

# THE UNEXPLAINABLE DISAPPEARANCE OF MARS PATEL

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

Mars Patel's friend Aurora has disappeared! His teachers are clueless. His mother is stressed out about her jobs. But Mars refuses to give up—after all, his own dad disappeared when Mars was a toddler, before he and Ma moved to Port Elizabeth, Washington, from India. Luckily, Mars has a group of loyal friends eager to help—smart Toothpick, strong and stylish JP, and maybe-telepathic Caddie. The clues seem to point toward eccentric tech genius (and Mars's hero) Oliver Pruitt, whose popular podcast now seems to be commenting on their quest! But when the friends investigate Pruitt's mysterious, elite school, nothing is as it seems—and anyone could be deceiving them. Slick science, corporate conspiracies, and an endearingly nerdy protagonist make this first book in the Mars Patel series a fresh, exciting sci-fi adventure.

## Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Preview the novel by examining the synopsis of the text, chapter titles, and text structures. What are potential problems or themes in the story? Can you think about another novel with a similar problem? Based upon your observations, who is the intended audience for the novel?
2. Chapter one, “Aurora?,” is composed entirely of text messages. What important details do we learn about Mars and his friends in this chapter? Did you enjoy reading entirely in text messages? Why?
3. In addition to traditional chapters, the author uses different writing styles throughout the novel (e.g., text messages, podcasts, school memos, and emails) to convey the plot. Chapter three, “On the Other Side,” includes three different writing styles. What are they? How does each writing style inform the story and plot? Which style do you like best? Why?
4. What is a podcast? What kind of information can people convey in a podcast? How does a podcast compare to other media options (like television and radio)? As you read, consider how Oliver Pruitt’s podcast mirrors, foreshadows, and guides the events taking place in each chapter.
  - What do we learn about Oliver Pruitt’s life and podcast during the initial chapters of the novel? Describe Oliver Pruitt based upon the podcast, events, and character conversations.
  - What is the “Something BIG” future event that Oliver Pruitt might be describing in his first podcast? What might “To the stars” mean (page 19)? Make a prediction.
5. Read the school’s “PROCEDURE FOR CODE RED ALERT” on page 10. List a few potential imminent threats that could require a drill or alarm. How do these procedures mirror school drills you’ve experienced? What types of drills does your school have? Why are they important to school function? Read the follow-up letter to parents on page 20. What does it suggest about the drill?
6. Mr. Q states, “Remember, they have cameras in every room. Somebody’s watching you right now” (page 34). What evidence in the novel suggests that students are being carefully monitored inside and outside of school? In your opinion, is the monitoring necessary and/or helpful? Why? Does owning a phone or using social media influence the way you think about privacy? If you have a phone, does somebody monitor the way you use it?



7. Describe Caddie, Jonas, Toothpick, Aurora, Mars, and JP. As you read, think about their character traits, skills, and goals. Name three positive character traits and three negative character traits for each individual. What are the pros and cons of the character traits listed? How might the traits help the characters throughout the novel?

CHARACTER NAME	THREE POSITIVE TRAITS	THREE NEGATIVE TRAITS
CADDIE		
JONAS		
AURORA		
MARS		
TOOTHPICK		
JP		

8. Chapter five is titled “A Promise Is a Promise.” What is the main idea of the chapter? What new character traits are evident in Mars based upon the information in the chapter? Describe a potential interaction or situation when these traits would be helpful.

9. Mars says, “It was silly. But when people went missing in your life, you found yourself looking for them in the strangest places. Like maybe they were there in the shadows of your life all along, but you weren’t looking where you should be” (page 54). What does this quote suggest about how Mars views absence? Who is absent from his life? What impact does the absence have on him?



10. What kind of trouble do Mars and his friends get into throughout the book? How are Mars and his friends viewed by school faculty and administrators? Be specific. How do the views of school faculty contrast with how they perceive themselves?
- Examine the police report on page 57. What is missing or should be added to the report to make it more accurate? Is the treatment of each student following the police incident fair? Do you agree with Principal Fagan that Mars is the “chief instigator” (page 70)?
11. During the podcast, Oliver Pruitt says, “*Ever wonder if that’s true? If they’re building that bridge, designing that tunnel, WORKING THAT SECOND SHIFT?*” (page 63). Why does this statement resonate with Mars? How does it mirror events in his life? How do the podcasts help the reader understand Mars’s views and opinions?
12. Mars and his mother encounter immigration picketers carrying signs stating HUMAN RIGHTS 4 ALL HUMANS and ILLEGALS, GO HOME (page 64). What question does Mars pose to his mom? What does her answer and his reaction suggest? What contrasting views about immigration in the United States are represented by the picketers? Which views do you believe are flawed? Why?
13. JP says to their mother, “My clothes are how I show the real me. Don’t you get it?” (page 77). Why is JP’s mother concerned? What is JP’s gender pronoun? How do the students in school treat JP based upon their gender identity? Why is the term “boy-girl” hurtful? How does JP challenge stereotypes throughout the book?
14. In chapter eleven, what do Mars, Caddie, Toothpick, and JP expect to find on Gale Island? What do they actually find? On the island, Mars asks, “Isn’t it strange how here on this island everybody’s like . . . more?” (page 118). What skill does each person possess? Why does Mars feel disheartened about his own skills? Do you agree with Caddie’s view of Mars’s skill? Why?
15. School memos and emails from Principal Fagan often include “Every Success for Every Child. Success means . . .” Do you agree with the interpretations of success (such as *cooperation* on page 127)? Why? What tone does the message set in each letter? Is it positive or negative?
16. How does Mars’s perception of Oliver Pruitt match the reality of his initial conversation? Mars wonders why he looks “so different” yet “so familiar, too” (page 134). How does Oliver Pruitt respond to Mars’s questions? What does this suggest about him?



17. In chapter eighteen, Mars thinks, “There were too many secrets, too much sadness, and in her eyes flashed a hidden anger, not at him but at something Mars didn’t understand” (pages 178–179). What does this suggest about his mother’s past?
18. Describe Mr. Q’s interactions with Mars and his friends throughout the novel. In what ways does Mr. Q intervene when they are in trouble? Does Mars’s accusation make sense in chapter twenty-seven? Why?
19. How does the initial picture and description of Pruitt Prep in the brochure (pages 48–49) differ from the actual school? Describe the school, rooms, and halls. What makes the school structure unique? What emotions does Caddie sense from children in the school as she travels through the halls?
20. At the end of the novel, Oliver Pruitt states, “*Whatever your destiny may be, be brave, be bold. Be the beam of light that saves us all. To the stars!*” (page 283). How does this quote align with one of the themes from the novel? What other important messages or themes does the author convey in the book? Explain the events, interactions, and details that support the development of the theme. Select one theme and explain how you can use this message in your own life.

### EXTRA: USING THE BOOK WITH THE ORIGINAL PODCAST

*The Unexplainable Disappearance of Mars Patel* is based on the Peabody Award–winning podcast of the same name, developed by Gen-Z Media. Visit [www.marspatel.com](http://www.marspatel.com) to listen to the first season for free. How is the book similar to the podcast? How is it different? Try writing a podcast script for a scene from a favorite book of yours. How can you use dialogue to make the characters come to life? Consider ways to use words and sounds to let a listener know what’s going on.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sheela Chari is the author of *Finding Mighty* and *Vanished*, which was an Edgar Award finalist. She teaches fiction writing at Mercy College and lives with her family in New York.

