

WELCOME BACK, MAPLE MEHTA-COHEN

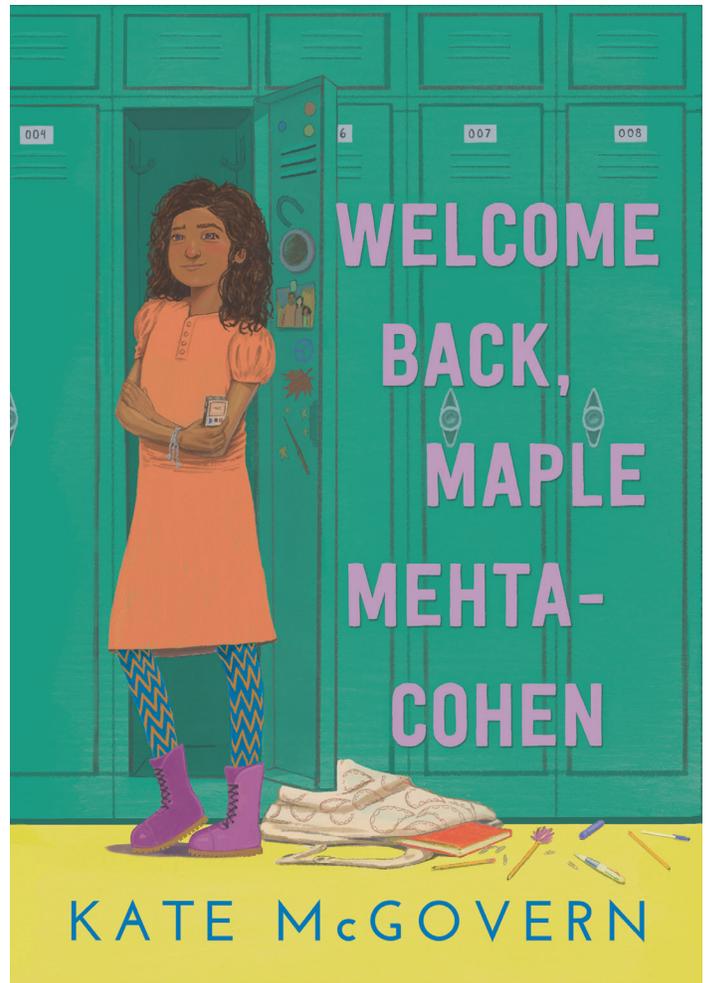
KATE MCGOVERN

ABOUT THE BOOK

Maple Mehta-Cohen has been keeping a secret: she can't read all that well. She has an impressive vocabulary and loves dictating stories into her recorder, especially the adventures of a daring sleuth who's half Indian and half Jewish like Maple herself. But words on the page just don't make sense to her. Despite all Maple's clever tricks to hide her trouble with reading, her teacher is on to her, and now Maple has to repeat fifth grade. Maple is devastated—what will her friends think? Will they forget about her? It's not easy as Maple navigates the loss of old friendships, the possibility of new ones, and the challenges of her new reading class. Can she begin to recognize her own strengths and to love herself just the way she is? Readers who have faced their own trials with school and friendships will enjoy this heartwarming story and its creative heroine.

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.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate McGovern is the author of the young adult novels *Rules for 50/50 Chances* and *Fear of Missing Out*, which received starred reviews. She has worked in schools and education nonprofits in Boston, London, and New York City, including at the Harlem Children's Zone, where she served as a reading specialist. Her daughter, Priya, is the original "Hin-Jew" kid that Maple is written for. Kate McGovern lives in an Indian-Jewish household in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the opening word in the novel is “normally” (page 1)? What aspects of Maple’s life are no longer normal in her view? After reading the novel, reread the first chapter. Talk about what it reveals about Maple and her family and how it foreshadows the rest of the book.
2. Describe Maple, her family situation, and why she’s repeating fifth grade. Find examples of how she talks about herself in a negative way, such as having a “defective brain” (page 99), and discuss why she feels so bad about herself. What helps her feel better by the end of the story?
3. Consider a time when you struggled with something in or out of school or felt like you couldn’t do something as well as your peers. How did that make you feel? How did you respond?
4. Maple’s last name is Mehta-Cohen. She refers to it as her “Indian-Jewish hyphenated situation” and adds, “Hin-Jew, my parents call me” (page 4). How does she feel about her name and her heritage? Discuss other places in the novel where the topics of her name and heritage come up, including how she tries to find a “famous Hin-Jew woman in history” (page 175) and how she compares herself to Sonia Shah.
5. Why haven’t the school and Maple’s parents realized that she has so much trouble with reading? What are some of Maple’s tricks for hiding the issue? Discuss whether Maple might be in a different situation if she had told her parents and teachers about her difficulties with reading sooner. How do her parents feel when they find out?
6. Even though reading is hard for her, Maple loves words, stories, and books. Point to places in the novel that show this. How is her love of stories part of her relationship with her father? How has it been part of her relationship with Marigold and Aislinn in the past? Why do you think it takes Maple so long to recognize that she is a “gifted storyteller” (page 260)?
7. Maple feels like she’s let her mother down by not being a better reader. Discuss the scene where she asks her father, “Is Mom disappointed in me?” (page 98) Why does she wonder that? What does he say? What is Maple’s reaction to his answer, and why does she respond that way?
8. Jack is new to the Barton School. Where has he been before this school, and why did he live in those places? What is difficult for him about starting at the Barton? Talk about his personality with examples from the text that demonstrate what he’s like. Describe how he and Maple become friends.
9. How and why did Maple deceive Marigold and Aislinn over the summer? Why does she lie to Jack, saying she’s repeating fifth grade as a special assistant? When do Benji and Daniela hear the lie? How do the three kids from the reading group react when they find out Maple’s been lying to them? How does Maple feel about deceiving them?
10. What do Maple’s parents do for a living? What kind of art does each of them pursue? What are clues that her parents have less money than some of her friends’ parents? Talk about Maple’s observation “Stepping into Aislinn’s house is always like crossing the border into another country” (page 19).

11. Explain the Lifelong Best Friends Contract and what it tells you about the history of Maple, Aislinn, and Marigold. How does Aislinn change over the summer and in the first days of school? Why does she keep leaving Maple out? How do seating arrangements in the cafeteria affect Maple and the other students?
12. Describe what happens at Aislinn's birthday party. Why does Maple go even though she's not invited? How does Aislinn react? Why does Maple give Aislinn the charm bracelet? What does Aislinn do with the secret recording she made of Maple trying to read, and why does she do it?
13. How does Marigold treat Maple once school starts, and why does she behave this way? What does Marigold do at the party? Why does she get the charm bracelet back for Maple? How could she have done more to help Maple at the party and later? What indicates that she's changed by the end of the book?
14. Find places where Maple says "Fine" or "Okay" when things aren't, in fact, fine or okay. Why does she do that? Do you ever do that?
15. Nurse Marcus says to Maple, "Maybe you should just assert yourself" (page 172). What does he mean? Why does he suggest it? Do you agree with him?
16. After the morning announcement with the tape that Aislinn made of Maple, Jack says, "Those girls were . . . pretty mean" (page 264). Maple replies, "I don't think it was really about *me*, you know? It was more about them" (page 264). What does she mean? What does her observation reveal about her?
17. Explain why Maple chooses Agatha Christie as her autobiographical project. How did she learn about the writer? In what ways does she identify with her? Why do you think the audience reacts enthusiastically to her presentation?
18. Who is Mira Epstein-Patel? Give a summary of the story that Maple is writing about her. How does Mira resemble Maple? How are they different? What aspects of Mira does Maple wish she herself had? Describe the other characters in the story that resemble people Maple knows.

These questions were prepared by Kathleen Odean, a school librarian for more than fifteen years who now gives professional development workshops for educators about new books for children and teens. She chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Caldecott and Newbery Award Committees.



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