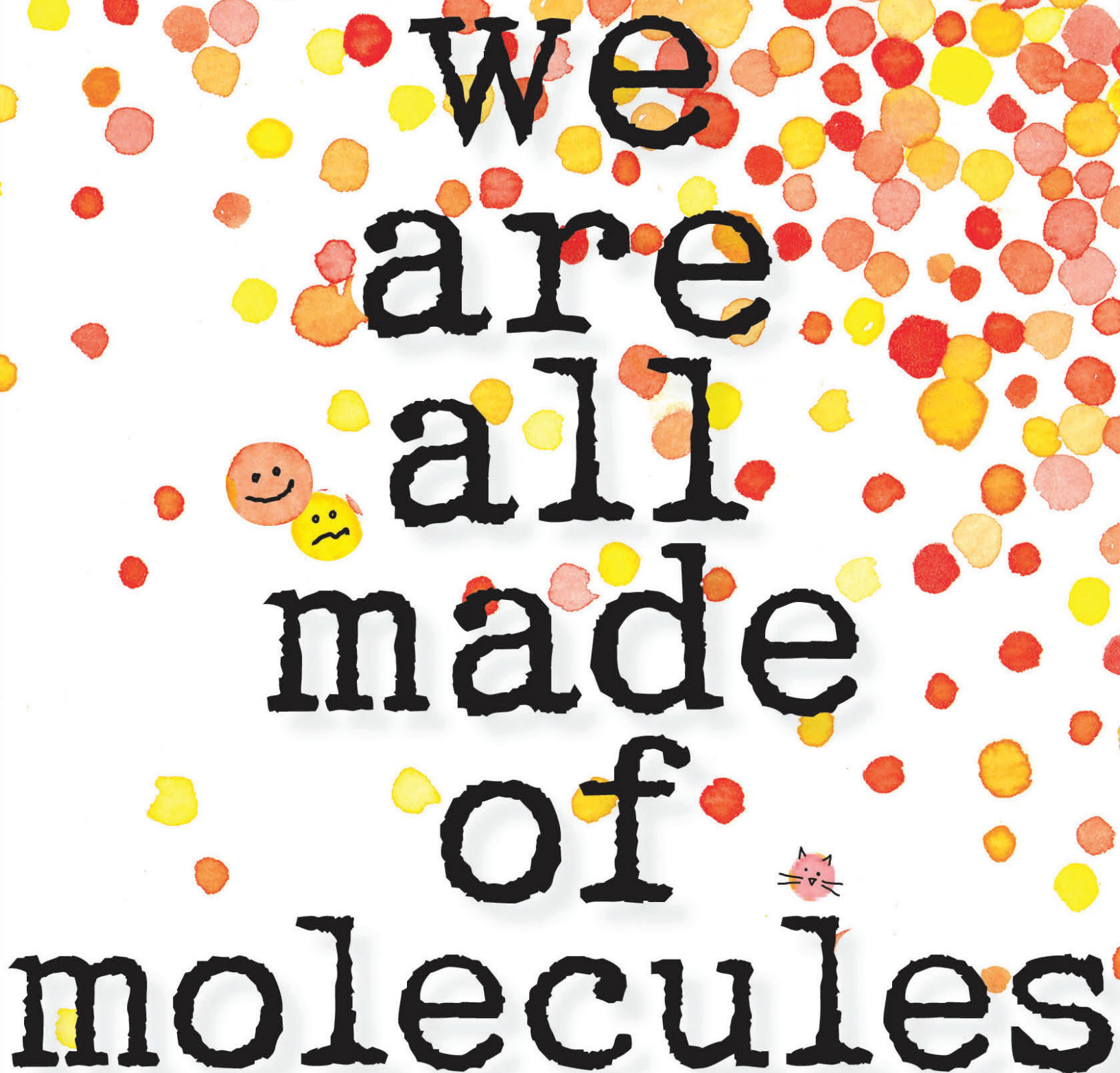


educator's guide

we
are
all
made
of
molecules



A NOVEL BY SUSIN NIELSEN

about the book

Thirteen-year-old Stewart Inkster is academically brilliant but socially “ungifted.” Fourteen-year-old Ashley Anderson is the undisputed “It” girl of grade nine, but her marks stink. Their worlds are about to collide when Stewart and his dad move in with Ashley and her mom. “The Brady Bunch” it isn't. Stewart is trying to be 89.9% happy about it, but Ashley is 110% horrified. She already has to hide the truth behind her parents' divorce; “Spewart” could further threaten her position at the top of the social ladder. They are complete opposites. And yet, no matter their differences, they share one thing in common: they—like the rest of us—are all made of molecules.

This insightful, tender and often funny narrative can be used in a number of ways, including

- Exploring conceptual and thematic connections such as family, friendship, truth, loss, grief, homophobia, acceptance and rejection
- Conducting an in-depth study of character and narrative structure
- As a springboard for engaging young readers in meaningful and open conversations about bullying and peer pressure

The reading guide includes discussion questions and prompts to elicit a meaningful understanding of the text. Readers will be encouraged to ask and answer questions to clarify and monitor their understanding, identify important ideas and synthesize information for a broader understanding. Discussion questions can be adapted to suit the level and needs of young readers twelve and up.

about the author

Susin Nielsen got her start writing a spec script for the popular television series *Degrassi Junior High*. She went on to pen sixteen episodes of the hit show and four of the *Degrassi* books. Since then, she has received two Canadian Screenwriter Awards and a Gemini Award. Susin has written for many TV series, including *Heartland*, *Arctic Air* and *Robson Arms*, which she co-created. Her first novel, *Word Nerd*, won four Young Readers' Choice Awards and was a finalist for the TD Canadian Children's Literature Award and the Canadian Library Association's Book of the Year Award, among others. Her second novel, *Dear George Clooney, Please Marry My Mom*, won three Young Readers' Choice Awards and is a Winner of the Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers by VOYA and the Gold Winner of the Book of the Year Award in Juvenile Fiction by *ForeWord Reviews*. Susin's third novel, *The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen*, won many awards, including the Governor General's Literary Award, CLA's Book of the Year for Children Award and three Young Readers' Choice Awards. It was also selected as one of the “Best fiction” books for young adults by the American Library Association and a Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers by VOYA. Susin Nielsen lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.



before you read – discussion questions

- What are molecules? What are your first thoughts when you hear the title *We Are All Made of Molecules*? By using the word “we” in the title, what effect does this have on you as the reader? How might this be different if the title were “Everybody is Made of Molecules?”
- Have you ever had any positive or negative experiences with peer pressure?
- Have you or anybody you know lost someone close? How was this loss dealt with?

after you read – discussion questions

1. labels

What are some of the labels used in the novel to describe the characters? Do any of the labels have a positive connotation?

How do the characters show that they are much more than the label ascribed to them? Give specific examples of their actions.

What is the danger of labeling somebody a certain way? Can labels ever be positive? Why or why not?

2. perspective

What narrative technique did the author use? Why do you think the author opted to write the book in this way?

What are some of the advantages and challenges of writing a story from two competing perspectives?

How might the tone of the story differ if it was written with third-person narration?

Ashley often behaves in an unlikeable manner but the reader develops sympathy for her over the course of the novel. How does the author achieve this?

As the narration flips back and forth between Ashley and Stewart’s perspectives, the two characters develop specific voices. What are some of the characteristics of each of their voices? For example, Ashley often misuses words and Stewart uses graphs and charts to help explain his emotions. Assume the role of Ashley and write a letter or email to one of her friends describing her feelings about her family blending with Stewart’s. Assume the role of Stewart and write a letter or email to his friend Alistair about the same event. Try to stay true to the voice of the characters.

3. ashley and stewart

Ashley and Stewart are very different characters. Compare and contrast their similarities and differences. Consider their life circumstances and how they coped with some of the challenges they faced.

Did you have sympathy for one character over the other? Did this change over the course of the novel?

At the beginning of the novel, both characters are about to experience a big change. How do each of the characters approach and cope with this change? What does this say about the characters themselves? What are some of the challenges of blending their two families?

Both Ashley and Stewart are prone to feelings of anxiety and guilt. Locate examples in the novel where they exhibit these feelings. Have you ever experienced any of these emotions? How did you cope with them?

4. grief

Both Ashley and Stewart were grieving as their families merged under one roof. What was each of them grieving?

Stewart develops a number of ways to cope with his mother's death. What does he like to do that makes him feel closer to her? Why was moving into a new home particularly difficult?

How does Caroline try to help Stewart through his grief?

Who is Schrodinger and how does he help Stewart?

"Everything, and everyone, is interconnected." What is Stewart's theory about how humans are interconnected? Do you agree with Stewart? Why or why not? How does this theory comfort him? What is Ashley's opinion about his theory? Why?

5. peer pressure

Ashley often speaks of the pressures involved in maintaining her place at the top of the social ladder. Why do you think this is so important to her? Is this important to Stewart? Why or why not? How and why does Ashley's opinion change?

At the heart of the novel, Ashley and Stewart both have to deal with acceptance and rejection. Locate examples in the novel where they feel accepted or rejected.

Describe any strong feelings or emotions that you experienced while reading this novel. Was there anything in particular that you either remotely or strongly related to? If you had to choose one event in the novel as being the most personally relevant, what would it be? Why?

6. victimization

Stewart, Ashley and Phil are all victims of malicious and hurtful behaviour at various points in the novel. Why are they victimized? How do they cope with this victimization? What do their experiences have in common?

What does the word "homophobia" mean?

What words come to mind when you hear the word "bully?" Have you or anybody you know ever been a victim of bullying? How did it make you or the person you know feel? Not all bullying involves a physical confrontation between a bully and their victim. What other ways can bullying take place? Were there any examples of this in the novel?

If you were the principal of Stewart and Ashley's school, what action could you take to address bullying within your student population?

What action does Ashley take to protect Stewart from further bullying? What are your thoughts about her plan? Would Ashley have suggested such a plan at the beginning of the novel? What changed? How does this show that Ashley's character has evolved?

7. friendship

What characteristics do you most value in a friend? If there were one person in the novel that you could imagine befriending, who would it be? Why?

Who are Ashley's friends? Who are Stewart's friends? Which group of friends more closely aligns with your notion of true friendship? In what ways?

What role do Phoebe and Violet play in the novel?

How does Ashley's notion of friendship evolve over the course of the novel?

8. humour

The novel deals with some serious and difficult topics. What do you consider to be the major themes of the novel?

In spite of its subject matter, there is a lot of humour woven throughout the novel. What is an example of the author using humour in an otherwise serious situation? Why do you think she chose to do this?

Stewart uses graphs and charts to express his thoughts and feelings. What do they add to the novel?

If you were to plot your feelings and thoughts on a graph as you read the novel (indicating your highs and lows as a reader), what would your graph look like?

q&a with SUSIN NIELSEN

You began your career as an on-set caterer for a teen TV series, *Degrassi Junior High*. How did you turn this into a writing career?



I loved writing, from a very early age. I wrote all the time. But I'd never put two and two together; I never thought about making a career out of it. I went to Ryerson in Toronto, Canada, for Radio and Television Arts, and even then I didn't think about it—I thought I'd go into news reporting. But a short stint at a local news station put an end to that. I realized I couldn't handle dealing with real-life tragedies. I did better in a fictional world! So I started getting jobs on movies—really, really terrible, straight-to-video slasher flicks—but I loved being on set. Then *Degrassi* came along, and it was actually a GOOD show, turned into a very successful show in fact, and it was sold all over the world. They hired me for that first season to feed the kids muffins, coffee and sandwiches ('caterer' would be a gross overstatement). I was terrible at it. So terrible that the kid actors on the show wrote a poem about me at the end of the first season:

An ode to Susin, the Bran Muffin Queen;

We eat them, we die, then we turn green.

But I loved working on the show. I knew I had to find something I was better at so that I'd get hired back. So in between the first and second seasons, I wrote a spec script—took characters I liked, gave them story lines I thought would work. I gave it to the head writer and asked for his feedback. He told me he didn't think much of the script BUT that he saw a spark in my writing, and he was going to give me a shot at writing an episode. That one episode turned into sixteen episodes of *Degrassi Junior High* and *Degrassi High*. The show became my training ground.

During my years there I also wound up writing four books in the *Degrassi* series: *Shane*, *Wheels*, *Snake* and *Melanie*. They revolved around events that had happened to the characters on the show. I really enjoyed writing them, and vowed that one day I would write an original young adult novel—it just took me many, many years! In the meantime I just kept writing for Canadian TV.

Where did the idea for *We Are All Made of Molecules* come from?

I seem to have an ongoing fascination with blended families; in my second novel, *Dear George Clooney, Please Marry My Mom*, Violet has to contend with her dad's new wife and kids, and her mom's new boyfriend, and with *Molecules* I wanted to take the idea one step further, and actually have two families merge into one. It's probably not too hard for me to figure out where this fascination comes from; my own parents are divorced, I have half-siblings, both my parents are remarried. . . . Now, my mom didn't remarry until I was older and out of the house, but she married a man with four kids.

I'm an only child and, don't get me wrong, I love them all very much, but if all of this had happened when I was Ashley's age . . . let's just say I would have behaved far, far worse than Ashley!

That said, Stewart was the character who spoke to me first. I love writing about socially inept boys, it seems—I think Stewart taps into my younger, kinder, glass-half-full self, and Ashley taps into my meaner, more hormonal teenage self.

***We Are All Made of Molecules* explores some big themes such as bullying, homophobia, death, grief and divorce. Did you set out to write about these things, or did they just come into the story as you wrote?**

I never set out to write about any particular issue. I start from a place of character. In this instance I knew it was going to be a blended family. I knew it was going to be two narrators. I knew Stewart's mom had died. I knew they were going to move in with this other family. I knew Ashley's dad was gay. I will say that having a gay character, who is (hopefully) believable, likeable and one hundred per cent accepted by Stewart from the get-go, was important to me. And I knew, of course, that Stewart and Ashley would not be a match made in heaven. And I think I knew the cat would go missing at some point. But I really had no idea where the story was going to go, what it would build to—I never really do. I have some vague notion of an end point, but it often shifts as I go along. I definitely make a lot of discoveries along the way, usually thanks to my characters. As they come into focus, I learn more.

There's often talk about how so many YA books have sophisticated, adult themes in them nowadays. Some people are worried about their suitability for a younger audience. And by adolescence, readers are selecting their own books. What do you feel about this debate? Do you think books should come with an age rating or something similar?



“I never set out to write about any particular issue. I start from a place of character.”

Well, in an ideal world we would all still be shopping at our local bookstore, where the staff are familiar with what they're selling, and may even be familiar with their customers and can make recommendations accordingly. But of course that sadly isn't the case anymore (though I'm lucky—I live six blocks from an excellent children's bookstore). I personally don't think books should come with an age rating, but then again I'm one of those people who reads the back cover blurb and reads online reviews and talks to my bookseller. I do see why booksellers have middle grade and YA sections—but isn't that enough?

Middle grade and YA writers, when they are writing in an honest and frank way, open themselves up to sometimes surprising accusations and attacks. It's happened to me before, and I wouldn't be surprised (based on past experience) if it happens in ways I never could have anticipated with this book. But I think all an author can do is stay true to his or her voice and characters. I never, ever write anything with the intention to shock or titillate or upset. I'm just writing the best story I can.

Also, my best guess is that an age rating isn't going to stop the complainers from complaining. I just read about a school in the States that has banned John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* because a parent didn't want her eleven- or twelve-year-old to learn about mortality. Who would have seen that one coming? Does this parent really think her child hasn't already thought about mortality? I am sure she was well meaning, but she's effectively burying her head in the sand and trying to bury her kid's head too. She's blocking any chances for meaningful, honest discussion. Imagine if she and her kid had read this book together and talked about the things they found upsetting. Now, that would have been cool. It makes much more sense to me to use compassionate novels (which John Green's certainly are, and which, if I may be so bold, I'd say mine are, too) to open up interesting discussions between readers and parents and educators.

What was your favourite book when you were a teen? Have you read it since and does it stand up to memory?

Oh, you can't ask me to pick just one! :)

Well, my favourite middle grade book, by far, was *Harriet the Spy*. I recently re-read it, rather terrified—and it more than held up. I LOVED re-reading it. It made me realize just how much I'd been influenced by Louise Fitzhugh.

As for teen books, I loved everything by Judy Blume. I also loved *My Darling*, *My Hamburger* by Paul Zindel, which

dealt with a teenage girl, an unwanted pregnancy and an abortion. Can you imagine that book getting by today? I confess I have not re-read any of these ones recently although Judy's books are still selling like hotcakes so they must hold up.

I can't not mention *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Catcher in the Rye*. And I did re-read *To Kill A Mockingbird* a couple of years ago, and it was beautiful. There are reasons why some books become classics.

When you write, do you know the whole plot before you begin?

No. Not even close. I think this is partly because of my TV background; in TV you have to outline things to death before you get to write an actual draft with dialogue, so for me, writing novels is liberating.

But it's scary. I've started a new manuscript and I'm terrified that the story won't unfold. I just have to sit at the computer and hope for the best. Which isn't to say it's entirely an organic process; I call it a mixture of organics and mechanics. I can't just wait for the muse to strike, I have to plod forward, try things on for size. It's hard work. But I also like not knowing . . . I like being surprised by my characters. And if I laid everything out ahead of time, I might miss some great opportunities by being too set on one path.

Are any of the characters based on people you know?

Ha-ha. If they were, do you think I would tell you? :) In all seriousness—no. I will sometimes lift a small characteristic, or a moment—'Truly thankful' is something friends of mine do at every meal—but no. And I do have a friend who's a TV news anchor, but she's happily married. I know families that have been shattered by the death of a parent. I know of families where one half of the couple has come out of the closet. But again—no.

That said—and I didn't even remember this when I was writing the novel, only later—I did experience a version of what happens to Ashley on New Year's Eve, when I was thirteen. Not as harrowing, but certainly embarrassing. To this day I am grateful that cell phones hadn't been invented yet. I do worry about young women (and men) growing up in a world where every little thing can be caught on camera.

Were you more of an Ashley or a Stewart at school? Or a bit of both?

A bit of both. More Stewart until I was around thirteen. Then definitely more Ashley. I was never, ever as bright as Stewart. And probably never quite as . . . um . . . academically challenged as Ashley. But I did have naïve ideas about boys and romance and being able to 'change him . . .'

High school-set stories are a perennial favourite for films and TV. What's your favourite in this genre? Have any of them influenced your books?

Well, I still think the original *Degrassi* series holds up (even if the fashions don't). Another show I adored was the short-lived *Freaks and Geeks*. That was my high-school era, and they did a great job of capturing it. *My So-Called Life* was another great show. I loved *The Breakfast Club*, *Rushmore*, *Mean Girls*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Gregory's Girl* and *Welcome to the Dollhouse*.

Stewart definitely shares some qualities with Jason Schwartzman's character in *Rushmore*. Ashley has a little bit of Stephanie from season one of *Degrassi Junior High*.

"I don't think it's gross. I think it's kind of beautiful. Everything, and everyone, is interconnected."

