

JENNIFER NIVEN

New York Times bestselling author of *All the Bright Places*



HOLDING



UP THE



UNIVERSE

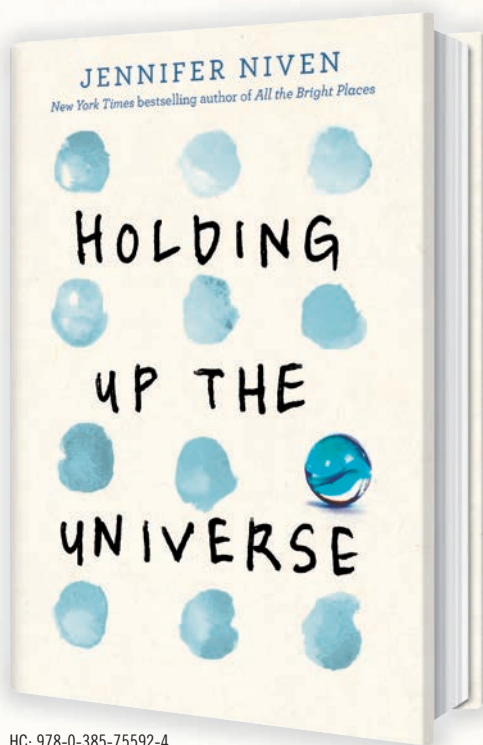


DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

Everyone thinks they know Libby Strout, the girl once dubbed “America’s Fattest Teen.” But no one’s taken the time to look past her weight to get to know who she really is. Following her mom’s death, she’s been picking up the pieces in the privacy of her home, dealing with her heartbroken father and her own grief. Now, Libby’s ready: for high school, for new friends, for love, and for EVERY POSSIBILITY LIFE HAS TO OFFER. *In that moment, I know the part I want to play here at MVB High. I want to be the girl who can do anything.*


Everyone thinks they know Jack Masselin, too. Yes, he’s got swagger, but he’s also mastered the impossible art of giving people what they want, of fitting in. What no one knows is that Jack has a secret: he can’t recognize faces. Even his own brothers are strangers to him. He’s the guy who can re-engineer and rebuild anything in new and bad-ass ways, but he can’t understand what’s going on with the inner workings of his brain. So he tells himself to play it cool: *Be charming. Be hilarious. Don’t get too close to anyone.* Until he meets Libby. When the two get tangled up in a cruel high school game—which lands them in group counseling and community service—Libby and Jack are both pissed, and then surprised.



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Because the more time they spend together, the less alone they feel. *Because sometimes when you meet someone, it changes the world, theirs and yours.*

Jennifer Niven delivers another poignant, exhilarating love story about finding that person who sees you for who you are—and seeing them right back.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Niven is the author of the *New York Times* and international bestseller *All the Bright Places*. She has also written four novels for adults—*American Blonde*, *Becoming Clementine*, *Velva Jean Learns to Fly*, and *Velva Jean Learns to Drive*—as well as three nonfiction books, *The Ice Master*, *Ada Blackjack*, and *The Aqua Net Diaries*, a memoir about her high school experiences. She grew up in Indiana and now lives with her fiancé and literary cats in Los Angeles. For more information, visit JenniferNiven.com, GermMagazine.com, or find her on Facebook or Twitter.

SELF-AWARENESS

- As the novel opens, readers meet Jack, who immediately tells them, “I’m not a shitty person, but I’m about to do a shitty thing. And you will hate me, and some other people will hate me, but I’m going to do it anyway to protect you and also myself.” (p. 1)
 - What can readers infer about this statement?
 - How does this earliest introduction to Jack shape the way you perceive his character?
 - Does your opinion of him change throughout the course of the novel? If so, in what ways?
- In terms of relationships (both friendships and matters of the heart), if Libby could offer her younger self some advice, what do you think she’d share? Do you feel that the things that happen to her ultimately make her better or worse?

CHOICES

- Compare the parent/child relationships in the story: Libby and her father versus Jack and his father.
 - To what extent are the relationships of these characters shaped by the world around them?
 - To what extent do their relationships shape that world?
 - How are Libby and Jack defined by the choices made by their parents?
 - What role has illness played in the dynamics of each of these families?
- Libby tells readers that three years ago, she was America’s fattest teen, but adds, “I haven’t always been fat. The short version is that my mom died and I got fat, but somehow I’m still here.” (p. 8)
 - Why is still being “here” so important?
 - Considering what you’ve learned about her life, what are the most significant decisions that Libby has made?
 - How do the results of those choices define who she is today?
- After observing Jack’s fight with the Hunt brothers while trying to protect Rum, Libby thinks, “This isn’t charming Jack Masselin. This is a boy burdened by life. I make myself sit there, inside his skin. I do it for Atticus and for my mom.” (p. 170)
 - How does this choice help her better understand who Jack really is?
 - Do you see this as a defining moment in their relationship?

PERSEVERANCE

- Consider how Jack’s prosopagnosia (face blindness) impacts his life. He states that he survives by doing the following: “Nod/smile at everyone. Be charming. Be ‘on.’ Be goddamn hilarious. Be the life of the party, but don’t drink. . . . Pay attention. Do whatever it takes.” (p. 2)
 - What do you believe are the most significant obstacles for someone who has face blindness?
 - To what degree are Jack’s coping mechanisms successful?
 - Do you think Libby becomes a force for change in regard to his attitude about his condition? Why?
 - Review the “Top 5 Most Embarrassing Moments of My Life” list (p. 15). How do you feel these incidents have shaped the way Jack sees and interacts with the world?

IDENTITY

- Upon entering high school for the first time, Libby shares that “No one looks as shiny or polished as they do in the TV and movie versions of high school. . . . We have bad skin and bad hair and good skin and good hair, and we’re all different shapes and sizes.” (p. 23)
 - In the beginning, why does Libby feel she has a clean slate?
 - To what degree do you feel our identities are determined by those around us?
- Consider Libby’s choice to vandalize the bathroom.
 - Why do you think she writes derogatory comments about herself?
 - Do you agree with the assessment that it’s “better to be the hunter than the hunted. Even if you’re hunting yourself”? (p. 89)



QUESTIONS

DREAMS

- As a way to celebrate her avoidance of a panic attack the morning of the first day of school, Libby throws on one of her mother's old albums and dances, stating that "the dance is in me" (p. 12).
 - Why is her lack of formal dance training unimportant?
 - Libby knows that dance will always play an important role in her life. Consider your own passions. What is the thing you are most devoted to doing?
- Libby shares that if she could have her wishes fulfilled, she'd want three things: her mom to be alive, nothing bad or sad to happen again, and to be a member of the Damsels.
 - In your opinion, is dreaming important?
 - What do these wishes indicate about her as a person?
 - What do each of these dreams or wishes symbolize for Libby?
- Libby thinks, "Today. . . This is what you dreamed of when you were too scared to leave the house. This is what you dreamed of when you were lying in your bed for six months. This is what you wanted—to be out in the world like everyone else." (p. 18)
 - How does Libby's dream of being "out in the world like everyone else" compel her to be courageous?
 - Libby reflects on her inability to drive, on the fact that she's never attended a school dance, or even officially had a boyfriend. Why do these gaps in her personal experiences make her not want to miss any other teen rites of passage?

COURAGE

- As Libby tries out for the Damsels, she thinks, "Too many people in this world think small is the best they can do. Not you, Libby Strout. You weren't born for small! You don't know how to do small! Small is not in you!" (p. 272)
 - Do you agree with her self-assessment?
- Libby uses "Flashdance . . . What a Feeling" as her song for the audition.
 - Do you believe her choice is an appropriate one?
 - Is there any significance to this song choice?
- When asked by Caroline if she is willing to lose weight if she makes the team, Libby replies, "Absolutely not." (p. 275)
 - How does this courageous act serve as a

catalyst for her other moments of bravery (purple bikini, sharing her story in the "You Are Wanted" handout)?

- Which act of bravery did you find most compelling?
- In what ways does Libby's "You Are Wanted" flyer serve as a call to arms to others who are "Big, small, tall, short, pretty, plain, friendly, shy"? (p. 317)
 - To what extent is her message a battle cry as well as a means of embracing and accepting others?
- After Jack tries to convince his little brother to stop carrying a purse, Dusty tells him, "If I want to carry a purse, I'm going to carry it. I'm not going to not carry it just because they don't like it." (p. 21)
 - In what ways does Dusty's stance inspire Jack to call his little brother his hero?
 - What are some of the specific ways Jack demonstrates courage?
 - Between Jack and Libby, who did you believe to be the most courageous? Use textual evidence to support your opinion.

LOVE AND LOSS

- Considering Jack and Libby's perspectives, in what ways is *Holding Up the Universe* a story about things that have been lost?
 - In your opinion, what does each of them find along the way?
 - How would you characterize the relationship between Jack and Libby?
 - Do you feel that it changes over the course of the novel? If so, in what specific ways?
 - What is it about Libby that Jack is able to "see"?

FEAR

- While trying to process how she ended up trapped in her home, Libby thinks, "It's everything changing when I was eleven. It's the bullying and the fear. So much fear of everything, but mostly death. Sudden, out-of-the-blue death. It's also being terrified of life." (p. 124)
 - In what ways does fear serve to both motivate and incapacitate Libby and Jack?
 - Are there any ways in which their fears align? How are they different?
 - When do each of them choose not to be defined by what they fear?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

INSPIRATION

- References to *To Kill a Mockingbird* are sprinkled throughout *Holding Up the Universe*.
 - Consider Niven's motivation to quote Harper Lee's seminal work within the framework of her novel. Why might she have chosen to do so?
 - If you've read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, do you find that *Holding Up the Universe* has similar themes or sensibilities?
 - Of the Harper Lee quotes included, which is your favorite and why? How are the quotes relevant to the experiences of Libby and Jack?
- Libby writes, "As long as you live, there's always something waiting; and even if it's bad, and you know it's bad, what can you do? You can't stop living." (p. 12)
 - How does this quote from Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* inspire her?
 - Why are the quotes Libby writes on her shoes significant?
 - Was there a specific one that you felt was most appropriate to her experiences?
- Explain the significance of Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.
 - In what ways does this novel serve as a connection between Libby and Jack?
 - After Libby is removed from her home, why do you think Jack felt compelled to sneak in and send Libby her favorite book?

FORGIVENESS

- To what extent does the ability to offer forgiveness play a significant role in the lives of Libby and Jack?
 - Who are the people most needing compassion from each of them?
 - How does forgiveness allow them to grow as people as well as in their relationship with each other?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

- After she is taken to the hospital, Libby receives a letter from Jack telling her, "I want you to know I'm rooting for you." (p. 125) In that moment, she shares that she feels something. Consider the significance of novel's title, *Holding Up the Universe*. How does Jack help Libby hold up a piece of her universe? How do you empower yourself to do the same? Think about the people who have helped you, and write a note or letter to thank them for supporting you.
- Jack's prosopagnosia obviously has a profound impact on his life and his relationships with others. Throughout the novel, as he learns more about his condition and others who suffer from it, he becomes increasingly empowered to take control of his life and his choices. After taking a moment to reflect on your life's most personal challenges, draft a journal or diary entry focusing on the ways you've already overcome obstacles. List some strategies you plan to use to deal with those you are still facing.
- In the past, Libby has often felt unwanted and inconsequential. Do you know anyone in your personal or school life who might feel that way? Using what you've learned from reading *Holding Up the Universe*, begin a "You matter!" campaign. Using Post-it notes or cards, write affirmations for the people around you who might be struggling. Cards can be as simple as "You are funny. I like that." Or "I appreciate how hard you work." Be creative and kind.
- Throughout *Holding Up the Universe*, Niven infuses her story with rich, figurative language. Embark on a literary scavenger hunt to locate your favorite phrases or quotes. Create a shareable quote card image to be published on the social media site of your choice (remember to attribute appropriately).
- While the novel focuses on the relationship between Libby and Jack, Niven introduces us to a number of secondary characters who face their own hardships or have opportunities to show some self-awareness. Select a secondary character in *Holding Up the Universe* and write a letter of advice to him or her. You can choose to be serious or funny—just make sure your advice fits the character's needs.



LISTEN & LEARN—

INCORPORATING THE AUDIOBOOK

Research indicates that there are many educational benefits to audiobooks:

- Audiobooks build and enhance vital literacy skills such as fluency, vocabulary, language acquisition, pronunciation, and comprehension—skills that often boost reading scores.
- Audiobooks help learners develop critical-thinking and active-listening skills, and listening together allows teens to become collectively engaged in a shared story in a manner that promotes a sense of intimacy and human connection. Plus, it's a good way to start a dialogue about difficult subject matters.

For audiobook-related activities, visit booksontape.com/SoundLearningActivityGuide

PRAISE

★ “[Niven] created two indelible characters and a heart-stopping romance.”—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred

★ “Written in short chapters of alternating perspectives, this is a thoughtful exploration of identity and self-acceptance, with commentary on overcoming adversities that will hit close to home.”

—*School Library Journal*, Starred

This guide was created by Dr. Rose Brock, an assistant professor in the Library Science Department in the College of Education at Sam Houston State University, in Huntsville, Texas. Dr. Brock holds a PhD in Library Science, specializing in children's and young adult literature.



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