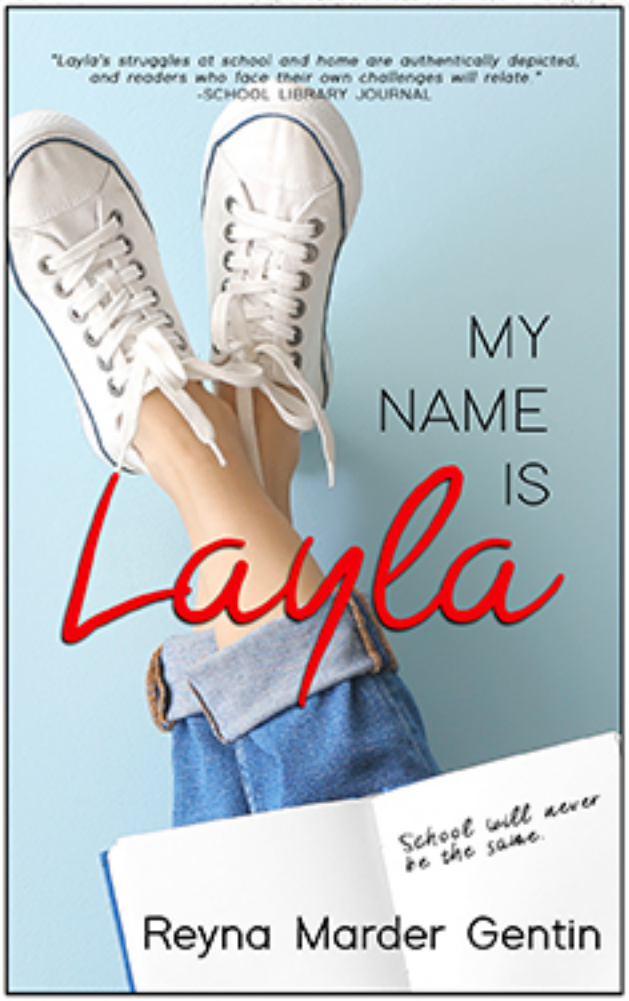
DISCUSSION GUIDE



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MY NAME IS *Layla*

By Reyna Marder Gentin

"Liza is always telling me that I'm smart, but she doesn't get what it's like in my head."

ON THE FIRST DAY of eighth grade, thirteen year-old Layla has a pretty good idea of what's in store for her—another year of awkward social situations, mediocre grades, and teachers who praise her good behavior but find her academic performance disappointing. Layla feels certain she's capable of more, but each time she tries to read or write, the words on the page dance and spin, changing partners and leaving her to sit on the sidelines.

This year will be different in ways Layla could never have predicted. Her new English teacher, Mr. McCarthy, senses her potential. When he pushes her to succeed, Layla almost rises to the challenge before making a desperate choice that nearly costs her everything she's gained. Will she be able to get back on track? And who can she count on to help her?

"Layla's struggles at school and home are authentically depicted, and readers who face their own challenges will relate." —*School Library Journal*

"Layla's struggles will strike a chord with young readers who face their own challenges, and every reader will root for Layla, a girl who only needs a little help to recognize how special she really is." —Diana Harmon Asher, author of *Sidetracked*

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The Common Core State Standards addressed by the discussion questions, activities, and worksheets in this guide are noted throughout. For more information on the Common Core, visit corestandards.org.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Unless otherwise noted, all discussion questions meet the following Common Core State Standards: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1

- The novel begins with a scene between Layla, also known as 'munk, and her older brother, Nick, at dinnertime. What information is revealed about the brother and sister as they talk over a bowl of mac and cheese on the front porch of their home?

- Describe Nick and Layla's mom. How does Layla's relationship with her mom affect the way Layla sees her family and feels about herself? Cite examples from the story to support your description of this key relationship.

- Liza is Layla's best friend. How do the friends differ when it comes to the way they approach the first day of eighth grade? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3

- Liza frequently says that Layla is smart, but what experience does Layla have in Mr. McCarthy's English class on the first day of school that makes her feel otherwise?

- What is Layla's reaction to Mr. McCarthy's homework writing assignment on the first day of school? Why do you think she reacts this way?

- Mr. McCarthy, the new English teacher, introduces himself to his students as someone who is willing to listen and to help students with their problems. How does Mr. McCarthy show that he means these words when he meets with Layla after she submits her first English assignment?

- Sammy and Layla are at the homecoming basketball game when Sammy notices some men in suits watching the game. He identifies them as scouts. Why is the presence of the scouts significant for Layla's brother? What happens during the game that may affect the scouts' opinion of Nick as a basketball player?

- How does Sammy come to realize that Layla might have had difficulty reading *The Scarlet Letter?* What is his suggestion to Layla when he makes this realization?

- Layla is aware that her father is in town—a father she hasn't seen since she was a baby. She suggests that Liza and Sammy join her on a stakeout to meet her father. What do Layla and her friends see while on the stakeout?

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- Mr. McCarthy assigns a poem specially chosen for each of his students. What poem does he select for Layla and what is her reaction to receiving the poem?

- Layla's father appears at her house on Thanksgiving. Why do you think the author did not include any scenes of Layla and her dad planning the visit? How did you react as a reader when Layla's dad suddenly appeared at the door?

- Layla has made a habit of squirreling away all of her papers with poor grades in her school locker. She is dreading the upcoming parent conference. How does she choose to handle the collection of bad grades stacked in her locker? What is the outcome of her decision?

- Describe the range of reactions Liza experiences once Layla confesses what she has done to destroy her schoolwork. What is your opinion of Liza's reactions to Layla's problem? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3

- Why do you think that Layla originally allows someone else to take the blame for her mistake? What does Layla's delayed confession reveal about her sense of right and wrong and her feelings about friendship? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3

- How does Mr. McCarthy give even more support to Layla after the incident at school? How does Layla initially react when she discovers Mr. McCarthy's plan? How does her reaction change over time?

- Layla has trouble reading, Sammy has difficulty organizing his homework, and other students get help with speech or motor skills. Have you ever faced a challenge at school? If so, how does it make you feel to need assistance? How can we support students who face learning challenges?

- Throughout the novel, Layla experiences many damaging situations with family, friends, and school. How are the situations mended by the end of the novel? Discuss what transpires with Layla's father, her friendship with Liza, and her connection to her brother and mother by the end of the story. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3

- The story ends with Layla being dropped at the high school by her brother, Nick, so she can take the entrance exam for ninth grade English honors. How does this event demonstrate Layla's growth over the course of the novel? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.2

The discussion questions, activities, and worksheets in this guide were created by Leigh Courtney, Ph.D. She teaches in the Global Education program at a public elementary school in San Diego, California. She holds both master's and doctoral degrees in education, with an emphasis on curriculum and instruction.

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ACTIVITIES

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Mr. McCarthy has his eighth-grade English students read and discuss S.E. Hinton's novel *The Outsiders*. He gives his students an assignment to write about a time they felt like an outsider. Invite your students to write a personal narrative about a time when they experienced being an outsider. Important points to consider: Where were you at the time? Who was involved in this experience? What was your emotional reaction to feeling like an outsider? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3

POETRY READING

Mr. McCarthy chose Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" especially for Layla. Have your students hunt for a poem that really speaks to who they are. Invite students to share their self-selected poems in a poetry reading. Save time at the end for students to explain the significance of the poems they've chosen for themselves.

UNDERSTANDING DYSLEXIA

Layla's reading difficulties negatively affect her academic performance, which in turn makes her feel that she is not very smart. Mr. McCarthy notices her struggles and refers her to the school's Learning Center where Layla is identified as being dyslexic. Working in pairs, have your students research dyslexia to learn more about this learning difference. Have pairs compile their research into an information report. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.2

MY NAME IS . . .

Layla's name was chosen by her father and it came from a favorite song. Invite students to learn the story behind their names. Have each create a "My Name Is . . ." mini poster that gives a definition of their name and a brief family story about how it was selected. Display these in the classroom.

MYSTERY BAGS

Place several key items in opaque grocery bags. The items should represent something from the story such as a basketball, a copy of *The Outsiders*, hospital scrubs, a bouquet of flowers, etc. Give three clues about the item that ties it to events in the story. Students then take turns guessing what the item is. Once the students guess correctly, discuss the item's significance and its connection to the novel. Then move on to the next mystery bag. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1

TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

Present two things that are true and one thing that is a lie about several characters from the book. The truths and lies can be presented orally or via a set of Google slides. Students then guess which of the three statements are true and which one is a lie. Discuss the characters in light of these truths about them. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1

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DESCRIBING CHARACTERS

Though each of the characters in *My Name Is Layla* share a connection with each other, they are unique in terms of their attitudes, behaviors, and personalities. Think of one adjective to describe each of the characters listed in the chart below. Then locate examples from the novel that support the adjective you selected. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3

Name of character	Adjective to describe character	Text evidence to support the adjective
Layla		
Liza		
Nick		
Sammy		
Mr. McCarthy		
Layla's mom		
Layla's dad		

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IT SAYS, I SAY

Look at the questions in the first column below about key events in *My Name Is Layla.*

- Find information from the text that will help you answer the question.
- Then add your own words and thoughts about each story event.
- Finally, combine what the novel says and your thoughts to answer the question.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1

The question	It says in the book	I say	My conclusion
Why does Layla invite her father to Thanksgiving dinner?			
Why does Mr. McCarthy read Layla's response to the poem "The Road Not Taken" aloud to Layla's English class?			
Why does Nick withdraw from Layla after his accident on the basketball court?			

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P.O.V.

My Name Is Layla is told from Layla's point of view—the reader is given insight into Layla's observations and feelings about the world around her. Think about how the novel would change if it were told from another character's point of view. Write a short paragraph describing an event from the novel from these characters' points of view.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.6; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.6; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.6

Layla's mother STORY EVENT: WHEN LAYLA'S FATHER ARRIVES ON THANKSGIVING

Nick STORY EVENT: THE INJURY DURING THE BASKETBALL GAME

Liza STORY EVENT: WHEN LAYLA COMES TO LIZA'S HOUSE AT DINNER TO APOLOGIZE

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