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DISCUSSION GUIDE

PLANET EARTH IS BLUE

ABOUT THE BOOK

A heartrending and hopeful debut novel about a nonverbal girl and her passion for space exploration, for fans of *See You in the Cosmos*, *Mockingbird*, and *The Thing About Jellyfish*.

Twelve-year-old Nova is eagerly awaiting the launch of the space shuttle *Challenger*—it’s the first time a teacher is going into space, and kids across America will watch the event on live TV in their classrooms. Nova and her big sister, Bridget, share a love of astronomy and the space program. They planned to watch the launch together. But Bridget has disappeared, and Nova is in a new foster home.

While foster families and teachers dismiss Nova as severely autistic and nonverbal, Bridget understands how intelligent and special Nova is, and all that she can’t express. As the liftoff draws closer, Nova’s new foster family and teachers begin to see her potential, and for the first time, she is making friends without Bridget. But every day, Nova is counting down to the launch and the moment when she’ll see Bridget again. Because Bridget said, “No matter what, I’ll be there. I promise.”



Grades 3–7

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PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Nova, the main character in *Planet Earth Is Blue*, has autism. Learn about autism spectrum disorder. Some resources are listed below.

- kidshealth.org/en/kids/autism.html
- Watch this short video, which describes how a child with autism may sometimes feel: youtu.be/0idZghw97dc.
- Listen to David Bowie’s “Space Oddity.” How does the story the song tells make you feel?
- Create historical context: *Planet Earth Is Blue* takes place in 1986. As a class, research what was going on at the time. Who was president? What music was popular? Much of the story leads up to the launch of the US space shuttle *Challenger* on January 28, 1986. What was the significance of this event? Why would classes like Nova’s be watching?

DISCUSSION PROMPT

Ask students to imagine not being able to communicate with words. Think about the frustrations and challenges you might encounter. How might you communicate your feelings or needs?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Why is interacting with people so difficult for Nova? What are some reasons Nova is more comfortable with her sister?
- Contrast Nova's feelings about Billy and Francine with her other foster care placements. What is different about this placement? Do these differences have an impact on Nova's actions?
- An underlying theme in *Planet Earth Is Blue* is loneliness. How does Nova find comfort from the loneliness she feels in her sister's absence?
- "The first person in space was a Russian named Yuri Gagarin. 'Guhguhguhguhguh!' [Nova] cried, unable to pronounce the cosmonaut's last name. She wanted to add that Alan Shepard, the first American astronaut in space, had been from New Hampshire, just like them. Just like Christa McAuliffe. 'Nuh-ha! Mm!'" (p. 96) Nova often has a hard time expressing herself. How is she feeling during the classroom discussion about space? How do her classmates and teachers react when she is trying to communicate with them?
- Nova cries when her Walkman stops working. Why do you think she is upset? (p. 106)
- "Behind Carrot Krystle and Polka Dot Denise, Mallory was fiddling with the knob on the oven. She shot Nova a thumbs-up and gestured for her to come back. . . . 'Those girls are mean. I don't like them calling Mary-Beth a spaz and I don't like them calling you a retard. You are my friends, and I don't let *anybody* be mean to my friends.' 'Ah,' said Nova. She liked being called a friend." (pp. 120–121) How does this incident make Nova feel? What do you think Bridget would have done if she had been there? How did this incident make you as the reader feel? (pp. 118–122)



- In one of her letters to her sister, Nova writes: “I know burning their cookies was not nice. But I tried and I tried and I tried and I just don’t feel bad. Does that mean I’m not nice? . . . I have so many confusing feelings I think they might fill me up like the expanding universe and then explode me out like a supernova.” (pp. 123–125) Do you think Nova *does* feel bad about the cookies? Why? Do you ever feel too full of feelings? How do you deal with it?
- The social worker, Mrs. Steele, thinks Nova is less able than Billy and Francine do. Why do they see her so differently? What can you infer about what happened to Bridget from this conversation? At this point in the story, what did you think happened to Bridget? (pp. 143–153)
- What happened as Nova and people all across the country watched the *Challenger* launch? Did you know what happened before reading this book? How did you feel as you read this part of the story? (pp. 192–195)
- What happened to Bridget? How does Nova come to remember what happened to her? Why do you think it took so long? (pp. 200–212)
- Nova slowly begins to feel safe and at home with Billy, Francine, and Joanie. Find examples from the text that support this statement.
- Francine looked up the definition of *nova*. Discuss how the definition also applies to Nova herself. (p. 221)
- The author quotes the speech President Ronald Reagan gave after the *Challenger* accident. “Sometimes when we reach for the stars, we fall short, but we must pick ourselves up again and press on despite the pain.” (p. 224) How does this sentiment apply to Nova? How can it apply to all of us?



- *Planet Earth Is Blue* focuses on Nova and the feelings and experiences she has in her sister's absence. Nova has to learn to live without the person who understands her most. Has anything like this happened to you? Maybe you have read a book or seen a movie in which something similar happens? Discuss how we can carry on when bad things happen. Make a connection to how Nova handles being without the person who most understands her.
- Explain the title of the book. Cite scenes that help explain the author's choice of title.



AFTER READING

Learn about people with autism: autismspeaks.org/profile.

See how technology can be used to support and enhance communication for people with autism: autismspeaks.org/technology-and-autism.

After learning about advances in special education, discuss as a class how Nova's story might be different if it were set today.

This guide was prepared by Megan Gallant, a middle-school special education teacher from Stratford, Connecticut.

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EXTENSION ACTIVITIES & CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

- **SCIENCE:** Find out about NASA, the latest space news, and historical missions at nasa.gov.
 - Read about Christa McAuliffe and the astronauts aboard the *Challenger* at the following websites: history.com/topics/1980s/challenger-disaster and nasa.gov/centers/kennedy/shuttleoperations/orbiters/challenger-info.html.
 - What have you learned about the astronauts? What was the cause of the disaster? What happened in the aftermath of the tragedy?
- **MUSIC:** Create a soundtrack for *Planet Earth Is Blue*. Choose five songs to go along with scenes from the book. Why did you choose those songs? How do they match the characters' actions or feelings or the tone of the book?
- **ART:** Draw Nova. Think about her likes and dislikes, what is in her heart and her mind, what has happened in her past, and what is likely in her future. How does she dress? What does she have with her?

PRAISE FOR *PLANET EARTH IS BLUE*

- ★ “Panteleakos masterfully blends character and plot in this **gorgeous, hopeful story**.” —*Booklist*, Starred Review
- ★ “Bursting with worry, joy, empathy, humor, and even mischief, Nova is endearingly nuanced . . . **Stellar**.” —*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review
- ★ “**Tender and illuminating**, *Planet Earth Is Blue* is a beautiful debut novel about the strength of a girl who knows exactly who she is, even when others can't see her.” —Rebecca Stead, Newbery Award–winning author of *When You Reach Me*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Adam Grzechowski

Nicole Panteleakos is a middle-grade author, playwright, and Ravenclaw whose plays have been performed at numerous theaters and schools in Connecticut and New York City. She earned her BA in theatre scriptwriting from Eastern Connecticut State University and is currently working toward her MFA in children's literature at Hollins University. She lives in Brooklyn, New York, and has three awesome godchildren and two quirky cats, and at least one Broadway song stuck in her head at all times. *Planet Earth Is Blue* is her debut novel. Visit Nicole on Twitter at @NicWritesBooks, on Facebook (facebook.com/nicolepanteleakos), or at nicolepanteleakos.com.