



True Biz
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Ears and Hearing

Summary

This novel plunges readers into the halls of a residential school for the deaf, where they'll meet Charlie, a rebellious transfer student who's never met another deaf person before; Austin, the school's golden boy, whose world is rocked when his baby sister is born hearing; and February, the hearing headmistress, a CODA (child of deaf adult(s)) who is fighting to keep her school open and her marriage intact, but might not be able to do both. As a series of crises both personal and political threaten to unravel each of them, Charlie, Austin, and February find their lives inextricable from one another—and changed forever.

Questions

1. How much knowledge did you have about the Deaf community and/or ASL before you started *True Biz*? In what ways did the novel reflect or augment your understanding?
2. How does *True Biz* explore the ways the experiences of Deaf children, teens, adults, and elderly people differ? Compare and contrast the experiences each student had growing up, and how those experiences helped mold them into the young adults they've become. Which character did you identify with most, and why?
3. The conversation around cochlear implants can get thorny quickly, which Novic illustrates throughout the novel with lines like "She's read about . . . parents deemed negligent for opting against surgery" and "Isolation was a requirement of the implant, her doctor cautioned." For Charlie, a defective device and poor instruction from doctors and parents leads to "oral failure" and a host of other issues. For other Deaf children, the procedure is so prohibitively expensive it isn't even a consideration. Discuss the pros and cons of cochlear implants, and the ethical considerations for parents, medical professionals, and device manufacturing companies, citing examples from the novel.
4. Discuss Charlie's relationship with her mother. Why do you think Charlie's parents, especially her mother, were so insistent on the cochlear implant? How would have Charlie's upbringing been different if she also could have learned ASL?
5. February is headmistress of a Deaf school. Why did she decide to work with Deaf students? February's curriculum is interspersed throughout the novel. Describe the effect this had on your reading experience.
6. In what ways did River Valley remind you of other schools in classic boarding school novels or movies? In what ways did it strike you as different? Why do you think ASL is not taught more in schools?