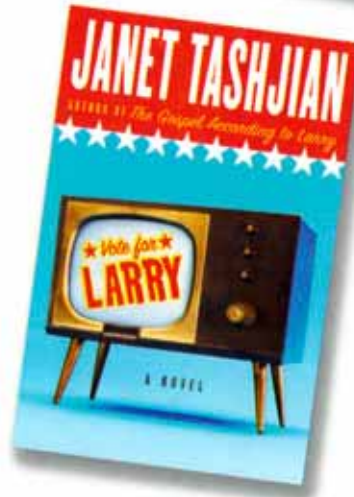
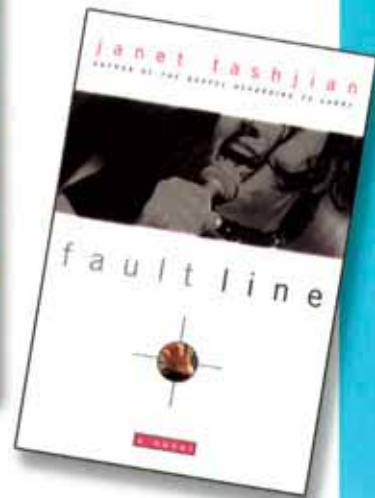
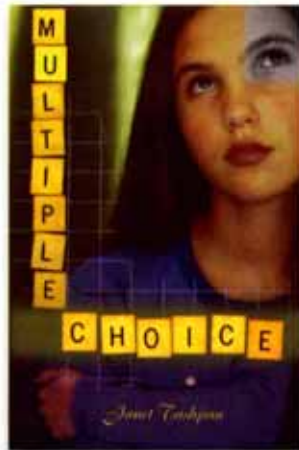


THE NOVELS OF  
**Janet Tashjian**

A READING GROUP GUIDE



HENRY HOLT BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

### *About the Novels of Janet Tashjian*

**J**anet Tashjian is one of the most insightful and inventive voices writing for young readers today. She has a remarkable gift for creating fresh, witty characters who confront and conquer issues with humor, resilience, and resourcefulness. From the sassy heroine Tru, who shares the struggles and triumphs of living with a sibling with special needs, to the passionate Larry, who runs for president and gives a new spin to the phrase “We the People,” Tashjian truly has her finger on the adolescent pulse.



### **TRU CONFESSIONS**

Ages 9–11 • 0-8050-5254-2

#### *About the Book*

**T**here are two things in the world twelve-year-old Trudy wants more than anything else—to be a successful filmmaker and to find a cure for Eddie, her mentally disabled twin brother. Tru’s goals begin to be realized when she wins a local cable contest with a video depicting one day in Eddie’s life. The video is aired on TV, and Tru is invited to produce her own half-hour program, *The Trudy Walker Show*. As Tru and Eddie work on the video together, she realizes it is okay for her to grow up, even if it means leaving her brother behind.

#### *Questions for Group Discussion*

- 1 Tru’s mother says “goals are just dreams with deadlines and that anything is possible if you’re willing to do the work to make it come true” (p. 11). Do you agree with her mother? Why or why not?
- 2 Tru writes in her journal about her frustration with all the labels people use to describe her brother and how they do not tell anything about who Eddie really is. What are some labels you have used or heard used before? How do you think other people would label you? How much do those labels really describe you as a person?

- 3 What do you think Tru is trying to say about her relationship with Eddie when she compares it to what she learned in school about baby sharks (p. 81)? What are some other moments in the book where Tru feels guilty about her relationship with Eddie and her thoughts about him?
- 4 What does Tru realize about Eddie while she is chatting online with Deedee? When Tru finds out that Deedee is her mother she thinks, “Maybe we’ve stumbled on a good setup—she can leave her opinions on the computer and I don’t have to feel like I’m taking advice from my mother” (p. 155). Why do we sometimes look to an outside source for advice? Why does Tru’s mother write to her anonymously rather than just speaking with her about Eddie?
- 5 After Eddie has a problem with claustrophobia in the mall, he says, “I don’t want to be different. I want to be the same. Same as everybody else” (p. 111). This is the first time Tru realizes that Eddie knows he is different from other children. Why is this moment especially painful for Tru?
- 6 When Tru sees her mother watching Eddie on the roller coaster, what does she realize about the future?

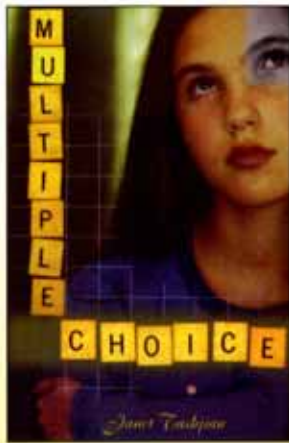
### *Activities*

- Create your own commercial like Tru and Eddie do together.
- Throughout the novel, there are pictures Eddie creates on the computer with captions beneath them written by Tru. Create a picture and have a friend write a caption for it.
- Make a list of clichés that Tru’s mother did not use in the book.

- 
- A New York Public Library Best Book for the Teen Age
  - A Bank Street College Best Children’s Book of the Year
  - A Women’s National Book Association Judy Lopez Memorial Award Honor Book

★“Neither flippant nor angelic, this promising first novel strikes a refreshingly honest tone.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review



## MULTIPLE CHOICE

Ages 10–15 • 0-8050-6086-3

### *About the Book*

**F**or as long as Monica Devon can remember, she has been two things: a whiz at making anagrams, and a perfectionist who spends most of her time obsessing about saying and doing the right thing. Now at fourteen, Monica's compulsive habits have spiraled out of control. Seeing no other way out, she creates Multiple Choice, a roulette word game that will force spontaneity into her life, and, she hopes, free her from her obsessions. It seems so easy—create a list of options, choose a Scrabble tile, and carry out the act. At first the game is exciting and somewhat liberating. But soon it starts to go devastatingly wrong.

### *Questions for Group Discussion*

- 1 Monica comes to the conclusion that she spends 98.762 percent of her time obsessing. Why is it unhealthy to try to be perfect in everything you do?
- 2 Janet Tashjian commented, "Of all of my characters, Monica is the one people most often tell me they identify with." Do you identify with Monica at all? If so, what are the things in your life that you obsess about? Do you see yourself in the characters in any of the other books by this author?
- 3 When Monica finishes constructing her frame, her grandfather suggests that her next project be one without instructions to follow. Why does this idea make her nervous? Why does she want "an instruction manual" for life (p. 37)? How does Monica make out when the Multiple Choice game leads her to create her own project?
- 4 Do you agree or disagree with Monica's best friend, Lynn, who thinks Monica's obsessions come from her fear of making mistakes or being wrong? If you had a friend with the same problem as Monica, what would you say and do to help her deal with it? Monica's Multiple Choice game leads her to write something mean about Lynn on the bathroom wall of their school. If you were Lynn, would you forgive Monica for this? Why or why not?

- 5 When do Monica's obsessions become a danger to her and others? What does Monica realize about Multiple Choice after she gives it up? How does the Multiple Choice game help Monica with her obsessions?
- 6 How does Justin's mother help Monica find a better way to cope with her obsessions?
- 7 Janet Tashjian said, "I don't use the phrase 'obsessive compulsive' in the book because, for me, it's about so much more than labeling." What do you think the author means by this statement? Use the Internet and the library to research obsessive-compulsive disorder. Would you diagnose Monica as having this disorder?

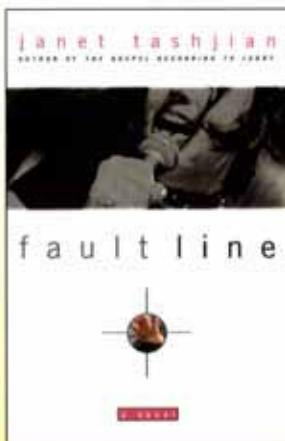
### *Activities*

- For each letter of her first and last name, Monica writes a word or phrase that describes her personality (p. 110). Do the same with your name.
- In the novel, Monica plays word games using anagrams, palindromes, and oxymorons. Try creating some anagrams together as a group, and then come up with some of your own. Use the Internet to see if you've missed any words.



- A New York Public Library Best Book for the Teen Age
- A Chicago Public Library Best of the Best
- A Pennsylvania Young Reader's Choice

"[E]nlightening, insightful novel."—BOOKLIST



## FAULT LINE

Ages 14–18 • 0-8050-7200-4

### *About the Book*

Seventeen-year-old Becky Martin—smart, funny, ambitious—aspires to be a stand-up comic. While setting out to make her goal a reality, she meets Kip Costello, a rising star in the San Francisco comedy-club scene. And what could be better than an intense boyfriend who cares about every detail of her life? But Becky soon discovers a darker side to Kip, where emotional and physical abuse grow hand in hand. As the relationship goes from loving to controlling, Becky must find the courage to get help before it's too late.

### *Questions for Group Discussion*

- 1 What does Becky find attractive about Kip when she first meets him at the comedy club? What are some things Kip does that make Becky fall in love with him?
- 2 What are some initial clues you get that Kip is trying to control Becky's life?
- 3 Abby says to Becky, "You're turning into one of those girls we hate . . . A girl like Lynda, who only joins the living between boyfriends" (p. 68). How does Becky's relationship with Kip affect her friendship with Abby? What does Becky realize when she compares her relationship with Kip to Abby's relationship with Jacob? If you had a friend in a situation like Becky's, what would you do and say to help her?
- 4 Why can't Becky fully enjoy her time with her mother on the UCLA campus and at The Comedy Store? What does her mother mean when she says, "[Love is] never that simple . . . Being in a relationship is the most complicated thing in the world" (p. 93)?
- 5 What are some things Becky does to try to please Kip? Why doesn't she break up with Kip after he physically assaults her the first time? What happens to make Becky finally recognize that she has lost control of her life?

6. Becky's old boyfriend Peter says, "I don't remember ever being angry at you. You're too easygoing to get mad at" (p. 133). What does Becky's conversation with Peter make her realize about her relationship with Kip?
7. How did you feel when reading Kip's entries in his paper-towel dialogues? Why do you think Janet Tashjian included these entries? Do you think Kip is a bad guy?
8. In the author's note at the end of the book, she references a study in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* stating that "one out of every five" teenage girls gets physically abused by her boyfriend. Is this statistic surprising to you? Are you amazed that a smart, funny, ambitious girl like Becky could be a victim of teen relationship abuse? Why or why not?
9. Discuss the significance of the novel's title. What does it suggest about Becky and Kip's relationship?



- A New York Public Library Best Book for the Teen Age

"Tashjian shatters any stereotypes young readers may have about people in abusive relationships . . . An expert at balancing the humorous with the bittersweet, Tashjian here examines a deadly serious topic using two protagonists who live to make others laugh."—THE HORN BOOK



## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY

Ages 12 and up • 0-8050-6378-1

### *About the Book*

Josh Swensen isn't your average teenager—when he observes America, he sees a powerhouse of consumerism and waste. He's even tried to do something about it, with his start-up controversial Web site. But when Josh rises to messiah status in the Internet world, he discovers that greed and superficiality are not easily escaped. Trapped inside his own creation, Josh feels his only way out is to stage his death and be free of his Internet alter ego, "Larry." But this plan comes with danger, and soon Josh finds himself cut off from the world, with no one to turn to for help.

### *Questions for Group Discussion*


- 1 Why do you think the author frames the story as if she is telling the tale of a real person? Do you think this is an effective introduction to the novel?
- 2 In Larry's Sermon #93 (pp. 12–14), he rants against advertising and materialism. Do you agree or disagree with Larry when he says, "We're being used and abused by the advertising companies." If you agree, what are some examples of how we are being taken advantage of?
- 3 In response to one of betagold's threatening e-mails Larry writes, "If I tell people who come to this site that I'm black or a college professor or a retired businesswoman, suddenly everything I say gets filtered through that" (p. 68). Do you agree with Larry's reasons for remaining anonymous, or do you agree with betagold that Larry is a coward?
- 4 In order to keep his life simple, Josh will not allow himself to own more than seventy-five possessions. Using Josh's rules of what is and what is not a possession, make your own list of the seventy-five possessions you would limit yourself to owning. Do you think that owning possessions complicates our lives?
- 5 How does Josh feel when Larry becomes one of the very products he has been ranting against in his sermons? Would you take Josh's offers of

commercial endorsements? Why or why not?

- 5 Josh struggles between choosing to stay loyal either to Peter or to Larry (pp. 151–155). Where should his loyalty be? If you were Josh, what would your decision be?
- 7 Josh/Larry thinks faking his death is the only way to deal with his problems. What are some other solutions he could have tried?
- 8 Is it possible for a teenager to really influence people with his/her ideas in the way and to the extent Josh/Larry is able to do?

### *Activities*

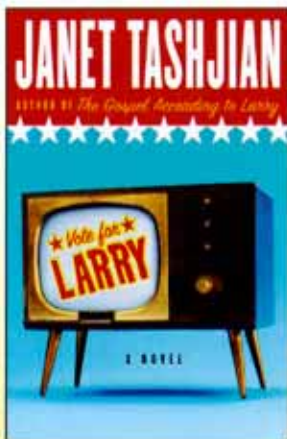
- Carefully watch the commercials aired during your favorite television program. What are the commercials selling? Who is the target audience of the commercials? Are the messages conveyed truthful?
- Create a parody of a magazine ad that could be posted on Larry's Web site.
- Visit Larry's Web site ([www.thegospelaccordingtolarry.com](http://www.thegospelaccordingtolarry.com)). Read the letter from Larry, cast your vote in Larry's poll, complete the crossword puzzle, and check out the links.

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- An ALA Top Ten Best Book for Young Adults
  - A New York Public Library Best Book for the Teen Age
  - A Notable Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies
  - A Booklist Editor's Choice

★"Tashjian's gift for portraying bright adolescents with insight and humor reaches near perfection here."—SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL, starred review

★"[A] thrilling read, fast-paced with much fast food for thought about our consumer-oriented pop culture."—KIRKUS REVIEWS, starred review

★"[V]ery fresh."—BOOKLIST, starred review



## VOTE FOR LARRY

Ages 14 and up • 0-8050-7201-2

### *About the Book*

After falling off the wagon and becoming what he so clearly and strongly resisted—a consumer—Josh Swensen (aka Larry) finds himself in a hyper-paranoid state of no return. That is, until he's kidnapped and coaxed into resurfacing as his old persona. Before long, Larry is back on the scene with much more on his mind than a gospel Web site—this time Larry wants to affect change in government. What starts out as a campaign to get the younger population to vote turns into a run for the presidency. Could Larry actually win the election?

### *Questions for Group Discussion*

- 1 After Josh starts dating Janine, he begins to be filled with great anxiety about whether he is living true to his beliefs. Is it Janine's fault his life is getting off track, or should Josh take responsibility?
- 2 Beth calls Josh selfish and cruel (p. 23). Do you agree with her? Why or why not?
- 3 Why is Josh so attracted to Janine? Why is he so attracted to Beth?
- 4 What makes Larry such an appealing candidate to teens is that he speaks to issues that are of concern to them. What issues should a real presidential candidate focus on in order to win over voting-age teens? Would you vote for Larry?
- 5 One criticism Josh's opponents have of him is that he is too young and inexperienced to be President of the United States. Look up the requirements for presidential candidates in our country. Do you think they make sense? Does age really make a difference?
- 6 What does Josh mean when he says, after talking with Peter, "I finally understood the meaning of the word 'father'" (p. 71)?

- 7 Listen to the Pink Floyd song “Money.” Why does the song serve as an appropriate soundtrack to Larry’s campaign commercial (p. 105)?
- 8 Part Three of the novel begins with a quote by Edward Abbey: “A patriot must always be ready to defend his country against his government.” What do you think this quote means? Is Josh a patriot defending his country against the government?
- 9 What does Josh realize about himself after he meets betagold face-to-face?
- 10 Discuss the cover of *Vote for Larry*. What do you think is the significance of the vintage television set?
- 11 What do you think Larry will do next?

### *Activity*

- If you could run for President of the United States at this point in your life, list the top ten reasons people should vote for you.



★“Readers will get a charge out of Josh/Larry’s fiery speeches and outrageous platform, and startling facts . . . plus a resource list in the back (with voter registration Web sites) provide plenty of fuel for those motivated by the hero’s call to action.”—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review

“Politics, romance, important social issues, and even a saboteur in the wings make this a fun, spirited romp through an election year. Tashjian’s lively, comic prose, coupled with her characters’ anger at politics as usual in this country, may just inspire young readers to become young voters.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

## A CONVERSATION WITH JANET TASHJIAN

**Q:** In your novels, you make use of a variety of visual techniques, such as e-mail correspondences, different fonts, journal/notebook entries, computer graphics, and drawings. Why do you use these various narrative techniques? Are you looking to appeal to the multimedia nature of teens?

**A:** When I wrote my first novel, *Tru Confessions*, my son was an infant and his sleeping patterns were irregular. When I sat down to write, I never knew if I had twenty minutes to work or two hours. Therefore some chapters ended up being just one page—lists, drawings, etc.—while others were longer. Breaking up the narrative that way seemed to fit my personality; I have a very short attention span and those quick chapters felt like doodling in the margins—a way to keep me focused during the long task of writing a novel. After that book, I used the same kind of fractured format in all my novels. It does appeal to the multimedia nature of teens, but first and foremost, it's what works for me.

**Q:** The book jacket for *Tru Confessions* mentions that your family received an award for work in the field of mental retardation. Can you explain what kind of work you did and how it relates to the story?

**A:** My husband's family has long been active advocating for people with special needs. His father, Vahram, was the longtime president of the national ARC and was one of the first to spearhead Scout troops for handicapped and special-needs boys. My mother-in-law, Lorraine, was named Volunteer of the Year for the Developmental Disability Council and was the president of the Blackstone Valley ARC. My husband, Doug, is on the board of directors for the Charles River ARC and was director of soccer for the Massachusetts Special Olympics. They have received several national and state awards, including *Newsweek's* Everyday Heroes Award and the Kennedy International Award for Family Support. Writing *Tru Confessions* was my way of contributing to the amazing family legacy.

**Q:** The psychology of the characters in *Multiple Choice* and *Fault Line* rings so true. How did you get into the heads of these characters? What sort of research did you do for these novels?

**A:** For me, doing research is one of the best parts of the job. Between the library and Google, I look up information all the time—not just for my books but for things I’m curious about in general. For *Multiple Choice*, I did a lot of research on obsessive-compulsive disorder and read many books on perfectionism and young girls. For *Fault Line*, I read a ton of books and articles on teen dating violence, as well as interviewing many therapists and teens. But writing a realistic novel means not only researching character “issues” but creating a world that rings true. Doing research on taxidermy, comedy clubs, or anagrams was fun for me. It’s more like a reward than a chore—getting to enter a world you knew nothing about when you started. It’s one of the gifts of being a writer.

**Q:** What inspired you to write *The Gospel According to Larry*? Is the Josh/Larry character based upon any one particular person you know?

**A:** I wish Josh/Larry was based on someone I knew; I’d be hanging out with him every day! Partly, he’s a mixture of my own idealism and my son’s overactive nature, but mostly he’s just Larry. Whenever I start a new book, I usually take two unrelated topics and try to weave them together to tell a story. With *Tru Confessions*, it was having a special-needs sibling and wanting your own television show. In *Multiple Choice* it was perfectionism and word games. For my next book, I knew I wanted to write about consumerism, but that was all I had. Then one day I was skimming through a book in Tower Records and came across the word pseudocide. *The Gospel According to Larry* came to me right there. (Of course, then I had to write it!)

*(continued)*

**Q:** Why did you choose to frame the Larry books as if you were telling the story of a real person? How have your readers responded to this?

**A:** I've always considered myself a postmodernist because playing with form and narrative structure is one of the main things that interest me when I write a novel. The books I read are almost always postmodern. When I sat down to write *Larry*, I knew I wanted to push the line between fiction and nonfiction. Some of my favorite books do that, most notably *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. To blur the line between those two worlds, I put myself in the book, as well as other real people like Bono. I had a blast writing it. When thousands of kids started wondering if Larry was real, I felt like I had succeeded in the challenge I had set up for myself. (Of course, my intentions weren't only literary; I hoped readers would have as much fun with the sleight of hand as I did with the "Is Paul McCartney dead?" debate that was popular when I was a teen.)

**Q:** Where will Larry go next? Are you working on a new Larry book?

**A:** I will write a third and final Larry. I only have pieces of it in my mind, but I do know this: because it will be my last time hanging out with him, I want us both to have a lot of fun.

**Q:** What reactions have you received from teens who have read the Larry books and visited the Web site ([www.thegospelaccordingtolarry.com](http://www.thegospelaccordingtolarry.com))?

**A:** The reaction to *The Gospel According to Larry* has been extraordinary. Between the Web site and school visits, thousands of teens have told me about their own battles with materialism and what they're doing about it. Kids who have organized to fight branding or junk-food vending machines in their schools, kids who are working for political candidates, or who have limited their personal possessions—it's awe-inspiring. The sequel, *Vote for Larry*, is very political; it's about how critical the act of voting is. I'm hopeful that book will also have many positive ramifications.

**Q:** When you were a teen, in what ways did you involve yourself with activism and politics?

**A:** My activism came later in life; in my twenties, I didn't even vote! My sister is twelve years younger than I am and one day, years ago, she and I were bemoaning the economy and the current administration. She was too young to vote at the time and was mad, telling me that my friends and I were to blame for the state of the country. She was furious that people my age could vote and didn't. Her words hit home; I immediately registered and have been a rabid voter ever since. But voting isn't enough—I also write and call my House and Senate representatives all the time. A political ad my friends and I made for MoveOn.org recently placed as runner-up in a national contest and will run during this presidential election. I donate 10 percent of my income to charitable and activist organizations. Gun control, the environment, and women's rights are all important issues for me. Because my books often deal with social and cultural issues, I feel like my career itself is politically based. People sometimes say that the activism of the sixties is over, that people today are apathetic. Not the people I know!



"Larry and I believe that ordinary people can change the world—in fact it's the main reason why we're here."—Janet Tashjian



*I write almost every day. If I don't, the words start backing up inside me and it gets ugly fast. My mind pretty much never stops—I have more ideas than time to write them in. Nothing makes me happier than coming up with characters and story lines for a new project. My family and friends very graciously put up with my barrage of new ideas.*

—Janet Tashjian

Ms. Tashjian lives outside of Boston, Massachusetts, with her family. For more information, visit her Web site at [WWW.JANETTASHJIAN.COM](http://WWW.JANETTASHJIAN.COM).



Guide written by Ed Sullivan. Ed Sullivan is a school librarian in the Hardin Valley Elementary School in Knoxville, Tennessee. He also teaches children's literature courses at the University of Tennessee.

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