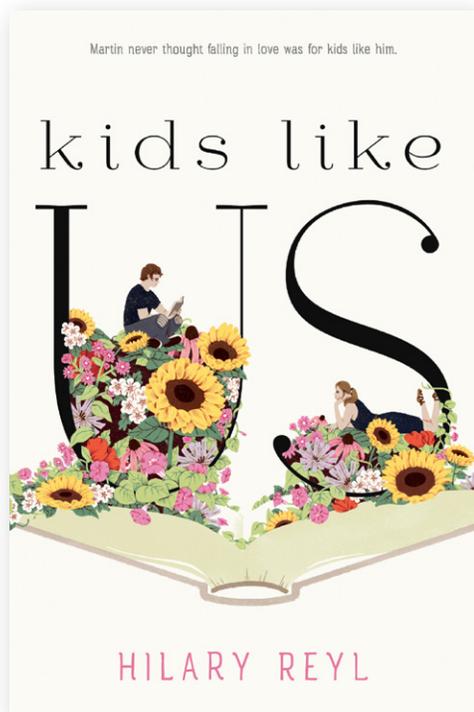


A TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR kids like US



ABOUT THE BOOK

Diagnosed with autism as a child, Martin has grown used to seeing the world differently from other people. Back home in Los Angeles, he attends a special school for kids on the spectrum, kids like him. But he's never really mixed with neuro-typical students before his mother enrolls him in a summer study program in France, where the family will spend the summer while his mother directs a movie. At first, he thinks he's fitting in. He meets a girl who reminds him so strongly of the character from his favorite book that he's sure he's destined to fall in love with her. But soon Martin finds out he's not fooling anyone into thinking he's typical, and the fictional girl of his dreams is just a regular girl with flaws, like everyone else. Maybe, though, it's not about fooling people into thinking he's a kid just like them, but learning to accept—even love—the things that make him different.



Photograph by David Jacobs

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hilary Reyl lives in New York with her husband and three daughters. She has a PhD in French literature and has spent several years living and working in France. Her previous novel, *Lessons in French*, is a coming of age story set in Paris. *Kids like Us* is her first young adult novel.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

- Hold an in-class discussion about neurodiversity. What are students' personal experiences with people who are neurodivergent, whether they have autism or other syndromes, like Downs' or Tourette's? How have their lives been impacted by knowing people who process experience differently from them?
- Discuss what students know and feel about the autistic spectrum. What do they think about the autistic rights' movement and how do they feel it relates to other diversity movements? Are there analogies with sexuality and race? Or is neurodiversity a fundamentally different issue?
- Discuss the concept of empathy. What does it mean to imagine you are another person and feel what they might feel, even when they are very different from you? Is empathy really possible or is it an ideal that can never quite be reached? What are moments in the students' lives when they have felt empathy? Have there been moments when they wish they could have felt it?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS WHILE READING

1. Kids Like Us opens with Martin traveling to France for the first time at age 16. France holds a very important place in his family mythology and in his sense of himself, but he has never physically been there. Has there been a place, significant to you, that you imagined for a long time before actually going? How did your experience of the real place compare with your expectations?
2. As he is arriving in the Loire valley on the train, Martin thinks, "You aren't supposed to dream about being someone else. That is a form of betrayal. You're supposed to be proud of who you are, Martin. So you try to stop dreaming, but you can't." Do you think Martin becomes "someone else" in Kids Like Us? Does he betray himself or betray his old friends from The Center, like Lola?



3. The kids who befriend Martin in his French high school are “moths” drawn to the glamor of his mom’s movie. Do you think he can’t see this from the beginning? Or do you think he chooses to see beyond it? How do you understand his reaction to Gilberte/Alice’s letter explaining that the kids have befriended him in order to be invited to a Hollywood party at his mother’s house? How does his reaction affect the “moths?”
4. Martin’s mom wants him to be happy. But her idea of happiness is very different from his. Do you think she is really paying attention to who he is? Does she become more able to see him as the story progresses?
5. What do you make of Layla’s often repeated question: “Do you think our phones are instruments of communication or torture?”
6. When Martin realizes that the girl he has been calling “Gilberte” is in fact “Alice,” a real person and not a character from his favorite novel, do you think the “bubble” he has been living in is popped? In what ways is it painful for him? In what ways is it positive?
7. Have you read other novels in which there is a “book within a book?” Does this structure work for you? Did Martin make you curious about Proust? Were his references an important part of the story or more of a distraction?
8. Do you agree with this quote that Layla sends Martin from autism rights activist, Jim Sinclair: “It is not possible to separate the autism from the person ... Therefore, when parents say, “I wish my child did not have autism,” what they’re really saying is, “I wish the autistic child I have did not exist and I had a different (non-autistic) child instead.” Read that again. This is what we hear when you mourn over our existence. This is what we hear when you pray for a cure. This is what we know, when you tell us of your fondest hopes and dreams for us: that your greatest wish is that one day we will cease to be, and strangers you can love will move in behind our faces.” Jim Sinclair argues that being autistic is like being gay, a way to exist in the world, not a thing to be cured. Martin makes this point to his mother to explain the autism rights movement. Do you think it’s an accurate comparison?
9. Were you surprised by the revelation of Martin’s father being in jail and the reasons for it? Does this complicate the way you think about his father’s love for and dedication to Martin? How does this kind of conflict within a character resonate with you?



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10. Do you think think that Martin is more transformed by love than a neurotypical person would be? In a conversation with his mom toward the end of the book, he says, “Getting close to Alice is making me realize how much I have to lose.” How do you imagine Martin being changed on his return to Los Angeles after his time in France?

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

- Now that they have read Kids Like Us, ask the students to imagine that they are on the spectrum and that they understand the world through a filter the way Martin does through Proust. It could be a book, a movie, tv show or comic or the work of a visual artist. Ask them to write an essay or do a visual project on how this narrative might frame their experience. For example, a Marvel character could inform their moral code. Or they could live out variations on scenarios from Disney movies. The sky is the limit!
- Has reading Kids Like Us reminded anyone of a time when they felt their way of seeing or understanding a situation was completely different from those around them? A time when they felt isolated in their own perceptions? Ask the students to write or make art about the difference between feeling you are in sync with those around you and feeling you are isolated in your own mind. Does this exercise give them empathy with neurodivergent kids?