

DISCUSSION GUIDE

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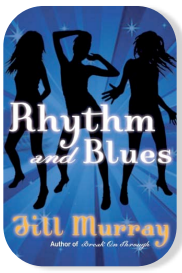
Alya Merchant doesn't have a lot to complain about. She earns strong grades, performs with the Hydra Force b-girl crew, hangs with Madi (her BFF), and teaches dance classes. But then she is jolted from the comfort and familiarity of her ordinary life when it takes an unexpected and extraordinary turn. Alya lands an opportunity of a lifetime: an invitation to join EnChantay, an R & B female vocal trio. Once she starts working with the group's two other songstresses, her initial excitement about singing with them transforms into feelings of self-doubt, frustration, confusion, and isolation. Though her journey to stardom unfolds as an unpredictable and emotionally-taxing one, it leads her to figure out what matters most to her in life and to come to terms with who she really is.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Our identity consists of multiple facets from the way we dress to the work we perform to earn a living. There may be parts of our identity which we accept and others we do not. Why does Alya struggle with accepting the sexual orientation aspect of her identity? How does she eventually come to terms with it?
2. RJ Cormier spots Alya in a parking lot and asks her to audition to be part of the singing group, EnChantay. How accurate of a reading can someone get of another person's talent by just looking at him or her? To what extent can appearance make up for a person's lack of talent and ability?
3. Julie and Angelique do anything but welcome Alya into EnChantay with open arms. Why? What are the ways in which they exclude her and are unkind to her?
4. Though her name means "angelic", Angelique is quite a devilish character. She is jealous of Alya, views her as a threat, and even verbally lashes out at her (p. 118-119). But Angelique then kisses Alya, more than once, during their drunken night out. What are the possible motivations underlying Angelique's sexual advances towards Alya?
5. Alya is a mega fan of singer Bershawn Sera. Thanks to Dee, Alya gets to meet him during a lunch date. Describe what this experience is like for Alya and what she takes away from it. If you've been lucky to meet one of your idols, describe what the experience was like for you. How was the person like or unlike what you expected?
6. RJ, David, Rachel, and Mimi meet Alya alone at the studio one morning to shoot a few key sequences for the EnChantay video (p. 202-204). They lie to Alya about their reason for doing this but she comes to figure out the truth herself. What are the ways in which Alya and other characters deceive one another?
7. Mr. and Mrs. Merchant are Alya's parents. RJ is her manager. Dee is her vocal coach. These individuals are the key adults in Alya's world. What type of effect do they have on her life? How do they influence her way of thinking?
8. In what ways does Alya change and grow during her stint with EnChantay?

Thematic Links

Friendship - Identity - Deception - Belonging - Acceptance - Self Discovery - Opportunity -
Performing - Singing - Music Industry - Appearances



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Projects

- Design a cover for EnChantay's first CD or a poster for one of their concerts.
- Write music for the lyrics of "Stepping Out (Girl Fight)". Have three students learn and perform the song. Select a director to shoot a video of their performance. Recruit others to take care of hair, makeup, costumes, and choreography for the video.
- Singers and musicians naturally spring to mind when we think of the music industry. But folks, like producers, stylists, vocal coaches, and choreographers, are examples of folk who work behind the scenes. Learn about various careers in the music industry, what work is involved in them, and the education/training required to pursue these careers.
- Learn the lingo of b-boying/b-girling (breakdancing). Find out about the dance form's four main moves which are toprock, downrock, power moves and freezes. Invite a b-boy/b-girl who is a classmate or friend to demonstrate them. If this isn't possible, find online videos that show dancers performing them.

Author Interview: 1 on 1 with Jill Murray



What inspired you to write *Rhythm and Blues*?

Rhythm and Blues is a YA comedy of ambition, identity and Auto-Tune. I was inspired to write it by the spirit of the character herself (she got her start in my first novel, *Break on Through*), by my own love of music, and the culture of celebrity that has become inescapable, all around us.

What do you do when you encounter the dreaded writer's block?

I don't do writer's block! If I'm having trouble with something, I just write myself a note like "[between here and the end of the chapter, she needs to make it clear that she really cares, and she's not just doing it because she feels like she has to]" and then I'll go work on some other scene that strikes me as more inspiring or easier to deal with. I know I'll eventually go back and fill in the gaps, and that if I'm struggling, there's probably something I haven't learned about the story or character yet, that I'll work out by writing ahead.

What advice do you have for aspiring young writers?

Write a lot, and read a lot, and have as much fun with it as you can. Explore different genres, take big risks, be silly, be melodramatic; try everything.

If you could go back and give your high school self one piece of advice, what would it be?

Everyone lacks confidence about something, and that's what makes them act shy, stuck-up, belligerent, self-obsessed, bossy, flirty, friendly, clingy, silly, smiley, jokey, loud, quiet, nerdy, judgmental, cliquey, theatrical, serious, flaky, pushy, slackerly, nervous, and even over-confident. The moment when you look for the good in them may be the moment they start to see the good in you.

Do you have any writing rituals?

Every day, I don't quit.