

## *Background about the Book – A Mango-Shaped Space*

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In kindergarten we all learned our colors and shapes. It was all pretty simple, right? For Mia, it wasn't as easy as that. She had shapes and colors, but they hung in the air around people's names. Numbers had colors, too, and so did sounds. Until third grade, Mia thought everyone else saw the world the way she did. An unpleasant incident in her math class that year caused her to hide her gift from everyone, until a friend of hers told everyone about Mia's talents in eighth grade. With the secret out, Mia knows it's time to tell her parents about her special ability. They take her from one doctor to the next until Mia learns that she has synesthesia, a brain condition that causes multiple senses to mix, giving sound --- and even taste --- color. Knowing what she has opens a new world for her that is sometimes scary but completely fascinating.

*www.teenreads.com*

## *About the Author*

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Wendy Mass grew up in Livingston, New Jersey, about 45 minutes from New York City. Her favorite pastime as a child was reading. Her first book was co-authored with her two sisters and starred her cat Muffin. After earning an English degree from Tufts (YEA) she moved to Los Angeles and worked in the entertainment industry as a literary agent and script reader. Wendy soon discovered that her real desire was to write for children and young adults. She moved back east and began writing. Some of her very favorite books are *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Are You There God, It's Me Margaret*, all the books by Beverly Cleary and Edward Eager, the

*Encyclopedia Brown* books, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, *A Bridge to Terabithia*, and *Charlotte's Web*.

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## Reviews – A Mango-Shaped Space

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Mia Winchell is a synesthetes-her brain's electrical wiring causes words and sounds to be accompanied by a visual display of colors. She describes laughter as "a pale blue cloud that drizzles down." The word friend is "turquoise with the glow of glossy red." Mia, now 13 years old, has been keeping her condition a secret since she first discovered it in the third grade. When Mia finally confides in her parents, they take her to a series of doctors, and she is properly diagnosed. Once the teen learns that she's not crazy and her problem is synesthesia, she embraces her uniqueness. But she also abandons her normal relationships to spend time with fellow synesthetes. Finally, the death of her beloved cat, Mango, reconciles Mia to her family and friends. Wendy Mass's novel captures the emotional roller-coaster ride of a teenager born with synesthesia in much the same way as Mark Haddon captured the complicated world of autism in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. Mass weaves an intriguing and compelling story filled with believable dialogue and characters. Mia's parents are almost too perfect, but her siblings' and friends' personalities and voices ring true. Mass moves from character to character effortlessly, but without much deviation in voice inflections for the secondary players. In voicing Mia, she does a remarkable job of expressing the whirlwind of complicated teenage emotions. A must for all collections.

### **School Library Journal**

In an intriguing first novel, Mass introduces a 13-year-old heroine with an unusual perspective. Mia Winchell is a synesthete: her visual and hearing senses are connected so that numbers, letters, words, sounds and even some people's auras appear to her as colors. The letter "a" for instance, is the shade of a "faded sunflower," screeching chalk "makes red jagged lines in the air," and Mia's beloved cat, Mango, is surrounded by an orange cloud. Mia's unique view proves to be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, she enjoys having heightened senses ("If I couldn't use my colors, the world would seem so bland-like vanilla ice cream without the gummy bears on top," she says.) On the other hand, sometimes it's hard for her being reminded that she is different, like when her brother, Zack, calls her "the Missing Link." Although the storyline at times, seems cluttered with underdeveloped subplots about Mia's friendships, potential romances and conflicts at school, the novel's premise is interesting enough to keep pages turning. The author successfully brings abstract ideas down to earth. Her well-defined characterizations, natural-sounding dialogue, and concrete imagery allow readers to feel Mia's emotions and see through her eyes a kaleidoscopic world, which is at once confusing and beautiful.

### **Publisher's Weekly**

This contemporary novel does for synesthesia what Terry Hesser's *Kissing Doorknobs* (1998) does for obsessive-compulsive disorder: the lively personal story demystifies a fascinating condition. For 13-year-old Mia Winchell, the world has always been filled with a wonderful, if sometimes dizzying, sensory onslaught-numbers, letters, words, and sounds all cause her to see a distinct array of colors. She keeps her unusual condition a secret until eighth grade, but then her color visions make math and Spanish impossibly confusing, and she must go to her parents and a doctor for help. Mass beautifully integrates information about synesthesia with Mia's coming-of-age story, which includes her break with her best friend, her grief over her grandfather's death, and the loss of her beloved pet. The episode where Mia fabricates an illness to try out acupuncture for the color visions it produces is marvelously done, showing Mia's eagerness for new experiences even as it describes a synesthete's vision. References to a comprehensive Web site and bibliography about synesthesia are included.

### **Booklist**

## Read Alikes –A Mango-Shaped Space

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*Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio* by Peg Kehret

*The Spadefoot Toads* by Bill Harley

*Charlotte's Choice* by Cathleen Twomey

*Stand Tall* by Joan Bauer

*A Terrible Secret* by Ginette Anbousse

Novelistplus.com

## Discussion Questions: A Mango-Shaped Space

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1. Mia lost her grandfather and paints a picture in his honor. Jenna lost her mother and every year on Jenna's birthday she receives a present from her mother that Mia's mother has been holding for her. Have you ever lost anyone close to you? If so, what things do you do to remember them? Do you have any traditions for honoring those you lost? When Mia's cat Mango dies, she falls apart. Have you ever lost a pet?
2. When Mia shows her father the picture she painted of her grandfather, her father says, "They say the eyes are the windows to the soul, you know. I can see Grandpa in those eyes." (p. 28) What does he mean by that?
3. Describe the relationship between Mia and Jenna. As with any friendship there are highs and lows. Site various examples of times when Mia and Jenna are getting along and those when their friendship seems to be in question.
4. Mia doesn't tell anyone about her synesthesia; not even Jenna. When the truth is revealed, Jenna's response surprises Mia. "Maybe you don't know what a best friend is." (p. 62) How would you describe Jenna's reaction? Anger? Disappointment? Hurt? Do you think Jenna is just in her feelings? How would you respond to Jenna's statement about the meaning of best friend?
5. When Mia's friendship bracelet gets snagged on the door latch and a thread rips (p. 128), how is that symbolic of their relationship?
6. "I hurry back to the house thinking of all the things we keep from other people. Even our best friends." (p. 32) Discuss this statement with the group. Do you think everyone keeps things hidden? How does this statement compare to Mia's statement on page 100: "It's so much easier to talk to people over e-mail than it is in person." Do you agree? Why or why not?
7. Mia is apprehensive about engaging in an e-mail exchange with Adam, questioning his true identity. (p. 103) Do you think Mia is right to be cautious? Discuss the dangers of e-mail chat rooms with the class.
8. Mia is part of a unique and loving family. How does each family member deal with Mia's diagnosis? Do you think it has pulled them together as a family?
9. Mia uses her synesthesia to cheat on a math quiz and finally receives an A. "I'm so proud of myself that I forgot to be ashamed." (p. 115) Discuss the dichotomy in this statement.
10. Ever since being made to feel stupid in third grade, Mia finally feels like she has found her place with fellow synesthesians. Can she belong and be accepted by both groups?

11. What does Mia mean when she says, “I guess life is all about priorities.” (p. 150) Does Mia have her priorities in order? What are her priorities? Do you think that is why she was so hard on herself when Mango died? Her father said, “We all do the best we can, trying to keep all the balls in the air at once.” (p. 197) Discuss this statement. Do you think this helped ease Mia’s grief? Would you agree with her father’s assessment of life?

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## GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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The following questions can be applied to any book. You can tweak the questions for your specific book. They can be cut into strips and passed around in a basket to help facilitate discussion.

My favorite part of the book was...

A better title for this book would be...because...

(Name of character) reminds me of myself because...

My least favorite character was...because...

If I were (name of character, -----) I would (wouldn't) have...

(Name of character) reminds me of someone I know because...

I changed my mind about...because...

I would (wouldn't) like to read another book by this author because...

This book made me think...When I finished this book, I still wondered...

This book reminded me of...

I'd like to tell the author...

What happened in this book was very realistic (unrealistic) because...

This book was better (worse) than the movie version because...

When I started reading his book, I thought...

I didn't like...because...

This book made me realize...

If I could talk to (name of character), I would say...

One thing I have noticed about the author's style is...

If I could be any character in the book I would be...because...

I was surprised when...

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I think the main thing the writer was trying to say was...

The most important thing about this book is...

I predicted that...

I think the writer must be ...because...

I would change the ending...

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