

Turn the page for  
a discussion guide to

the  
sky  
is  
everywhere



1. A major theme of this book is Lennie's discovery of her sexuality. Do you think this is depicted realistically? Do you think this is tied to her grief or do you think the two are unrelated?
2. Throughout the novel, Lennie writes on anything and everything and leaves these poems scattered around the town. Do you think this is an effective way of showing the reader Lennie and Bailey's relationship? How do these poems ultimately bring Joe and Lennie together? What is the significance of Lennie's scattering these poems?
3. Writing can be a form of therapy for some people. Do you think these poems are Lennie's way of finding an outlet for her grief? If so, what makes you think it works? Doesn't work?
4. When Sarah hears about Lennie and Toby's relationship, she's upset by their actions. Do you agree with Sarah's reaction or should she have reacted differently, knowing Lennie and Toby's situation? What is your opinion on Lennie and Toby's relationship? Do you find it forgivable or heartless?
5. During one of her encounters with Toby, Lennie realizes, "I'm sure a shrink would love this, all of it." (pgs. 146–147) What does she mean by that? Do you agree with this assessment? Discuss whether you believe Lennie's actions in wearing Bailey's clothes and hooking up with her boyfriend are an act to keep Bailey close or to gain the life her sister had.

6. Lennie and Bailey were extremely close sisters. Do you really believe no competition existed between them? Why or why not?
7. Bailey and Lennie's absent mother is a large part of their lives. Ultimately the mystery leads Bailey to search for her. Why do you think she leaves Lennie in the dark about this? Who do you think is a stand-in for Lennie's real mother—Bailey or Gram? Why do you think Lennie decides not to continue with the search? Do you think she'll be content?
8. Lennie's actions hurt Joe very deeply, on account of his relationship history. Do you think his reaction is extreme or understandable? Why do you think he forgives Lennie in the end?
9. Consider the role music plays in the novel. How is this a crucial part of the story? Why does Lennie purposely throw the audition for first chair? How does music help her to heal? Is it just the music that draws Joe to Lennie or something more? How does it shape her relationship with Joe?
10. The novel is saturated with grief. Each person touched by Bailey in the novel—Gram, Big, Lennie, Toby, and Sarah—grieve in distinctly personal ways. Define their grief and how each character learns to move on, if at all. Do you wish any of the characters had worked through his or her grief in a different way? How would you have acted in their situation?

Turn the page  
for a Q & A with author

JANDY NELSON

**Music plays a large role in Lennie's life. Why did you feel this was an important addition to her character? What made you want to include music in the book in the first place?**

Well, the funny thing is I don't feel like I had that much to do with it! Lennie pretty much crashed into my psyche, clarinet in hand. So she was always a musician in my mind and I went from there, believing then that music would be an intrinsic factor in her growth, in the way she coped with her grief, in how she connected in a wordless way with Joe, in how she moved out of Bailey's shadow and into her own light. In the beginning of the story when Lennie's so shut down, she says, to express what she's feeling she'd need "a new alphabet, one made of falling, of tectonic plates shifting, of the deep devouring dark." I think over the course of the story, she realizes that, for her, music is this alphabet. She says, "What if music is what escapes what a heart breaks?" and I think this becomes true for her. More generally, I love music and wanted it to have a curative, aphrodisiacal, celebratory, and transformative role in this story. Like Jack Kerouac said, "The only truth is music." And Shakespeare: "If music be the food of love, play on." I wanted Lennie to play on.

**You have an MFA in poetry. Is this why you decided to make Lennie a poet in the novel?**

Before writing this book, I'd only written poetry, and *The Sky Is Everywhere* actually started as a novel in verse. I had this image in my mind of a grief-stricken girl scattering her poems all over a town—that was really the inciting image for the whole book and key right from the start to Lennie's character. I kept thinking of her, this bereft girl, who wanted so badly to communicate with someone who was no longer there that

she just began writing her words on everything and anything she could, scattering her poems and thoughts and memories to the winds. In my mind, it was a way for Lennie to write her grief on the world, to mark it, to reach out to her sister and at the same time to make sure, in this strange way, that their story was part of everything. So it all began with Lennie's poems, but very early on, like after a couple weeks of writing, it became clear that Lennie's story needed to be told primarily in prose so I dove in and found myself falling in love with writing fiction—it was a total revelation! After that, I wrote both the prose and poems simultaneously, weaving the poems in as I went along.

**Why did you want to tell Lennie's story? Did you ever imagine telling Bailey and Lennie's story from another point of view?**

No, it was always Lennie's story I wanted to tell and always from her point of view. I wanted the immediacy of first person, to really be able to follow her closely emotionally and psychologically over the course of the story. That image I had of her scattering poems was incredibly persistent; it chased me everywhere until I sat down to write her story. I had lost someone very close to me years earlier and I wanted to write about that kind of catastrophic, transformational life event. I wanted to explore some of the intricacies and complexities of grief, but I wanted to explore them through a love story—or two really. I imagined a story where joy and sorrow cohabitated in really close quarters, where love could be almost as unwieldy as grief. James Baldwin said, "When you're writing you're trying to find out something which you don't know." I think there were things I wanted to explore and discover, and writing Lennie's

story helped me do that. She really took me over. What's odd is that despite the subject matter, and even though many days I typed with tears falling onto the keyboard, writing this novel was an incredibly joyful experience, one of the happiest times of my life.

### **Was setting important to you in writing this story?**

Absolutely. I very much wanted the setting to be a “character” in this story interplaying with the other characters. I love California, love writing about it. I'm very inspired by the landscape. The imagined town of Clover, where *The Sky Is Everywhere* takes place, has really dramatic natural elements: roaring rivers, skyscraping redwoods, thick old-growth forests. This landscape is in the DNA of the Walker family, and I wanted it to be instrumental in Lennie's recovery and awakening, as objective correlative, but also as almost a spiritual force in her life.

### **What do you want readers to take from this story?**

It's funny there's a paragraph toward the end of the novel in Chapter 35. Lennie has just told Rachel she's going to challenge her for first chair and she's running through the woods on her way to write the poem for Joe. She's taking steps that will propel her into the future when she's suddenly clobbered (not for the first time) by the realization that she has a future and Bailey doesn't. It's agony for her and it occurs to her that grief is forever, that it will be with her always, step for step, breath for breath, but she also realizes in this moment that this is true because grief and love are conjoined and you can't have one without the other. Grief is always going to be a measure of the love lost. She thinks, “All I can do is love her [Bailey], and love

the world, emulate her by living with daring and spirit and joy.” Every time I come across this paragraph, I think to myself, Well there it is, the whole book crammed into one paragraph! So for me the ideas in that paragraph kind of ring out, but every reader will take something different from the novel and that’s what I want, that’s the magic of it all. Reading is such a wonderfully personal and private affair.

**What are your favorite parts of the writing process? What were your favorite scenes to write in *The Sky Is Everywhere*?**

I have two favorite parts of the whole process. I love the beginning, the first draft, when I’m totally lost inside a story, so immersed that my fictional life overtakes my real one. I love the madness of that, when the story is pouring out and I feel this compulsion to get it down before I lose it. It’s fevered, euphoric, like a mad love. And I also adore the later stages of revision, the last draft, when I’m playing with words, fiddling endlessly with this and that. At that point, I kind of just stare zombie-like at my computer screen for days living inside a particular sentence or scene or section trying to make it better, to make it come alive. It’s a total blast. I think my favorite scenes to write were the ones where Lennie was falling in love. One of the wonders of writing a love story is you get to swoon right alongside the characters. I love that kind of tumbling rapturous emotion and trying to find language for it. I also loved writing the family scenes with Big and Gram and others around the breakfast table—the two of them were a lot of fun to spend time with, what came out of their mouths always surprised me. And . . . actually I think I have a lot of favorites!

## **Do you have any tips for aspiring writers?**

Yes. Read, read, read. And write, write, write. Also, remember that what makes your voice as a writer unique is the fact that you're you, so don't be afraid to put yourself on the page, to reveal your passions, sorrows, joys, idiosyncrasies, insights, your personal monsters and miracles. Only you can be you and only you can write like you—that's your gift alone. If you have the writing fever, just keep at it—writing takes a ton of practice, patience, and perseverance—make sure to ignore the market and don't let rejection talk you out of your dream. I love this quote by Ray Bradbury: "Yet if I were asked to name the most important items in a writer's make-up, the things that shape his material and rush him along the road to where he wants to go, I could only warn him to look to his zest, see to his gusto."

## **Have you begun working on your next project? If so, can you give us any hints?**

I am currently hard at work on a new YA novel about twins Noah and Jude. It's really two novels in one and it alternates between Noah's story, which takes place when the twins are fourteen, and Jude's, when they're eighteen. It's full of secrets and lies and heartbreak and romance and love and very strong passions. Both narratives revolve around a very charismatic and mysterious sculptor who changes both the twins' lives, and they, his. I'm excited about it—fingers crossed!

For more information, visit  
[www.theskyiseverywhere.com](http://www.theskyiseverywhere.com)

or

[www.jandynelson.com](http://www.jandynelson.com)