

# A GUIDE FOR READING GROUPS



## **The Alice Series**

By Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

# Discussion Questions

1. Alice deeply misses her late mother and imagines that a mom would be able to handle every awkward situation or answer all of Alice's questions. Discuss the relationships that Alice's friends have with their own mothers. What is the difference between living with a real mother and living with a faint memory of one?
2. "I kept wondering who makes the rules," Alice muses in *Alice in Rapture, Sort Of*. "I just don't understand how one day you aren't ready for something and then, after a birthday party, you are." Do you think arbitrary age limits make sense? Why or why not?
3. Bullied by Denise in *Reluctantly Alice*, Alice ends up reaching out to her tormentor. Why does Alice do that? How does Denise respond? Do you think anyone could have spared Denise from the tragedy she suffers in *Alice in April*? Why or why not?
4. As many of the titles in the series suggest, Alice has her fair share of embarrassments and disappointments. Yet somehow she is able to rise above her troubles. What are some of Alice's character traits that help her weather the bad times?
5. At the beginning of *Reluctantly Alice*, Alice decides she wants to be liked by everyone, but her father insists: "People who try to please everybody all the time turn out like oatmeal." Do you agree with Mr. McKinley? Why or why not?
6. Although Alice insists there are no racial divisions in her junior high, a school-wide experiment in *Alice on the Outside* shows her how easy it is to slip into ugly prejudices. Discuss race relations in your own school or community. Is your neighborhood racially mixed? Is your school? Do you see any evidence that individuals are treated better or worse based on their race or physical appearance?
7. Why does Alice keep turning to her Aunt Sally for advice? Does she ever take any of it?
8. Despite her many complaints about living with only men, Alice is deeply attached to her father and older brother. How do they look out for each other? Does the absence of a mother in the house make them closer somehow?
9. *Alice In-Between* is the title of one of Alice's adventures, but is it also a theme that runs through the whole series? In what ways is Alice in-between girlhood and womanhood? Are there other ways that Alice is in-between?
10. The Alice books, especially *Alice on the Outside*, are forthright about Alice's curiosity about sex and her growing understanding of her own sexuality. To whom does Alice turn when she has questions about sex? How reliable are each of these sources? What do you think are the important values she's learning?
11. Alice feels like she spends a lot of time making mistakes and embarrassing herself. What are some of the embarrassing things she's done? Do you think she makes more mistakes than other people? Does the embarrassment she feels match the things she does? Is it the most important thing about her?
12. In *The Grooming of Alice*, Pamela and Elizabeth want to get in shape in part because they have too much stress in their lives and they want to have control over some aspect of themselves. What are some other ways that characters in the books—or people that you know—deal with stress? Are these healthy ways to

Alice likes watching basketball since it's easy to follow.

12. Although she resisted at first, Alice joined a few school clubs, where she met new people and discovered new interests. Join a club that interests you, or sign up for classes about something you've always wanted to learn.
13. For Alice's three-minute speech in *Dangerously Alice*, she talked about the cruelty of animal experimentation. Investigate the truth of her talk.
14. Role-play the thoughts and feelings that a guy might have when he finds out his girlfriend is pregnant. If he says he'll "be there for her," what might he mean by that? What might *she* think he means?
15. In *Alice in Charge*, we meet Daniel Bul Dau, a foreign exchange student from the Sudan. Brainstorm ways to help a new student feel welcome.

## About the Series

To hear grown-ups talk, the years before you turn twenty-one are a joyous, carefree time that you will eventually think of as a high point. But how could this possibly be true when there are so many things that can go wrong every single day? You could fall down the stairs at school...and wet your pants while you are falling. Your boyfriend could tell you that you're chubby. You could make a fool of yourself in a talent show. You could wear really bad eyeshadow. You could even get accidentally locked out of your house while wearing your underpants. The list is endless!

Luckily, there's Alice McKinley, in a whole series of books by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor. Alice faces the same problems and emotions that you do, and deals with them in a manner that everyone can relate to. She may not have a mother to guide her, a plan for the future—or even, sometimes, a clue—but she does her best and muddles through. She is the friend that every girl needs...to laugh with, to cry with, and to face the mysteries of growing up with.

When Alice McKinley first burst onto the scene more than twenty-five years ago, readers and critics immediately welcomed her into their hearts. "A wonderfully funny and touching story that will make readers smile with wry recognition," *Booklist* wrote in its starred review of the very first Alice book, *The Agony of Alice*. Since then, the number of titles in the series has grown and so has Alice, from a third-grader anxious about finding her place in a new town... to a teenager eager to discover her own individuality. It's clear in book after book, each a witty and often moving portrayal of everyday disasters and occasional triumphs, that effervescent Alice is maturing into someone pretty fabulous.

## About the Author

**PHYLLIS REYNOLDS NAYLOR** spent her own teenage years in Joliet, Illinois, but she set the Alice books in suburban Maryland, where she and her husband raised their two sons, Jeff and Michael. Now a grandmother, Ms. Naylor enjoys spending vacations in the mountains or at the ocean with her family. When she is not writing, she likes to hike, snorkel, play the piano, and attend the theater. The author of more than 140 books, Ms. Naylor won the 1992 Newbery Medal for *Shiloh*.



Photo © Gilbert

# Projects and Research

1. Each of the Alice books is distinguished by sparkling dialogue. Choose a favorite scene and act it out. If the scene features both young people and adults, try switching age roles. The adults in your group could read the younger parts and the younger members can tackle the adult parts.
2. Imagine Alice is part of your reading group. Write her a letter that describes yourselves to her. Who is in the group? What are your goals? What else have you read together?
3. In *Alice in Lace*, each student in Alice's health class has been assigned a hypothetical real-life problem to figure out. Most of the older members of your group already have plenty of experience with practical problems. How prepared were they for the decisions they had to make? Do they have any regrets?
4. At the close of *Alice in April*, Alice writes a letter to herself at age sixty. Your group can do the same thing, but with a slight twist. The younger members compose letters to their older selves. Their older members write a note to their younger selves, back when they were adolescents.
5. In *All but Alice*, Miss Summers asks her language arts class to find a song or musical or book title that best reflects the personality of each member of their family. Alice picks *Funny Girl* for her mother and *Annie*, as in the musical version of *Little Orphan Annie*, for herself. Ask all your members to think of popularly known titles that describe themselves and everyone else in the group.
6. Alice has a number of people whom she can turn to with questions about sex and her body, but sometimes it can be hard to bring up the topic. Find someone in your community—a doctor, teacher, or social worker—who is knowledgeable and willing to speak to you and a group of your friends. Including your parents in this group can spark some interesting discussions, in addition to ensuring their support. If you are all still feeling too embarrassed to ask questions, perhaps you can create an anonymous question box, which you could use to get the discussion started.
7. Several times throughout the books, Alice makes a pineapple upside-down cake using her mother's recipe. Ask around for some of your family's recipes and try them out.
8. Working on her school newspaper is something that brings Alice both pleasure and recognition. Volunteer to work on your school newspaper. If this is not an option for you, then perhaps you could create a newsletter for some group that you are part of—your family, reading group, or workplace are all possibilities. Get others to help you with the creation of this newsletter.
9. When Alice first starts babysitting Jimmy Benton, she has a frightening experience when he chokes on a grape. Research opportunities in your community to learn CPR, the Heimlich maneuver, or first aid, so that you will be prepared for such emergencies.
10. Alice often tries to help out others who are in need, inviting them to Thanksgiving dinner, befriending them if she senses they are lonely, or buying holiday gifts that they might not otherwise get. Find a local organization that fits your interests and beliefs, and volunteer there.
11. Patrick and Alice help out their teacher and have a good time when they create a timeline of the Russian Revolution. Create your own timeline—choose a historical event or something that happened in your own life—and have fun finding creative ways to illustrate it. Use it to decorate your classroom or your bedroom.

relieve tension? What are some things that you can do to reduce the stress in your life, before it becomes such a major issue?

**13.** Pamela, Elizabeth, and Alice are blown away by parts of their “For Girls Only” day at the Y. What is it about the day that they find so effective? Why do you think that it moves them so? Do you think that the things they learn during the day are true? Are they helpful?

**14.** When Patrick and Alice break up, Alice feels like she can’t go on without being part of a couple. Why, then, doesn’t she take her friends’ advice and look for another boy to date? What does Alice think is the most important part of being in a relationship? What do you think is the most important? How does Lester feel about dating?

**15.** Alice often feels nervous and awkward about kissing Patrick and being intimate with him, and at one point breaks up with him because she doesn’t feel ready to have a boyfriend. In your opinion, is this normal for a girl her age? How does her nervousness—and how she deals with it—compare to Pamela, Elizabeth, and their other friends? Which members of their group are most ready for mature relationships, and how does this compare to the way they each act?

**16.** Who does Alice turn to for mothering, since her own mother died when she was so young? What does each of these people provide for Alice? Does Alice give anything in return for this nurturing? What does Alice have from her real mother?

**17.** Alice has been waiting a long time for her father and Sylvia to get married. Why is it so important to her that this happen? Why did she choose Sylvia Summers? Do you think that having Sylvia in the family will turn out the way that Alice thinks it will?

Alice doesn’t like when people call body parts “you-know-what.”

**18.** Alice is so certain that something is going to ruin her dad’s wedding, but it ends up being one of the most beautiful days of her life. But was the day perfect? Is there such a thing as a perfect day, where nothing goes wrong? Can you think of other times in her life when Alice was expecting things to be perfect and they didn’t turn out as she had planned? What was important about each of these days? Does Alice—or anyone else—have the right to expect certain days to be perfect?

**19.** In what ways does Alice’s relationship with her father and Lester affect how she thinks about other boys? Are these influences good or bad? Does the fact that she’s the only girl in their house put her at as much of a disadvantage as she thinks?

**20.** How does Alice’s relationship with Pamela and Elizabeth change over the years? What is it that keeps the three girls together? What separates them?

**21.** Alice struggles because she wants to fit in and be part of the group, but also wants to be a distinctive and special person. How does she go about achieving each of these things? Why does she sometimes choose to do things that she knows will keep her from being accepted? Do you agree with her choices?

**22.** In *Alice on Her Way*, Alice really hits it off with Sam—but when she starts to get to know him better, she is surprised by his opinions on certain topics. Have you ever dated someone who had very different opinions from you? Did this affect your opinion of them?

Overall, Alice is a B+ student – gets more Bs than As – but rarely gets Cs (except in math).

23. Faith believes that her boyfriend only hurts her because he cares so much about her. Discuss whether this is true. How can thoughts like this be dangerous? If you had a friend in Faith's position, what would you do?
24. When one of Alice's friends gets sick in *Alice in the Know*, it prompts her to ask her father questions about her mother, and together the two of them discover that sharing their memories of her mother helps them. Why do you think this is? Have you ever had the experience of remembering someone you love who is no longer with you?
25. Discuss a time when a friend has gone through something sad and scary. How did you help them through it?
26. Race is a huge issue in *Alice in the Know*. Do you agree with Tracy's rejection of Lester's proposal? Why or why not?
27. Responsible, dependable Alice is fired from her department store job! Do you think her dismissal should have come as a surprise, or should she have been expecting it? What did she learn from the experience?
28. Do you agree or disagree that a person who worries all the time about something awful happening is already ruining the good times?
29. In *Dangerously Alice*, Alice has a hard time dealing with the Miss Goody-Two-Shoes label she has been given. Have you ever been called a name? How did it make you feel?
30. Alice seems smitten with Tony Osler from the first time he asks her to dance. Analyze Alice's attraction to him.
31. Alice's speech teacher, Mrs. Cary, has each student choose a controversial subject and defend his or her own view on it, without knowing that later they will all be asked to research and defend the opposite view. Do you think it was a fair assignment?
32. Alice hides in her dad's closet because she suspects Sylvia is going to tell him about the fight they had. Instead, her parents have sex, all while Alice can hear. Lester advises her to never, ever tell her dad what happened. Discuss the wisdom of this advice.
33. Alice and Liz spend the night out in the city so that Alice can write an article for the newspaper. Do you think the article made the risk worthwhile? Why or why not?
34. Alice finds out from Sylvia that her father had been terribly anxious when she missed her curfew. Role-play her dad's anxiety.
35. Sometimes Alice feels that she is just treading water, waiting for her real self to emerge. Is this a feeling you can relate to? Explain.
36. In *Almost Alice*, Patrick reveals to Alice that he won't be able to attend the school dance in February, and suggests that Alice take someone else. What do you think of this suggestion?
37. David points out that different people handle doubt in different ways. Do you think this is true? How do you handle doubt?
38. In *Intensely Alice*, Alice lies to her father about where she is going to sleep while she's in Chicago. Provide examples of things you still feel obligated to tell your parents as you get older—and some that you might keep to yourself.
39. A man named Doug Carpenter puts his hand on Alice's knee on the plane and makes her uncomfortable. Discuss her handling of the situation. Would you have reacted like Alice did or differently?

Alice's favorite  
color is green.

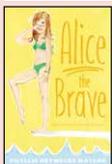
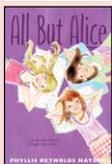
40. How did Alice and her friends deal with Shelly and her evangelizing? Do you think they handled the situation correctly?
41. What helped Alice and Sylvia finally be honest with each other? In your experience, what types of settings make it easier to talk about difficult things?
42. Without planning or foresight, Mark's friends gather at the Stedmeisters' house. Discuss this silent tribute. Who do you think this might have helped? How effective do you think this was in expressing their feelings?
43. In *Alice in Charge*, Alice is shocked to discover that there is a neo-Nazi group in her school. Why do people join hate groups? What need do you think this could fill?
44. Alice's family is fascinated by the traditions of Daniel's family—and vice versa. Does your family have any old traditions related to their country of origin?
45. Alice is horrified when she realizes that Mr. Granger has taken advantage of Amy. Discuss molestation. Who do you think is most vulnerable?
46. In *Incredibly Alice*, Alice manages to overcome her fears and tries out for the school play. Have you ever had to find the courage to try something new? How did you do this?
47. Sometimes, trusting your own judgment can mean disappointing a parent or a teacher. Have you ever had to decide between your own heart and that of someone who is looking out for you?
48. Discuss Alice's decision about how she would like things to be when she has sexual intercourse for the first time.
49. It's not just *Alice on Board*—Pamela's parents are on board too! That's bad enough, but then her mom starts acting out to get attention. Discuss some instances in which a family member or relative has embarrassed you in public. How have you handled it? How would you like to handle it in the future?
50. As a member of the crew, Alice learns all sorts of things, from how to clean a bathroom in record time to how to help a passenger into a life jacket. What are some things that Alice learned that would be helpful in future jobs but are not part of her job description on the ship?
51. Even with all the work that needs to be done, Alice manages to find time to have fun—and ends up particularly close with fellow shipmate Mitch. How are Mitch and Alice alike? How are they different?

Alice first meets Patrick when they are in the sixth grade.

## **Now I'll Tell You Everything: The Last Book**

1. There's only one Alice book left! Before reading *Now I'll Tell You Everything*, make predictions about what will happen throughout the rest of Alice's life. Do you think that Liz, Pamela, and Gwen will remain her closest friends? Will her father be remarried? Will her brother finally settle on one woman?
2. Finally, sixty years of Alice's life have been revealed. How did she change as she grew older? How did she stay the same?
3. What goals did Alice set for herself? Were they realistic? How do they compare to your goals?
4. Do you think Alice had any regrets about her life? If Alice could relive her life, is there anything you think she might decide to do differently? Why?

# The Alice Series



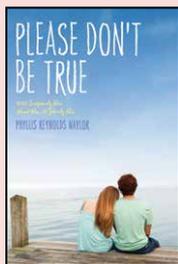
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