

## THE SHORT OF THE STORY

With her larger-than-average body and a plus-size inferiority complex, fifteen-year-old Virginia Shreves often wonders if she truly belongs in her picture-perfect family. Her mother and father don't seem to think so, or at least that is how it feels to Virginia. Meanwhile, her secretive after-school make-out sessions with Froggy Welsh the Fourth make her feel good in the moment, but bad after. Only her best friend, Shannon, miles away on the opposite coast, understands who Virginia really is inside. But when Virginia discovers an awful truth about her handsome, star-student brother, Byron, she begins to realize that what defines perfection depends on whom you ask. The journey she makes as she struggles to gain confidence in herself changes Virginia's outlook on life, love--and her less-than-perfect family.

## QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

1. Early in the story, Virginia says, "I try not to call too much attention to myself." How do you think her thoughts on this change as the story progresses, and why?
2. Virginia says, "I know what it's like to hate your body so much you want to hurt it." What do you think has caused Virginia to hate her body? How can you tell this is true even before Virginia says it?
3. Who is Brie Newhart? What do Virginia and Brie have in common? How does Virginia's opinion of Brie change, and why?
4. When her mother tells her that they have an appointment with Dr. Love, what does Virginia say she can't help wishing her mother would do? Why? When does Virginia's relationship with her mother begin to change in regards to her appearance?
5. What kind of relationship does Virginia have with her father? When he picks up treats for them to munch on as they watch the Yankees game, is he sending her mixed messages? Has Virginia's relationship with her dad changed by the end of the book? How?
6. Why does Byron get suspended from Columbia? How does this situation help shed new light on how Virginia sees Byron? What does Virginia ultimately realize about her relationship with her brother--past and present?
7. When Shannon calls Virginia to check on her after Byron's suspension, she quotes the following by John Muir, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." At first, Virginia doesn't seem to think it has any relevance to her life, but later she changes her mind. Why?
8. Who is Annie Mills? Why does Virginia feel a connection to her? When Virginia decides on a whim to visit Annie at Columbia, what surprises her about Annie's response? Who does Annie remind Virginia of, and why?

9. What role does Mrs. Crowley play in Virginia's life? How does she help empower Virginia? Do you have anyone like Mrs. Crowley in your life? How have you found this relationship to be helpful?

10. Virginia asks herself, "What if for one second I didn't care what people thought of me? What if I weren't so eager to please Mom and Dad? What if I didn't always try to blend in, go with the flow, be the good, obedient girl? What on earth would I do?" What does she do? Now ask yourself the same questions, and explain what you would do.

11. What motivates Virginia to pierce her eyebrow in Seattle? Did it have the effect she thought it would? If you were Virginia, would you have done the same thing? Why or why not?

12. Why does Virginia say that she has always felt very "un-Shreves?" Does she think this is a good thing? How does her opinion change over the course of the book?

13. Reread the first scene of Virginia in the school lunchroom (pp. 21-25), and compare it to the final scene of her in the same cafeteria (pp. 229-231). Though both scenes take place in the same setting, how do they illustrate Virginia's transformation in attitude when it comes to "fitting in"?

14. What is the "Fat Girl Code of Conduct," and how does it affect Virginia's relationship with Froggy Welsh the Fourth? Rewrite Virginia's "Code of Conduct" as she might have after the end of the story.

15. What do you have in common with Virginia? Do you feel you relate better to Virginia at the beginning or end of the book? Why? Do you feel your life has changed at all by reading this book? In what way?

## KNOCKING STEREOTYPES

When Virginia meets her new pediatrician for the first time, she's pleasantly surprised to find that Dr. Love not what she expected--he's an African American male with dreadlocks. What other characters in *THE EARTH, MY BUTT, AND OTHER BIG ROUND THINGS* does the author cast against stereotype? Have you read any other books or magazines lately or seen a movie or TV show featuring a person or character who is surprisingly unстереotypical? What did you think of him or her?

## YOU'VE GOT THE POWER

Brainstorm ways to help empower young people in your community. What do you think are the biggest challenges facing your peers? What kinds of programs or activities would address these issues and help people feel good about themselves?

## A 'ZINE OF YOUR OWN

Make plans to start a school or community magazine or web-zine such as EARTHQUACK. What would you call it? What would you write or publish in it? How could your 'zine help empower people?

#### FOR FURTHER READING

For those who liked THE EARTH, MY BUTT, AND OTHER BIG ROUND THINGS, author Carolyn Mackler suggests a few more titles of interest. Happy reading!

HARD LOVE by Ellen Wittlinger

THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER by Stephen Chbosky

SPEAK by Laurie Halse Anderson

STONER & SPAZ by Ron Koertge

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