

Reading Group Questions and Topics for Discussion



Confessions of a Closet Catholic by Sarah Darer Littman

About the book:

Justine Silver's best friend, Mary Catherine McAllister, has given up chocolate for Lent, but Jussy doesn't think God wants her to make that kind of sacrifice. So she's decided to give up being Jewish instead.

Jussy's bedroom closet becomes her confessional as she pours out her sins to her teddy bear, "Father Ted." But when her beloved Bubbe suffers a stroke, Jussy worries that her religious exploration is responsible. Worse, Jussy must suddenly contemplate life without Bubbe, the one person who seems to understand her.

Young readers of every faith will see themselves in Jussy as she struggles to find balance between her search for religious identity and the dramas of her everyday existence, including boys, life as a tormented middle child, and, of course, the temptations of chocolate.

About the author:

Writer, mother and chauffeur, thinks of herself as a "late bloomer." After spending much of her adult life doing things she didn't really plan to, including such diverse occupations as financial analyst and farmer's wife, she finally found her true calling as a writer.

Confessions of a Closet Catholic is Sarah's first book. "I was inspired to write Jussy's story when Paula Danziger asked, "What does your character have hidden in the closet?" during a workshop on characterization. At Jussy's age, my closet was a jungle of clothes and contraband- just ask my mom. Sometimes all it takes is the right question to get you started on the journey."

About this guide:

This guide includes discussion questions and projects appropriate for book clubs, literature circles, and classroom discussions. It is intended to provoke thought and insight into the themes of this novel, which include faith, friendship, family expectations, grandparents, guilt, beauty, mother/daughter relationships, traditions, and self-identity.

Author Interview:

1. Do you think all kids question their faith at one time or another?

I'm sure there are some kids out there that accept everything they learn in religious school without a question – but I definitely wasn't one of them! I think questioning is a natural part of growing up and developing one's own identity. The faith you come to from your own search for the answer to “what's if all about” surely is going to be more meaningful and, I would say from my own experience, more deeply felt, than faith learned by rote.

2. The book is hilarious! How did you develop your comedic writing?

I come from a funny family. When we were kids, my brother and I used to recite complete skits from Monty Python. “What's that on the telly? Looks like a penguin...” When I first graduated college and worked on Wall Street, my father and I commuted to NYC by train together. We'd have a contest every day to see who could come up with the most bizarre story in the newspaper. My favorite was the story of a woman who was bitten by a groundhog three times before she managed to throw it into a pond. This was in the New York Times!

But one of the things that helped me tighten up my comedic writing is my work as a columnist. Having to put forth an opinion on various issues in a witty, amusing way when you've only got 750 words forces you to hone your writing skills. Sometimes you have to cut what to you seems like the funniest line you've ever written because you're over your word limit and that's the one line that doesn't really move things along. It's incredibly painful, but in the end you become much better at self-editing.

3. Was writing the first draft or revision more difficult for you? Why?

I think I might be a little strange (well, actually I know I'm a little strange) but I find writing the first draft much, much harder than revising. Revising is the fun part - you get to see how you can make what your manuscript tighter and funnier. It's like having the bare bones of a story and then getting to dress it up in a funky outfit with great accessories and to-die-for shoes.

4. What advice do you have for young people who want to be writers?

Read, read, then read some more. All of my author friends are prolific readers. Read books in the genre you like, read books in other genres. Don't forget to read the newspaper or magazines, because you never know what little snippet will give you the idea for a story.

Then write. And keep writing. Write even though you aren't "inspired". You can't wait for inspiration. You have to sit there and slog it out, even though it feels like pulling teeth without anesthetic sometimes. But the more you write, the better you write. It sounds like a cliché, but it's the fact, Jack.

Finally, Revise, Revise, Revise! When I speak at schools, I show a slide of an archive box filled to the brim with revisions of "Confessions". And those were only the revisions AFTER the book was bought by Dutton. All the many revisions prior to my sending the book to the publisher went in the recycling box.

5. What can your new fans look forward to next?

I'm currently working on two ideas – one about a girl who is an unconventional thinker in a rather conventional family and another about a boy with Aspergers Syndrome who is obsessed with the Civil War. I'll be posting more information about what is coming up next on my website, <http://sarahdarerlittman.com>, so keep checking back for the latest news.

Comprehension Check:

1. What does Jussy decide to give up for Lent? Why?
2. Compare Jussy to her brother Mac, and her sister, Helena.
3. Who is Bubbe? What happens over the course of the novel to Bubbe?
4. How does Jussy change by the end of the story?
5. What does she learn about religion?

Discussion Guide:

1. "I decided if my family was going to make fun of me for trying to be Jewish, I might try something else." (p. 6) What spurs this decision? Would you be tempted to do the same thing? Why or why not?
2. What other religions does Jussy read about and experiment with before deciding to focus on Catholicism? What was she surprised to learn about them? How are they similar in many ways?
3. Compare Shira and Mac. How are her friends alike? How are they different? Are they alike in all the most important ways? What are the necessary qualities in a best friend?
4. What about Christian holidays interests Jussy? Why can "Christmas Day [can] feel pretty lonely for anyone who's Jewish, even tall, blond, thin Jews like Helena." (p27)?
5. Compare the McAllister's home to the Silver's. How are they alike? How are they different? Why do both girls want a little of the other's home life? Do other families always seem more normal than your own? If so, why?
6. Jussy worries a great deal about the types of sins she is committing. Do you think most kids feel the same pull of conscience that Jussy does? Support your answer. How does Jussy deal with her guilt? How do you? What is Jussy expected to do to absolve herself of sins within the Jewish faith? What about the Catholic faith? What about your own?
7. On p. 67 Jussy says, "I'm sick of the way the women in my family – well, except for Bubbe- nag me about my weight. It's like they think it's the defining part of me." What does she mean by this? What should be the defining aspect of someone? Why do you think weight is so important in her family or is it an issue in all families? Is it important in our society? All societies? Why or why not?
8. Discuss Jussy's relationship with her mother. What is important to her mother? How do they clash? Do they make amends? Who do you think is more responsible for the tone of their relationship? Why? What role does Justine play in how contentious things are sometimes between them?
9. Describe what Jussy learns by experimenting with Catholicism. What does Mac's mom try to explain to her when she spends the night? How are the services between the two religions similar? How are they different? Have you ever attended a religious ceremony or service other than your own? What did you notice?
10. Justine has a growing interest in boys. At first, who captures her attention? Does he still interest her at the end of the novel? Why? How do girls maintain their own self-identity while still becoming interested in what boys think of them? Do girls always change who they are to match what they think others will appreciate? Do boys do this too?

11. Bubbe is Justine's champion, the one person who understands her best and defends her actions even when her grandmother doesn't agree with them. Have you ever had this kind of connection with a grandparent or older adult? How would it feel to see them slip away? What's the hardest part for Justine? Why is her questioning of her religion compounded when she considers Bubbe? What does Bubbe say to Justine in her last letter?
12. How do Mac's cross and the necklace Jussy inherits become symbols for her own search for identity? In the end, do you think Justine has found herself and her faith? In five years what do you think Justine will be practicing?

Projects:

Language Arts:

Review the glossary in the back of the novel. Then, create one of your own that explains at least ten words from your own faith or cultural background. (These can even be foods!)

History:

In groups of no more than three research one of the world's religions (teachers may want to assign religions to insure a wide variety). Find out the names of their deity [ies], holidays they celebrate, description of their house of worship, approximately how many people worship it worldwide and any dietary or other important restrictions (like clothing). Create a poster about your findings and present it to the class.

Music:

Listen to at least one piece of music from the religion that you're assigned. What does it celebrate? What types of instruments are used? How old is the piece? Are there lyrics? If so, which line is your favorite? Compare (as Jussy did) this type of music to your own cultural or religious music. How is it the same? How different?

Visual Arts:

Create a piece of art which celebrates the diversity of religion in the world. You can use any media you prefer- painting, sculpture, collage, photography but explain your piece in a brief journal. Be sure to title your art as well.

Math:

One commonality among religions is that members are urged to support work that aids the less fortunate. Because the quality of non-profits can vary widely, researching an organization first is often wise. Visit:

<http://www.give.org/reports/index.asp>

and study the data on three organizations you'd like to donate to. Compare and contrast how wisely they use the donations they receive. Make a brief summary of your findings and design a fundraiser to help the organization you choose. Be sure if you put your design into action that you get permissions from parents and school administration.

This guide was created by [Tracie Vaughn Zimmer](#), a reading specialist and author of the book *Sketches from a Spy Tree*. Visit her website to find dozens of other guides to children's literature.