

Massachusetts, California, Timbuktu

by Stephanie Rosenfeld



About the Book

After mother and daughters hit the road, Justine desperately tries to navigate the changing terrain of home, family, and adolescence, as Colleen slips further into despondency. Forced to take over all responsibilities, Justine realizes it's up to her to make sure their little family survives this "grand adventure." Now if she only knew how to do that. . . .

Discussion Guide

1. **Massachusetts, California, Timbuktu** unfolds through the eyes of twelve-year old Justine. How is Justine older and more perceptive than her age would suggest? How is she younger than her years? How do you envision Justine's evolution as she grows older and away from her mother and sister?
2. Justine, in many ways, acts as the mother in her relationship with Colleen. Which of her attributes makes Justine a natural for this role? How does she chafe under it? In which ways is Colleen maternal?
3. "Maybe I'll grow up first," Justine says in regard to her mother (p. 387). How is *Massachusetts* Justine's coming-of-age story? Do you think that the book represents a similar growth for Colleen or for any other characters? If so, how?
4. Colleen approaches life as a "grand adventure." How does the title of the novel suggest this facet of her personality? How is this a positive attribute, and how is it damaging to her and to those around her? Do Justine and Rona share the same attitude about moving on?
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6. Based on Justine's memories and the information she's gleaned from her relatives, compare and contrast Colleen's behavior before and after she had children. In what ways is Colleen a different person from the one she was before motherhood? How is she similar? Do you think that having children changed her, or did something else inspire her transformation? What?
7. Justine describes her mother's boyfriends as "planets" (p. 62). How does this description encapsulate Colleen's attitude toward men, including Dale and Danny? How and why is Colleen's behavior toward Ron different?
8. What does Ron find so appealing about Colleen? How and why does Colleen sabotage her relationship with him? What does Ron represent to Justine and to Rona?
9. "I am doing this all absolutely alone," writes Justine in her pioneer diary (p. 240). How does the diary give you a better understanding of Justine's inner feelings? How does Zebulina's story evolve as the events in Justine's life unfold? How does writing it enable her to help come to terms with what's going on in her family?
10. Why is it significant that Justine is studying pioneers? How is she staking new ground and exploring new paths in her own life? How does Justine reach out for aid, and in what ways does she attempt to solve challenges on her own?
11. What forms the foundation of Marie and Colleen's friendship? Do you think that Marie is truly Colleen's "best friend"? How does Marie try to help Colleen, and how does she seek to denigrate her? How does Marie's attitude spill over onto Colleen's children? In particular, why do you think Marie has such a pointed --- and negative --- reaction toward Rona?
12. How is Colleen an enticing, larger-than-life character? How do those around her --- Justine and Rona, her mother and sister, Marie --- enable her destructive behavior? How do they act as a good support system? List some examples of Colleen's manipulative behavior. How does she also seem vulnerable and bereft?
13. "What I think is that inside children there's actually an adult," Justine says (p. 150). What propels her toward this insight? Which aspects of Justine's character might form the basis of her adult personality? How is she still an unformed child?
14. How does Colleen's attitude toward men affect Justine's attitude toward boys? Why does Justine want to feel "invisible," and how does she seek to overcome that feeling?
15. "Happiness had an opposite that went with it," says Justine of her mother (p. 71). Describe that aspect of Colleen's personality. How does that darker side inform --- and change --- this novel? How does Colleen's depression affect Rona and Justine?
16. Discuss the evolution of Rona in *Massachusetts*. At the start of the novel, what does Rona's discovery of a four-leaf clover and patient waiting for the cat indicate about her character? How does her attitude change as the book continues, especially after her mother meets Ron?
17. "Mom was the problem," realizes Justine (p. 344). How is this a watershed moment in her attitude toward Colleen? What spurs her to reach this conclusion, and how does she take action after it? How does Colleen's subsequent meltdown

affect Rona and Justine, especially compared to those that came before?

18. Justine measures time as a series of "perfect" and "disastrous" days. Why is the world divided into such extremes? What's Justine's conception of a perfect day? What is Colleen's?

19. "Living in Mom's life, you had no choice, though she was always trying to make it sound like you did," says Justine (p. 83). Why is Justine so fixated on what she terms the Mystery of Mom? How do her thoughts about her mother take over her own life? In which ways does she craft her identity around that of her mother? Based on the conclusion of the novel, do you think this tendency will change as she grows older? Why or why not?

Author Bio

Stephanie Rosenfeld is the author of **What About the Love Part?** Her work has been published in *The Missouri Review* --- where she was recently named to their list of Ten Fiction Writers to Watch --- *Northwest Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Bellingham Review*, *Willow Review*, *Other Voices*, and *The Cream City Review*. Rosenfeld is originally from Manhattan and Salt Lake City and has also lived in Western Massachusetts and San Francisco. She is a graduate of Wesleyan University where she received a B. A., and the University of Massachusetts where she received an MFA in visual art. She has worked as a printmaker and a pastry chef, and now lives in Salt Lake City with her partner and her fourteen-year-old daughter.

Critical Praise

"In Stephanie Rosenfeld's striking debut . . . 12-year-old Justine Hanley has a lot on her plate. Her mother, Colleen, has just left an abusive relationship with her stepfather. The plan? To move to Massachusetts. . . . Parenting duties fall on Justine, who takes charge of her sister while her mother drags them across the country and pursues one loser after another. . . . Rosenfeld's evocation of Justine is rich and real. She is witty and wise."--- *Chicago Tribune*"A MARVELOUS TRIP."--- *O, the Oprah Magazine*"Sparkling, madcap . . . [Rosenfeld] adeptly portrays the family's slide into disaster, using just the right amount of humor and pathos. . . . Insightful and bitterly funny, this is a winning effort."--- *Publishers Weekly*"A hilariously caustic first novel . . . A good strong voice."--- *Kirkus Reviews*

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