

"Lusciously crafted and achingly poignant. You won't soon forget it."

—KATHLEEN GLASGOW, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Girl in Pieces*



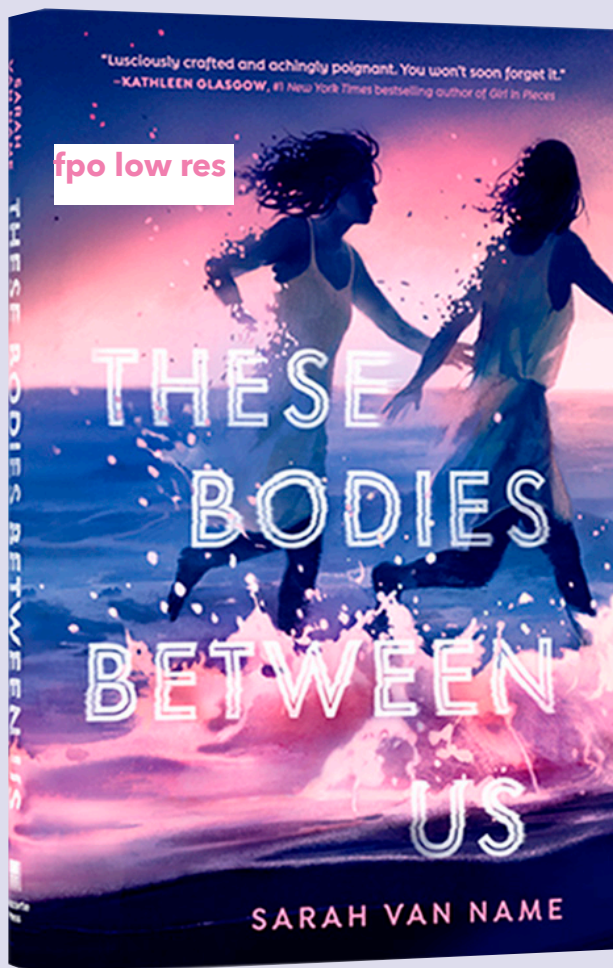
# THESE BODIES BETWEEN US

SARAH VAN NAME

**DISCUSSION GUIDE**

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**Themes:** Coming of Age, Friendship, LGBTQ, Emotions & Feelings, Self-Discovery

## About the Book

For seventeen-year-old Callie and her best friends Talia and Cleo, every summer in their small North Carolina beach town is as steady as the tides. But this year, Cleo has invited enigmatic new girl Polly to join them, creating waves in their familiar friendship. And Cleo has an idea, gleaned from private YouTube videos and hidden message boards: they're going to learn how to make themselves invisible.

Callie thinks it's a ridiculous, impossible plan. But the other girls are intoxicated by the thought of disappearing, even temporarily—from bad boyfriends, from overbearing families, from the confusing, uncomfortable reality of having a body altogether. And, miraculously, it works.

Yet as the girls revel in their reckless new freedom, they realize it's getting harder to come back to themselves . . . and they wonder, do they even want to?

## About the Author



Photo credit: Ben Azevedo

**Sarah Van Name** grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina, and now lives and works in Durham with her family and dog. She is the author of two young adult novels, *The Goodbye Summer* (a Junior Library Guild selection) and *Any Place but Here*.

## Discussion Questions

1. Describe Callie's background and personality. What's important in her life when the book opens? The final chapter describes her hometown as "growing, slow and steady, reshaping itself." How has Callie grown and reshaped herself over the course of the novel? Why do you think the author chose Callie as the narrator rather than one of the other girls?
2. How did Cleo become part of summers for Callie and Talia? What's she like? Why does Cleo bring Polly? What's their relationship? Compare and contrast the backgrounds and personalities of the four girls. Why do they get along well? What values do they share? What are some of their differences, and what causes conflict among them?
3. Why are Cleo and Polly so excited about the invisibility project? What is Callie's initial reaction? When in their lives would each girl like to be invisible, and why? Talk about the relationship between invisibility and sexism and between invisibility and racism. How is invisibility related to Polly's refusal to eat?
4. In chapter 5, Callie asks the other girls, "What are you going to do with your newfound power?" How do they respond? Explain why Polly presses her stomach and says, "To get away from all of this . . . will be so nice." What are some of the possible benefits of being invisible? What are some of the dangers and consequences?
5. Invisibility has the greatest impact on Polly's life. What decision does she make in the end, and why? How does the narrative foreshadow that choice? Explain how the author builds suspense about Polly's choice.
6. Talk about Callie's relationship with Adam. Describe Adam and how Callie knows him. What does she like about him? What do you think he likes about her? How does the relationship influence Callie's attitude toward being invisible?
7. Describe the relationship between Talia and Michael. How do her friends feel about Michael as a person and about how he treats Talia? Why is it frustrating to Callie? Why does Talia stay with Michael so long? Why does the incident on the double date finally change her mind?
8. Callie lies to her parents about working late at the rink and lies to Adam about what happened at the beach after she left the party. She explains, "I disliked the lying, but there was no alternative." Polly says of invisibility, "The secret is part of it. . . . Telling would ruin it." Discuss these and other examples of deception in the novel and the impact they have.
9. How does the prologue set the tone for the novel? Who and what does it mention that will be important in the story? Talk about the title and how it relates to the story.
10. Discuss the final chapter and what you learn about the previous two years. What do you think happened to Polly? Why does Callie lie in the rink and talk to Polly? Talk about the book's final words: "Something free. A flash of warmth." In the end, do you think their summer of invisibility was worth it to Callie and the others?
11. The author weaves figurative language throughout the novel. Find examples that you like and discuss how the language creates images and enriches the narrative.



## Activities

- Spend some time listening to songs on Callie's playlist, given at the back of the novel. Create your own playlist of songs that you think reflect the novel in some way. Jot down a sentence or two about why you chose each one. As a group, share your playlists, playing some of the songs, and discuss your choices.
- Research the painting, *The Birth of Venus*, and the myth behind it. Talk how you think it is related to the novel, including the book's cover. In the acknowledgments, the author also refers to the Greek Muses. Look up the Muses, focusing on Calliope, Clio, Polyhymnia, and Thalia. Discuss why the four main characters have names similar to those of the Muses.
- What superpower would you most like to have? What would be the best parts of having it? What would be the possible dangers or misuses? Express what that power would mean to you through writing, art, music, dance, or a multimedia presentation.

*Kathleen Odean was a school librarian for seventeen years and now gives workshops for educators on young adult books. She chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Newbery and Caldecott committees.*



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