



A Reading Group Guide to:

***The You I've Never Known***

By Ellen Hopkins

**About the Book**

For as long as she can remember, it's been just Ariel and Dad. Ariel's mom disappeared when she was a baby. Dad says home is wherever the two of them are, but Ariel is now seventeen and after years of new apartments, new schools, and new faces, all she wants is to put down some roots. Complicating things are Monica and Gabe, both of whom have stirred a different kind of desire.

Maya's a teenager who's run from an abusive mother right into the arms of an older man she thinks she can trust. But now she's isolated with a baby on the way, and life's getting more complicated than Maya ever could have imagined.

Ariel and Maya's lives collide unexpectedly when Ariel's mother shows up out of the blue with wild accusations: Ariel wasn't abandoned. Her father kidnapped her fourteen years ago.

What is Ariel supposed to believe? Is it possible Dad's woven her entire history into a tapestry of lies? How can she choose between the mother she's been taught to mistrust and the father who has taken care of her all these years?

**Discussion Questions**

1. This book begins and ends with a rumination on "the gifts of the chameleon." Why does the author choose to bookend the story with these almost identical sections? Does the poem "To Begin" offer any foreshadowing of the story? How does the last segment of Maya's diary help to tie up loose ends? How do the differences between the two passages reflect the differences between the two women who wrote them?

2. In what ways is Ariel's father abusive? Is his abuse limited to Ariel, or do other people experience it as well? Why does Ariel love him anyway?

3. What role does addiction play in the characters' lives? Does witnessing others' dependence on substances have any effect on the behavior of Ariel and her friends? Is Maya's mother's devotion to Scientology a form of addiction?

4. Ariel talks about getting free from her father's influence, but at one point says, "But what if I'm the kind of captain who can't avoid sideswiping the glacier and sinking the ship?" Do you think that this is a common feeling for someone Ariel's age? Does her lack of confidence have anything to do with her father's treatment of her?

5. Why does Ariel think that psychology might be a good career choice for her? Does her psychology elective help her have insight into the things that happen around her? Do you think the events of the story will bring her closer to this career or drive her farther away?
6. When faced with the prospect of a romantic relationship, Ariel says, "Lacking anything like a role model, commitment isn't something I understand." Has she ever had a good relationship role model? Is this a problem she will be able to overcome? Does the fact that she realizes it's a problem say anything about her ability to have a committed relationship?
7. How is Ariel's kiss with Monica different from her kiss with Gabe? What does she get from each of them that the other can't give her? Does Gabe relieve Ariel from having to make a decision between the two, or had she already made up her mind?
8. Why does Ariel's father say such nasty things during the Thanksgiving dinner with Gabe and Zelda? What is it about this family holiday that makes him need to lash out? Does Ariel's reaction make the situation better or worse?
9. Maya writes about 9/11 in her journal, and Hillary's mother and brother were killed when the twin towers fell. What effect does this terrorist attack have on the characters when it happens? Are they still feeling the repercussions in the present day? Do the characters who were too young at the time to register what was happening feel changed by that day?
10. Hillary's aunt Peg says that she won't leave Sonora when Hillary goes to college because "All that I am is right here." What does she mean? Is this true of any of the other characters?
11. Zelda and Ariel both feel betrayed by Mark/Jason. How does this help them interact in the aftermath of Maya's arrival? Does Zelda have the right to feel betrayed? In what ways are the lies that he told the two women similar, and in what ways are they different?
12. What is "gaslighting"? Who does Mark/Jason do this to, and how? How does knowing about this technique help Ariel wrap her head around what has happened to her?
13. Will Ariel be able to forgive her father? What regrets might she have if she doesn't forgive him? How would you react if you were in this situation? Would you be able to forgive your father? Is there anyone else whom Ariel needs to forgive?
14. Why does Ariel love Monica? Why is it so difficult for her to admit that she loves Monica, and to take the next step in their relationship? Even though their family situations are so different, why is it also difficult for Monica to come out as a lesbian to her loved ones?
15. How can Ariel be attracted to both Monica and Gabe? Why is she also hesitant to identify as a bisexual? Do you think that it's possible for a person to be attracted to both men and women equally? Moving forward, do you think that Ariel will identify herself as bisexual or a lesbian?
16. There are several points in the story when Mark/Jason and those who love him use his life as a soldier to excuse his behavior. Are there parts of his personality that make him a

good soldier? How does his identity as a soldier change from when he meets Maya to when he leaves her?

17. Even before she finds out about being kidnapped, Ariel struggles with her identity. What defines her as a person? Can her father's past actions erase who she truly is? What parts of her past and her personality will she take with her moving into the future?

18. The author structures her poems so that the title also serves as the first line. Why do you think she does this? How would the book be different if the individual poems didn't have titles? Are there any instances where the title serves in the traditional sense, as opposed to being part of the "story" of the poem?

19. Why are there two narrators telling their stories? Did you notice parallels to the two stories, even before you understood the connection between them? How would the story have been different if there had been only one narrator?

### **Extension Activities**

1. Ariel is learning Spanish so that she can express herself to Monica in her native tongue. If you don't already speak Spanish, learn some phrases that can help you communicate with native Spanish speakers. If you do speak Spanish, learn some phrases in a language that is important in your community.

2. Mark/Jason uses "gaslighting" to manipulate those around him. Research this specific form of abuse—where the phrase comes from, how to recognize it, and how to help people who have had people do it to them. Write a short report using your findings.

3. There are many charities that help women who are escaping abusive situations. There are women's shelters, abuse hotlines, organizations that provide professional clothing for women to wear at job interviews, and more. Choose one of these charities in your town and volunteer with them.

4. Maya finds a great deal of comfort and value in keeping a journal for Ariel. Have you ever kept a diary or journal? If not, try it now. Write down the things that are important to you, the important events from your day, and your emotions as you move through your day.

5. Gabe and Ariel are able to help Hillary because they know some basic first aid. Find somewhere that you can get some first aid training, so that you will know how to react in an emergency.

6. September 11 is significant in the lives of several of the characters. Interview your relatives, teachers, or older friends about their memories of this terrible day. Compile these oral histories so that you can better understand how the world changed with this one event.

7. Ariel is very happy to find a job exercising horses, as she loves interacting with them. Visit a riding stable in your community and go for a ride.

8. Maya does not support her mother's involvement in Scientology. Look up information on Scientology—what the basic beliefs are, why some people are opposed to it, and how it has spread. Write a short essay on your findings.

9. Make a list of the traits, memories, and events that create your identity. Create a collage that incorporates the items on the list and represents who you are.

10. Hopkins uses different formats for her poems. Choose a nontraditional format, and write a poem of your own.

*Guide written by Cory Grimminck, Director of the Portland District Library in Michigan.*

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