

Discussion Guide

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Also available in hardcover!

ACCESS DENIED

(and other eighth grade error messages)

By Denise Vega

"I'll say it again: Denise Vega is a wonderful story-teller, juggling humor and uncertainty and the desperate desire to fit in so skillfully, you'll be sucked into Erin's world before you know it."

- Rita Lorraine

"Ever funny and clever, Erin tackles eighth grade...[her] ups and downs are humanizing, entertaining, and real."

-Kirkus Reviews

Computer whiz Erin Swift is ready to start eighth grade. The Year of Humiliating Events (aka, seventh grade) is behind her and she's looking forward to another year in I-Club, playing basketball with her best friend (and former crush), Mark Sacks and being on the same track with her BFF, Jilly. But eighth grade comes with a new set of problems and even more questions -- Will she still be the web guru in I-Club? Will she get her period unprepared? Why can't she talk to her mom like she used to? Why is she suddenly checking herself out in the mirror?

When new girl Reede Harper shows up as her locker partner, Erin's life takes another turn. Reede doesn't look like other eighth graders and she doesn't follow the rules either. Even though Erin disapproves of her behavior, she's also a little envious. Why can't she break a few rules sometimes?

Tired of waiting for her parents--especially her mother--to figure out she's not a kid anymore, Erin decides to take matters into her own hands and puts herself in a situation where she not only hurts herself, but the people she loves too.

As Erin navigates the rocky terrain of her first boyfriend, her first breakup, and a personal tragedy, she discovers that growing up means growing out of her own world to embrace the larger world around her—which means embracing pain and joy and possibility.

Note from Denise This guide includes two sets of questions: Questions about the characters and story in *Access Denied* and general questions about your real experiences as they might relate to the book.

Pick and choose among these two sets of questions to get your discussion going. You'll probably have some of your own questions as well. Have fun!



Questions about ACCESS DENIED

- ③ Erin finds that she can't talk to her mom like she used to, but she talks to Mr. F easily. Why do you think that is? What changed in Erin's and her mom's relationship?
- ③ Early in the book, Erin is IM'ing Mark. He confides in her that his mom screens PG-13 movies, too. She is very grateful and tells him thank you but doesn't tell him why because she imagines, "... If I said all that he'd either barf on his keyboard or run screaming from the room." Why does Erin react this way? What does this say about her attitude toward her friendship with Mark?
- ③ Throughout the book Erin explores her feelings about her appearance. She starts wearing make-up and picking out outfits she feels flatters her looks. Why? Do you think this makes her shallow or less genuine? Why or why not?
- ③ Erin becomes enamored with Reede. Even though she disapproves of a lot of her behavior at the same time she envies her. "She's way cool without even trying." Why does Erin feel this way? How does she deal with it?
- ③ When Erin starts dating Blake, she feels more confident and more of an equal with Mark. Why do you think she felt this way? Did it change her interactions with Mark?
- ③ Erin didn't have any major feelings toward Mark until Reede said he liked her. What changed? What makes Erin question her feelings?
- ③ When Erin decides to lie to her parents, she's convinced it's ok because she believes it's an important step toward becoming her own person. What did she risk by making this decision? How did she handle the consequences of her decision?
- ③ When Erin gets caught in a lie, she blames both her parents and Reede. Why does she think they are responsible? Why is she so unwilling to see and take responsibility for her actions?
- ③ After Mr. F's death, Erin is overcome with guilt. Why does she feel guilty? How does she handle it?
- ③ When some girls are making fun of Erin and the "underwear incident," Serena stands up for her. Why does Serena do this?
- ③ When Erin finally takes responsibility for her own actions, does her guilt go away? Why or why not? If not, what does she do to deal with her feelings? Does it help? Why or why not?



General Questions

- ① Middle school is a time of change and budding independence. When you became a teenager did you find it hard to relate to one or more of your parents? If so, why do you think that was?
- ① Erin is angry and frustrated because she feels her parents don't let her do things her friends get to do. Think of an event/activity that your parents wouldn't let you attend. What was your reaction? Did you understand their point of view? Why or why not?
- ① Which parts of the book could you relate to? Which parts were not things that are a part of your own life?
- ① Were any of the characters like people you know? In what ways?
- ① Jilly is convinced that girls can't just be friends with boys. Do you agree? Why or why not? Do you have friendships with people of the opposite sex? If so, how are they different from your friendships with those of your own sex?
- ① Have you ever lied to get what you wanted? How did you feel before you did it? After? What were the consequences? Would you do it again if another situation came up?
- ① Have you ever blamed someone else for your mistakes? Why didn't you want to admit it was your fault?
- ① Have you ever had someone unexpected stand up for you? If so, did it change the way you felt about that person? Did it change how you treated other people?



Denise's Thoughts on ACCESS DENIED

When I wrote *Click Here*, I felt that Erin's story wasn't finished and wanted to continue it through eighth grade. I played around with several ideas before the main story started to form in my mind—someone from the “outside” needed to step in and provide a way for Erin to move beyond herself and experience other things. She was going to make mistakes, but ultimately she would succeed in recognizing what was important to her and who she wanted to be in the world.

I also wanted to explore the ways we deal with grief and tragedy. In Erin's situation, she experiences a great deal of guilt, which is common when someone close to us dies. Why didn't we spend more time with them? Why didn't I do that one last thing? Why didn't I tell them how I felt one more time? These experiences can be a wake up call that reminds us to cherish the moments we have with those we love or it can paralyze us with guilt. We choose how we will move forward out of grief, even though sometimes it doesn't feel like we have a choice, our feelings are so strong and overwhelming they seem to be everything.

Access Denied explores the themes of self-worth, relationship, grief, and forgiveness and I hope you will have rich discussions about these and other topics you've pulled from the book.

Note from Denise: I'm happy to be a part of your discussion and am available for a 20-minute Q&A in-person (Denver area) or via Skype.

For answers to frequently-asked questions or to read more, visit my website, www.denisevega.com

