

JUST FOR THE SUMMER

Reading Group Guide

Q & A WITH ABBY JIMENEZ

1. The big question on everyone's mind: why bring Neil back?

Honestly? I wanted to burn his house down lol. Maddy makes a comment early in the book prophesizing this. It's fun to catch on a reread.

Both Neil and Amber were in *Part of Your World*, though Amber was almost completely off page. Neil was Alexis's ex, and Daniel was dealing with Amber's toxicity in his own way. To explain why Neil was here, I need to explain why I brought back Amber. I knew I wanted to write a book about trauma and the effects it has on relationships. I knew I wanted to feature a woman with a difficult mother, maybe someone a lot like Amber—and then I thought, why can't it actually be Amber? Daniel escaped so many hardships by being raised by his grandparents. What if there was a child who wasn't? What if he had a sister who was left to Amber's devices? What would her childhood be like and how would she have turned out?

Avoidant attachment relationship style is something most of us have encountered in the dating wild, but chances are you didn't know there was a name for it. It's the person you hit it off with and everything is going great, you have incredible chemistry—and then they ghost you. Or they pick a fight with you out of nowhere and break up with you. They avoid deeper conversations and other opportunities to get closer to you. Maybe they cheat and sabotage the relationship and you can't understand why because things between you were so good.

Avoidants' relationships tend to be superficial and fleeting, because that's what they're comfortable with. It stems from childhood trauma, usually relating to an emotionally unavailable caretaker or unstable upbringing. They avoid emotional bonds and romantic relationships, they don't seek support from those around them, and they withdraw when someone tries to get to know them—which was honestly really difficult to write in a character as an author trying to tell a love story.

Emma was so aloof, it was challenging to create chemistry between her and Justin because she wasn't fully onboard. She wouldn't be, that's her issue. For much of the book Justin, who has a

healthy, secure relationship style, is falling in love, while Emma is getting there, almost to her own surprise and against her will. She's drawn to Minnesota for the curse thing, liking Justin and signing up for the summer for the fun of it. She meets his family on a technicality and ends up getting close to them. Then she's forced to lean on Justin and confide in him due to the unexpected presence of her mother and a fight with Maddy.

She's pressured to let him care for her when she gets sick, and there's no other choice. Justin makes headway inches at a time until he finally breaks that wall and gets in—but once he's there, it can't last, because she hasn't addressed the trauma that's made her the person she is.

Enter Amber and Neil.

I wanted Amber to arrive and show us exactly what Emma grew up with. Amber is not all bad. Almost nobody is. She can be extremely charismatic and charming and at times she was a doting mother. She was fun and eccentric and even protective in her own way. But Amber is prone to getting sucked into her toxic relationships and this started the neglect and abandonment that would shape who Emma becomes.

I wanted to show the progression of Amber's attachment style. How she gets so immersed in the relationship, it's all that matters.

I decided to have Amber attach herself to the man the two were renting from, and it was almost immediately obvious to me that the man should be Neil. We now have two antagonists from *Part of Your World* dating each other, and those who made the connection would spend the book braced for the shoe to drop. I loved this tension. And it made sense that these two would hit it off. Neil is working on himself. I think he was doing it in a very genuine way.

But at the end of the day, Neil is still a narcissist, or at the very least still has narcissistic tendencies, and Amber very much feeds into that. Amber shows up showering him with praise and idolatry, and Neil doesn't even pause to question it because narcissists believe they deserve that kind of worship. He wouldn't suspect that maybe there was something wrong with Amber and her desire to attach herself to him so quickly.

Amber seeks male validation. She craves it. She becomes whatever she needs to be to please the man she's courting—but it can't last. It's not sustainable. She hasn't addressed the things that cause her problematic behaviors.

I purposely never explain what Amber's issues or diagnoses are—because that's real life. I know exactly what Amber has. I have to write her authentically. I talked her over at length with my mental health advisor, Karen Flood.

But in the real world we don't always get answers for why people are the way they are. Even when we do get answers, they're often wrong or only part of the truth.

No two people are made the same. We all have different experiences and brain chemistry and abilities. Amber is complex and can't be summarized by a mental health condition or personality disorder. Nobody can.

These things can overlap and evolve, wane and wax. They can be exacerbated by a multitude of factors, stress, and changing situations. I can say, though, that abandonment, or perceived abandonment, is very triggering for Amber. And unfortunately Neil is a workaholic with a job that makes him unavailable for long hours, and that was a recipe for disaster for them. Her fear of being left caused her to act out, putting a wedge between them. The wedge made her feel insecure, so she resorted to old habits like stealing since she was financially unstable and was afraid Neil was going to leave her. It also starts her on a mental health spiral that causes Neil to further question the relationship. Ultimately Amber's behavior creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where she is in fact broken up with. She will repeat this cycle again and again because she won't seek treatment to learn the skills to change it, because unlike Emma, Amber lacks the self-awareness to admit something is wrong with her.

It's this same deep-seated fear of abandonment that leads to Amber hiding Emma from her family. Even though Emma ends up separated from Amber for a lot of her childhood, that separation is still on Amber's terms and it's less permanent than giving Emma to her parents. Amber can always pluck Emma out of foster care, but her parents would never give her back. Instead of Amber examining why her life is so tumultuous, she continues to chase relationships that will fail, seeking the stability of someone who will never leave her because she draws her self-worth from whatever man she's dating.

Neil, to his credit, tried to navigate this using the skills he developed in therapy. In an earlier version of the book, I made a mention of Neil being in a healthy relationship at the end with someone after Amber, and my beta readers expressed disappointment that Neil was given a happy ever after, so I took that out. Apparently even putting him through Amber and burning his house down wasn't enough for readers to forgive Neil for what he did to Alexis in her book—and that's fine. We don't necessarily need to see Neil be happy. That wasn't the point in having him in this book.

I needed him as a device to display the behavior Emma grew up seeing from her mother and I also needed someone who could offer Amber every resource she needs to be better, to show that she would turn it down. Emma needed this for her own closure.

2. Why did you choose to have the women stay on the island?

I'd gone on a summer boating trip with a friend, and we ended up on Big Island on Lake Minnetonka. I'd never been out there and I was fascinated by it. The summer homes were both

novel and sort of impractical. I could absolutely see the draw of owning one, but also the downsides. I loved the thought of Emma being drawn into the romantic idea of it, and then slowly realizing that it's not all it's made out to be. That the isolation and seasonal nature of it was less than ideal. I liked that the island was very much a metaphor for her own way of living, and we see the decline in the quality of the experience as the story goes on. The house looks great at first glance. It's in a beautiful setting, it's adorable inside. But we begin to realize that it's poorly maintained and falling apart.

It's uncomfortable and even proves to be a little dangerous when Emma gets sick with no way to get help. And I love that we see Justin get on the island, literally and figuratively, by painstakingly clawing—or paddling—his way there.

The island isn't the only symbolism in this book. Stuffie the unicorn is the token of Emma's innocence and childhood. He's one of the last things she attaches to before she loses the ability to attach at all. Justin cleans up Stuffie as a gift to her because he knows how unsentimental she is about things, and he wants to honor the things she cherishes. He also uses a unicorn floatie to get to her when she needs him, a symbol of her vulnerability, to scale the insurmountable challenge of breaching her defenses and finally reaching her.

There's also the ongoing role that roses play in the book. The roses that Amber brings to the story are always fleeting and temporary. Perfume that fades, flowers that she gives Emma that wilt and die, a painting on a wall that she never finishes. Justin gives her roses that need planting. He wants her to put roots down.

The roses in Grant House, however, never die or change. They're on Daniel's arms as tattoos and carved into the banister and they represent the stability and permanence of the family home. This is where Emma eventually finds herself and takes control of her life and trauma.

The changing stained-glass window of Grant House makes its third appearance in this book, and it depicts a young Emma, surrounded by roses, celebrating her return home.

I also bring back the dragonflies from *Part of Your World*, a symbol that change is coming.

3. Any other Easter eggs? We know how much you love them!

Yes! Of course there are the obvious ones. Mentions of Jaxon Waters, the Sloan Monroe slow cooker cookbook that Justin and Sarah use, Josh Copeland coming up as a relative of Emma—did you catch that Easter egg in *Part of Your World*? Daniel Grant is cousins with Josh from *The Friend Zone*!

There's a lot of foreshadowing for the Maddy-and-Doug thing. Maddy is a vegetarian. So is Doug. Her favorite song is "More Than Words" by Extreme, the only song Doug knows how to play on the guitar (badly). Maddy is also someone who deeply understands PTSD, which Doug has. Maddy would know how to love and support Doug through his own challenges with his mental health because we've seen her do it with Emma. Also Doug needs someone to tell him to shut up lol.

Another Easter egg/inside joke to anyone who lives in Minnesota is the subtle nod to the Kris Lindahl real estate billboards that are everywhere here. I got the idea for Justin's studio after seeing a viral TikTok where someone showed an apartment with a Kris Lindahl billboard directly outside their window.

At first I strongly considered using actual Kris Lindahl billboards in the book. I reached out to Mr. Lindahl to ask his permission, and he very generously agreed. But I decided being able to create a fictional billboard would give me more flexibility to make it funnier, and also make it more universal to the readers who won't get the joke, so Toilet King it is.

There are lots of other Easter eggs, including a deeply buried one that takes us back to my first book. But I'll let you find those yourself.

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you could live anywhere just for the summer, where would you live?
2. Have you ever met someone who acts like Amber? How did that relationship end up?
3. Do you think Emma leaving to work on herself was brave or selfish?
4. What do you think about Emma and Maddy's lifestyle? Would you like traveling and changing states every three months?
5. Have you ever felt small like Emma?
6. Justin's mom did something really out of character while dealing with her grief. What are some of the things you've seen grief do to someone?
7. Would you ever put a wild baby animal in your shirt?
8. Is Justin the asshole?