

# A Corner of the Universe

It is the early 1960's and Hattie Owen's world revolves around the boarding house her parents run in the small town of Millerton, where her grandparents are the wealthiest residents in town. The summer of Hattie's 12th birthday starts like any other. Her best friend Betsy leaves for vacation in Maine, and once again Hattie does not accept her invitation to go along. She can't imagine changing her routine or leaving her home. But this is a summer that will change her life forever. It is the summer of the carnival, where she makes a new friend, Leila, the daughter of one of the carnival families. And it is the summer when she meets Adam, her mother's much younger brother, the uncle she never knew she had.

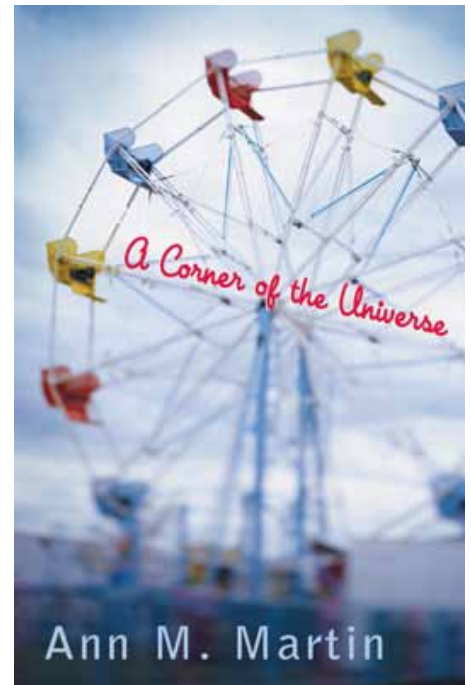
Adam has been living at a school and home for the mentally ill since Hattie was a baby. No one has ever told her of his existence. But the school has closed and Adam must come home to live until Hattie's grandparents decide what to do with him. His erratic behavior is an embarrassment to the adults, but Hattie finds Adam's childlike impetuosity to be intriguing and refreshing . . . and sometimes scary when it is uncontrollable.

Torn between helping Adam enjoy life and worrying about what to do when he becomes difficult, Hattie also secretly worries about whether she herself may have a personality disorder. Is her excessive shyness a sign of problems that will get worse? Could she develop problems as difficult as Adam's? Throughout the course of the summer, Hattie learns more about herself as she interacts with Adam and Leila and grapples with the issues her family has kept hidden all these years.

## Discussion Points

### Setting

1. How important is the setting to the story? What would change if the story were set in a city or in a rural area?
2. How are the attitudes of Hattie's grandparents affected by their status in the town?
3. What is the importance of the boarding house in the story?
4. How can Hattie's family keep a family secret from her in such a small town? What are the dynamics of the town that keep her ignorant of Adam's existence?
5. What is the importance of the carnival to the development of the story? What is the importance of the carnival in Hattie's life? In Adam's life? What does the carnival represent to Nana?



## Characters

1. Discuss Hattie's question about Adam: "If a person is kept secret, is he real?"
2. Both of Hattie's uncles have been absent from her life. Compare Adam and Hayden, the reasons both have been away, and Hattie's reaction to each of them.
3. What is Hattie's first impression of Adam? What attracts her to him? What repels her?
4. Adam's speech and actions slow down when he talks with Miss Hagerty and Mr. Penny. Why does he interact with them differently than with his family?
5. Discuss the character of Hattie's grandmother, Nana. What does Hattie mean when she says of Adam, ". . . he is not part of the perfect world Nana has worked so hard to create." How were Adam, Hattie's mother and Hattie's uncle Hayden each affected by that "perfect world"?
6. How is Hattie's mother similar to Nana? How is she different?
7. Discuss Hattie's friendship with Leila. Why is Leila so important to her? What do Leila and her family represent to Hattie? Why was it easier for Hattie to become friends with Leila than to make other friends in her town after Betsy leaves for the summer?
8. Why is Adam so important to Hattie? Why does she feel responsible for helping him? What makes her think she should take Adam to the Carnival that night?
9. Compare Adam to the character of Lennie in Steinbeck's classic story, *Of Mice and Men*. What do we know about their personalities? What do we know about their physical strength? How are these characters similar and how are they different?
10. Compare the ways each of the main characters reacts to Adam when he is alive with the ways they react to his death. Why is Hattie surprised at her grandparents' grief? What ways does Hattie find to deal with Adam's death?
11. What is the importance of the Strowsky family? Why are they introduced near the end of the book? How is Hattie's friendship with Catherine different from her friendship with Leila or Betsy?

## Theme

1. There are many secrets in this story. Discuss the reasons why people need to keep secrets: Nana and Papa, Hattie's parents, Adam, Hattie, Angel - how do their secrets affect them and those around them?
2. Hattie develops a concern that she might be like Adam. Would her fears be lessened if she didn't keep them to herself? Would she have the same fears if Adam's condition had not been kept a secret from her?
3. Why does Adam hate the camera so much? What does the camera represent to him? Why does Martin begin the novel with Hattie looking at home movies of the summer and of the family's past?
4. Discuss the concept and meaning of the words "freak" and "freak show." Compare the ways these words are used referring to Adam and to the carnival sideshow.

5. Discuss the meaning of the title. Does the phrase “a corner of the universe” mean something different to each of the characters? What does it mean to Hattie, to Adam, to the boarders, to Leila, to Nana?

6. Compare the theme of relationships and responsibility developed in this book to the same in *Of Mice and Men*. Does Hattie try to take responsibility for Adam in the way George does for Lennie? Why are these relationships so important to Hattie and George? Are they honest with themselves about their ability to cope with Adam’s and Lennie’s problems?

7. Both *A Corner of the Universe* and *Of Mice and Men* have tragic endings. How does each author let you know the tragedy is coming? Can you find incidents of foreshadowing that let you know Adam and Lennie are doomed? Could anything have prevented their deaths?

8. What would you identify as the true meaning of friendship after reading this book?

## **Other Books to Compare and Contrast**

*Eclipse*, by Kristine L. Franklin. (1995) Candlewick Press

The triumphs of Trina’s sixth grade year are clouded by her father’s increasingly strange behavior and her fears about his illness.

*The Face at the Window*, by Regina Hanson. Illus. by Linda Saport. (1997)

Clarion Books

When Dora’s parents learn she has joined other children in throwing rocks at Miss Nella’s house, they take her to visit the mentally ill woman to help her understand that Miss Nella should be treated with respect.

*Kissing Doorknobs*, by Terry Spencer Hesser. (1998) Delacorte Press

Tara is a normal healthy girl until, at age 11, she begins to exhibit obsessive compulsive behavior and her family and friends have various reactions to her illness.

*Lisa, Bright and Dark*, by John Neufeld. (c.1969, 1999) Puffin

Lisa’s parents refuse to respond to her increasingly difficult emotional problems, and she must rely on her friends for help.

*Of Mice and Men*, by John Steinbeck. Penguin (c.1937, 1993)

Lennie, a strong, but retarded migrant worker, is watched over by his partner George. The two dream of a better life, but are caught in a set of sad and tragic circumstances.

*Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy*, by Sonya Sones.

(1999) HarperCollins

Cookie expresses her feelings about her sister’s illness through a series of poetic chapters that explore the emotional range of her reactions.

## **Background Reading**

*Know About Mental Illness*, by Margaret O. Hyde. (1996) Walker

*When Someone You Love Has a Mental Illness: A Handbook for Family, Friends, and Caregivers*, by Rebecca Woolis and Agnes Hatfield (1992) J. P. Tarcher

## About the Author

As a child growing up in Princeton, NJ, Ann Martin loved reading. With her younger sister, she once set up a lending library in her bedroom for the neighborhood children. After graduating from Smith College in 1977, she taught school for a year and then went to New York City to work in publishing. While editing other people's books, Ann began to write her own, and soon she was devoting all of her time to writing about the lives and adventures of young girls. She is the original author of the popular Baby-sitters Club series, which contains many incidents, situations, and characters that she remembers from her own childhood. The series now has nearly 125 million copies in print.

From her home in upstate New York, Ann Martin writes thought-provoking middle-grade and young adult novels, which have been praised by reviewers for their sensitivity, integrity, and humor.

Learn more about Ann Martin at <http://www.scholastic.ca/annmartin/>

## Other Books by Ann M. Martin

*Belle Teal*, by Ann M. Martin. 2002. Scholastic

Fifth-grader Belle Teal struggles to handle the changes in her life - her grandmother's aging, her mother's long work hours, and the desegregation of her school in the early 1960s.

*P.S. Longer Letter Later*, by Paula Danziger and Ann M. Martin. 1998. Scholastic

Danziger and Martin, friends in real life, have created a page turning "novel in letters" between two 7th grade friends who are forced to move away from each other.

*Snail Mail No More*, by Paula Danziger and Ann M. Martin. 2000. Scholastic.

Elizabeth and Tara\*Starr discover e-mail in 8th grade and their correspondence changes as they continue to explore the problems they face at school and home.

*Missing Since Monday*, by Ann M. Martin. 1987. Scholastic.

Two teens are left in charge of their younger half-sister and are plunged into a frightening mystery when she disappears.

Discussion guide written by Connie Rockman, children's literature consultant and adjunct professor of literature for children and young adults at the University of Bridgeport, Sacred Heart University, and Manhattanville College, and editor of *The Eighth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators* (W. H. Wilson, 2000).