

Reading Group Guide for

Tune It Out

By Jamie Sumner

About the Book

Twelve-year-old Lou Montgomery and her mom live life on the road. They sleep in their truck and scramble to make ends meet with odd jobs and tips Lou earns from singing at coffee shops and state fairs. According to her mom, Lou is going to be a star. The problem is, Lou hates performing, especially when there's loud applause and strangers who try to touch her. After Lou crashes her mom's truck during a snowstorm, Child Protective Services sends her to live with her aunt and uncle in Nashville. There, Lou learns for the first time that the panic she feels in certain situations has a name: sensory processing disorder. But Lou doesn't want to make plans with her guidance counselor to manage her SPD. In fact, she doesn't want anyone to know about it at all. However, Lou learns it's important to share who you really are, especially with those who care about you.

Discussion Questions

1. Lou says, "I love to sing because the sound of my own voice in my ears steadies me. It makes me feel stronger than I am." Explain what she means by this. Do you have something in your life that makes you feel similarly? If so, what is it? Why do you love it so much?
2. Why do you think Lou's mom pushes her to perform even though Lou hates it? What effect does it have on Lou? Are there things your parents push you to do that you don't want to do? Why do you think they do this?
3. Lou says she often feels like "no one wants to hear what I have to say" and that she doesn't have control over her own life. Do you think this is true? Explain your answer using examples from the book. Do you ever feel like this? If so, how do you cope with those feelings?
4. Lou's social worker, Maria, tells her that the move to Nashville "is a chance to find out more about yourself and to learn who you are when everything else falls away. This is an *opportunity*." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? What do you think Lou learns about herself in Nashville? Have you ever experienced a big change that was hard at first but turned out to be an opportunity in disguise? If so, what was it? What advice would you give Lou?
5. Lou's mom pulled her out of school in fourth grade after a teacher suggested that she be tested for autism. Why do you think Lou's mom is so resistant to having her tested? Do you think she has Lou's best interests at heart? Explain your answer.

6. When Lou starts school at Chickering, she learns that there is a name for the panic she feels when she hears loud noises or when someone touches her: sensory processing disorder. Do you think knowing what causes her issues helps Lou? Explain your answer.
7. Lou claims that she's "faint of heart" and "not strong." Do you think other people in her life would agree with her? Explain your answer using examples from the book. What strengths do you see in Lou? Are there people in your life who have noted a strength that you didn't see in yourself? If so, what was it, and how did it make you feel?
8. Early in the book, Lou says, "What happens between me and mom stays between me and mom." Lou does go on to share some of her experiences with Well. Why do you think Lou decides to trust him? What makes you decide to trust or distrust someone?
9. Lou's sensory processing disorder is an invisible disability: no one can tell by looking at her. Do you think it's easier or harder to have an invisible disability than a visible one? What are the challenges of each? How can you help others feel accepted and valued?
10. After moving to Nashville, Lou misses her mom, but is also angry at her for sending Lou away and hiding her past. Have you ever had mixed feelings toward someone important in your life? If so, who was it, and how did they make you feel? How did you cope with these feelings?
11. Explain the meaning of the book's title, *Tune It Out*.
12. Over the course of the book, Lou learns that there is a lot about her mom she doesn't know or understand. Why do you think Lou's mom hides her past from Lou? Why is Lou so upset when she learns how much her mom has hidden from her? Do you ever feel like there are parts of your parents' or family's lives that are mysterious to you? How might you better communicate with them?
13. Why do you think Lou and Well become such good friends when he is her opposite in many ways; for example, he loves the spotlight, while she hates it. What do they have in common? What do they bring to each other's lives? Do you have any friends who are very different from you? What do you learn from them, and what do they learn from you?
14. Why does Lou want to hide her SPD from her friends and teachers? Do you think she is right to think that people would treat her differently if they knew? Have you ever felt like you needed to hide something about yourself so that people would treat you a certain way? Describe your experience.
15. How do Well and the other drama kids support Lou, both before and after they know about her SPD? How do your friends support you? What do you think makes a good friend?
16. When Well drives his dad's golf cart to her house, Lou wonders, "If Well wrecked it and hurt himself, I wonder if his dad would get in trouble like my mom. Probably not. People with enough money to own golf carts don't get investigated for neglect." In what ways are Well's dad and Lou's mom similar as parents? Explain your answer using examples from the book. Do you

think it's true that people with money are treated differently than people who don't have as much? Can you think of examples of this that you've seen in your own life or community? How does it make you feel?

17. Why do you think Lou finally decides to let her guidance counselor, Andrea, help her come up with a plan to manage her SPD? Support your answer with examples from the book. Do you think she should have asked for help sooner? Why can it be difficult to ask for help? Have you ever waited longer than you should have to seek assistance? If so, why did you choose to delay, and what did you learn from the experience?

18. During rehearsals for *Into the Woods*, Lou's drama teacher says, "The story doesn't end when we get what we want." What do you think she means by this? How might you apply it to Lou's story?

19. During *Into the Woods*, Lou learns that her friend Tucker has a hard time with small spaces. Do you think Lou was surprised to learn that one of her friends gets panicky sometimes too? Why does she thank Tucker after he tells her? Have you ever found unexpected common ground with someone? If so, who was it, and what did you have in common? How did the experience impact you?

20. When Mary Katherine gets sick during the performance of *Into the Woods*, Well pushes Lou to step in to sing the final song. Why do you think Lou decides to do it, even though she's terrified? Do you think the Lou at the beginning of the book would have made the same choice? Have you ever done something that really scared you? If so, how did it turn out?

21. After Lou's performance in *Into the Woods*, Well's father, who is a music producer, tells Lou to call him. Instead, Lou throws his card away. Why do you think she does this? Do you think she'll regret it later? Explain your answers. Her mom sees her do it, but doesn't say anything. Do you think that was hard for her? What does it tell you about their relationship?

22. Both Lou's mother and Well's father seem to have a hard time accepting their children as they are. List some examples from the book where you see this. How do Lou and Well feel about it? If you could give Lou's mom or Well's dad advice on how to treat their children, what would you say?

23. Do you think Lou and her mom will live together again someday? If so, how do you think it will go? Do you think Lou's mom will pressure her to perform again? Explain your answers.

Extension Activities

1. Throughout the book, Lou uses music to calm her emotions and help her feel stronger. Well notices this and shares songs and playlists with Lou. Create a list of songs for Lou that could help her cope with the challenges in her new life. Be sure to list why you chose to include each song. If you'd like, create the playlist in your favorite music app.

2. Research invisible disabilities, and read about kids who have them. What are they? What are some common ones? What are some of the challenges of living with an invisible disability? Design a poster to educate your classmates on invisible disabilities.

3. Lou is upset that her mom has kept so much of her own past from Lou. She says, “There are too many big black holes in my life, and I’m starting to see it’s because Mom chose to keep it that way. I don’t get it. I don’t get why everything has to be so hard.” Imagine that you are Lou’s mom. Write a letter to your daughter explaining why you have chosen to live the way you do. Then, imagine you’re Lou and write a response to your mom explaining why this was so hurtful to you. What was most surprising to you in writing from both perspectives? Which letter was easier to write?

4. Imagine Lou four years later, and write a short story about her life. How has she changed? How is she the same? Is she living with her mom again, or is she still with Aunt Ginger? Is she performing music again? Are she and Well still best friends?

5. Lou spends a lot of time wondering about her mom’s past and wishing her mom had shared more. For this activity, interview one of your parents or guardians to learn more about their life. For example, where did they grow up? What was their childhood like? What challenges have they faced over the years? If you’re able, consider interviewing your grandparents or other relatives about what your parent or guardian was like as a kid.

6. Watch a video of all or part of *Into the Woods*, the musical Lou and her friends perform for drama class. Why do you think the author chose to feature this particular musical in *Tune It Out*? What do the characters of the play and the book have in common? Draw a chart showing connections between the play and the book. Some themes you might want to consider are the relationships between children and parents, wishes, leaving home, and what it means to get what you want. **Note for teachers:** depending on your students, consider leading this conversation as a classroom discussion or in small groups. You can also consider reading a synopsis with your class in place of watching the full musical.

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