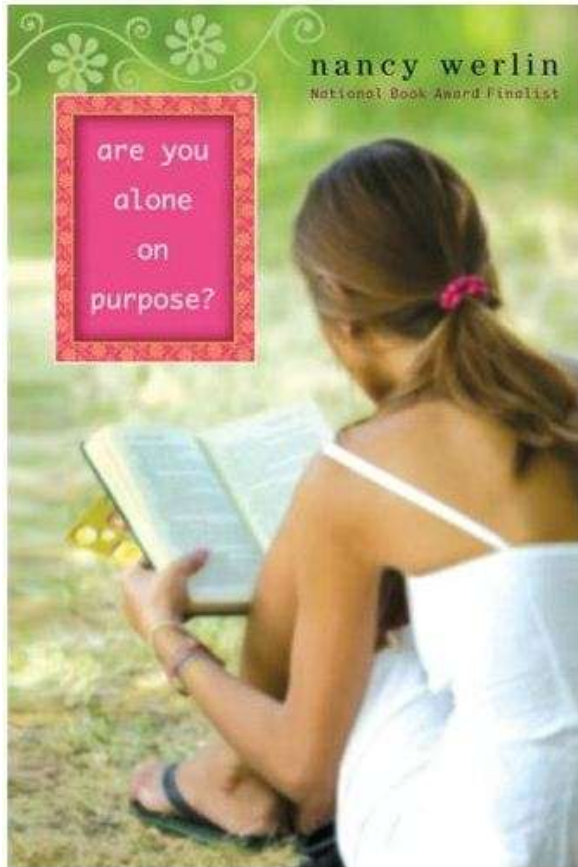


Are You Alone on Purpose? by Nancy Werlin



What's It About?

Though fourteen-year-old Alison Shandling is a brain, her twin brother, Adam, is autistic. All of her life, Alison's parents have focused on Adam and what he needs, while Alison has always felt she had to be perfect.

When the rabbi's son, Harry Roth, begins taunting Alison about her brother, she does her best to stand up for herself. But when Harry is injured in a diving accident, Alison senses that he's hiding something that he wants to share with someone. And she begins to think that—strangely—she's just the someone he can share it with . . .

- A *Publishers Weekly* Flying Start book
- "A wonderful first novel." —*VOYA*
- "Characterizations are superb." —*Booklist*

Inspiration

I think that all writers must feel a special kind of tenderness for their first novels. I certainly do for *Are You Alone on Purpose?* This novel began for me with a vision of a single pivotal scene: the one, early on in the book, in which Alison's mother "curses" Rabbi Roth for his decision not to enroll Alison's brother in Hebrew School. I had a vision of her screaming . . . and of Alison watching, listening, keeping her thoughts very private.

Of all the characters I've created, Alison Shandling is the closest on the surface to who and what I was at her age. But I made her smarter than me—both intellectually and emotionally. And I made her braver. She needs every bit of that courage, I think. With the plot of *Are You Alone*, I was trying quite deliberately to come up with a situation that would force Alison to confront her parents about her own needs, and that would also cause her to muse for the first time (but, I hope, not the last), on the place of God in the universe, given that the world contains so much pain and suffering.

Alison's enemy and sweetheart, Harry Roth, remains a bit of a puzzle to me. He is a whirling dervish of pain himself, and I am still both incredulous and amused that Alison finds him so compelling. But she does. I retain a bit of nervousness for her, for her fearlessness in this regard. But I also think that she knows exactly what she's doing. By the end, I trusted her instinct—and indeed, Harry's.

Finally, I think of both the Shandlings and the Roths as “functional families.” They're not perfect, but they try hard to cope with the difficulties in their lives, and they are all capable of change. And by the end of the book, they've managed, somehow, to communicate across the divides that separate them.

I believe that human beings are capable of understanding each other. I also believe it's hard, hard work. Everyday work. Heroic work.

Discussion Questions

(By Jennifer Richard Jacobson)

- Discuss the title of the book. What do you think it refers to? How do you think Alison would answer this question? What about Harry?
- *Are you Alone on Purpose* is written from two alternating points of view. Why do you think Nancy Werlin chose to write the story in this way? Discuss the effectiveness of this technique.
- Alison works to be the child her parents don't worry about. What are the costs of this effort? What are the payoffs? Imagine you can see into Alison's future. Do you think her approach will change? How?
- Mrs. Shandling, Rabbi Roth, and Alison all worry about playing a part in Harry's accident. Do you believe thoughts have power? Should any of these characters accept responsibility for the accident? If so, why?
- What is divine justice? Which characters in this story believe in divine justice? What evidence from the book supports your conclusions?
- It has been said that there are no accidents in life. Do you believe this to be true? Explain.
- This story was originally published in 1994. Discuss Alison and Harry's approach to the internet versus the ways in which teenagers use technology today.
- On his last day in the hospital, Henry calls Dr. Jefferies names, knocks her books and papers to the floor, and accuses her of pretending. What do you believe provoked this angry response? What do you believe Harry needs from Dr. Jefferies?
- Alison walks, uninvited, into Harry's room and Werlin writes, “Suddenly her sangfroid fled.” What is the meaning of “sangfroid?” Where do you think Alison's sangfroid came from in the first place? Can you describe a time when your sangfroid fled?
- What causes Alison to insist on time spent with Harry? Would you have done the same in her shoes? Why or why not?
- In what ways are Harry and Alison similar? What makes their unlikely friendship work?

- Discuss Adam’s role in the story. How does his presence shape and/or reveal the personalities of each member of the Shandling and Roth families?
- Both Rabbi Roth and Harry have been profoundly affected by the death of Harry’s mother. How are their ways of dealing with grief similar? How are they different? At one point Rabbi Roth says, “It’s important to keep up the form of things.” Do you think this is true? Why or why not?
- Harry calls Alison, “Queen Nerd,” and it has a surprising effect on their relationship. What changes in this moment? How is the reader affected by the shift in their communication style?
- Reread the pages of the story when Harry challenges Alison to a game of basketball and goads her into calling him “a cripple” (page 133-35). Why is this moment a turning point in their relationship?
- When Harry tells Alison, “I don’t think you’re nuts . . . Just—you’re really on your own planet,” she replies: “Isn’t everyone?” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- How does the friendship between Alison and Harry change each of them? Do you think it will affect their futures? If so, in what ways?

Publication Information

Age 12 and up.

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Reviews & Awards

- A Publishers Weekly Flying Start book
- An ALA Quick Pick
- A New York Public Library Best Book for the Teen Age
- An ALA Popular Paperback selection
- “A wonderful first novel.” —*VOYA*
- “A moving portrayal of two remarkable teenagers.” —*School Library Journal*
- “A writer worth watching.” —*Publishers Weekly*
- “Characterizations are superb ...” —*Booklist*
- “A complex, compelling story.” —*Horn Book*