

What's in a Name

by Ellen Wittlinger

Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by Frances Rourke
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SUMMARY:

A group of high school teens in a small New England community struggle to discover who they are and who they should be. Their challenges are multifold: Georgie must contend with a father who walked out on her; O'Neill must separate himself from his brother, Quincy, the football hero; Ricardo, an immigrant, has difficulty understanding and being understood in an unfamiliar language; and Nelson and Shaquanda are farther apart than just the distance the school bus has to travel. As if this isn't enough, the teens are pressured into taking sides in a campaign about changing the name of their town. Through the interconnected stories of Scrub Harbor High, *What's in a Name* takes on issues of identity, both individual and community, with insight and imagination.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Each of the chapters in this book is a separate story, narrating a part of each character's life. What is the link that binds these stories into a whole?
2. Who are the "Scrubs" and who are the "Follys"? Do you think this type of separatism exists in real life? Do you know of a situation where a person or a group is labeled by others?
3. Georgie was stunned when her father called and invited her to live with him in California. Do you think she was excited about the idea of moving? Would you like the idea of living in a house with a swimming pool and a Jacuzzi? Would it be difficult to leave your friends and your school, even if it meant having your own car?
4. Quincy is the type of person who doesn't like to make waves; he is happiest when things are running smoothly. How does this show up in his dealings with people, especially his father and Gretchen? How would you describe his reaction to his brother's poem?

5. Ricardo is easy-going and friendly. Do you think he is adjusting well to life in a foreign country? What is the greatest obstacle he faces with the other kids?
6. Ricardo's home is Brazil, where the native language is Portuguese; Nadia and her parents moved to this country from Russia. She has learned to speak English, but her parents are having difficulty with the language. What language does Shaquanda speak? Can you explain what Ebonics is?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Try to spend one day observing yourself as honestly as possible. How do you react to different people and different situations? Are you often happy, sad, or angry? Do you like the person you meet?
2. Make a list of qualities you most admire in a person. Are these qualities that you have or are working toward acquiring? Is there someone you admire, a friend or perhaps a famous person, who you think has these qualities? List the names of anyone you know with all or some of these qualities.
3. Imagine that one of your parents has had a job offer too good to refuse, but it involves uprooting and moving the family. What problems in adjusting to a new school, in a new town, perhaps in a different part of the country do you anticipate? What if the move is to a different country, where English is not the first language? How do you see yourself fitting in and feeling comfortable? Write out a plan for your first day in your new school.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Excerpted from Ellen Wittlinger's Homepage: <http://www.ellenwittlinger.com>

"I was born in Belleville, Illinois in 1948 and lived there until I left for college at Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois. I was the only child of parents who owned a small grocery store. We lived in a house that adjoined the store, so I could raid the ice cream freezer or the candy bar boxes more often than I should have. (Which made me very popular in grade school.) But on weekends I was sometimes pressed into service to bag groceries or dust the shelves, never my favorite jobs...

It wasn't until I had two children of my own, and a job as a children's librarian, that it occurred to me to try to write for young adults. I started reading the YA books in my department ... Some of the first and most inspiring books I read were *Celine* and *The Goats* by Brock Cole, and *The Great Gilly Hopkins* and *Jacob Have I Loved* by Katherine Paterson. I decided to try writing for young adults myself. My first novel, *Lombardo's Law*, was published in 1993 and I've never looked back."

HELPFUL LINKS:

Tolerance.org; a web project of the Southern Poverty Law Center:

http://www.tolerance.org/teach/mix_it_up/index.jsp

Educators for Social Responsibility; features lesson plans and activities in the Online Teacher

Center: <http://www.esrnational.org/otc>



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