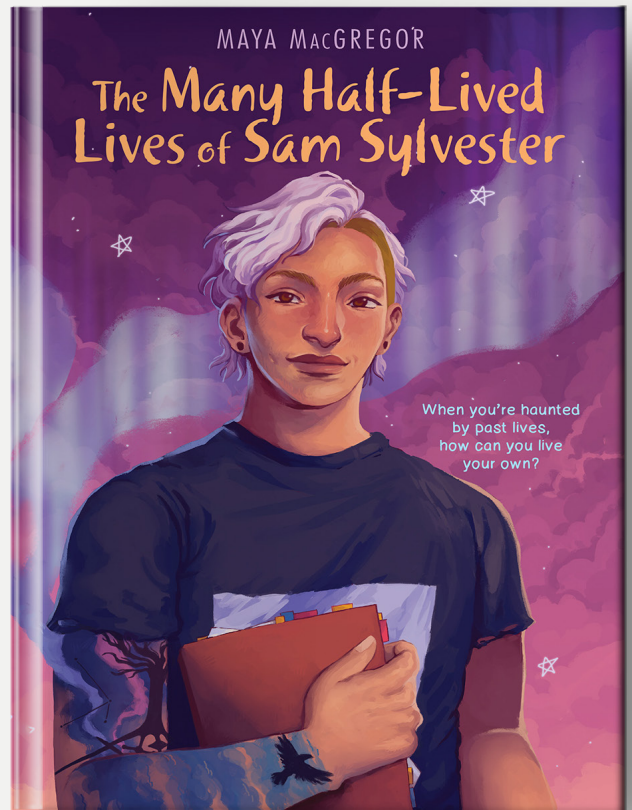


DISCUSSION GUIDE

THE MANY HALF-LIVED LIVES OF SAM SYLVESTER



Written by Maya MacGregor

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Grades: 7 and up

Ages: 12 and up

ABOUT THE BOOK

In this queer contemporary YA mystery, a nonbinary autistic teen realizes they must not only solve a thirty-year-old mystery but also face the demons lurking in their past in order to live a satisfying life.

Sam Sylvester has long collected stories of half-lived lives—of kids who died before they turned nineteen. Sam was almost one of those kids. Now, as Sam’s own nineteenth birthday approaches, their recent near-death experience haunts them. They’re certain they don’t have much time left. . . .

Yet Sam’s life seems to be on the upswing after meeting several new friends and a potential love interest in Shep, their down-the-street neighbor. But the past keeps roaring back—in Sam’s memories and in the form of a thirty-year-old suspicious death that took place in Sam’s new home. Sam can’t resist trying to find out more about the kid who died and who now seems to guide their investigation. When Sam starts receiving threatening notes, they know they’re on the path to uncovering a murderer. But are they digging through the past or digging their own future grave?

The Many Half-Lived Lives of Sam Sylvester explores healing in the aftermath of trauma and the joy in living a full life.

“Look no further for your next favorite read, because *The Many Half-Lived Lives of Sam Sylvester* has it all: a gripping murder mystery that will keep you turning pages, ghosts, romance, and a treasure trove of queer characters with depth and heart. Here’s something rare—a suspenseful story that also feels like a hug.”

—SARAH GLENN MARSH,
author of the *Reign of the Fallen* series

★ “A top-notch blend of contemporary fiction and mystery with a satisfying conclusion. . . . Blending and transcending genres, the book’s beautiful storytelling and the rich voice of the prose at times evoke poetry. This captivating story centers a memorable, relatable protagonist surrounded by a lovable ensemble cast. The central mystery is gripping and fast-paced, but the book never fails to give all the characters motivations and backstories, making even the tertiary characters feel lived-in enough to be believable. . . . A thrilling debut featuring lovable and well-developed characters.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS, starred review

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sam and their dad are starting fresh after a traumatic event. In what ways does Junius Sylvester support his teenage kid as they prepare for a second new school and town in one year?
2. Sam mentions that they’re used to being “the only queer in the room.” How does such an experience of being the only visible person of a marginalized identity in a group shape Sam’s early experiences in Astoria? How does this affect their mindset, and how is that different from their past mindset?
3. Describe how Sam and Junius navigate Sam’s introduction to their new principal and teachers. What does this tell you about the father-child relationship in the Sylvester family?
4. Astoria High School’s Rainbow Island is something new to Sam. What impact do you think it has on them to find such a group among their peers? In what ways does this group shift in dynamic throughout the book and why?
5. Shep is Sam’s neighbor and shows a great deal of interest in both Sam themselves and in Sam’s house and its mysteries. It is also revealed that Shep is coping with the loss of a close loved one, her abuela. How does this affect her perception of the mystery, of Sam, and her level of interest?
6. Sky comes across at first as playful, even a little flippant. Describe moments in the story where his behavior and words contrast with that outward personality. Why do you think that is?
7. Aidan enters the narrative as someone who, if not a bully himself, travels in less welcoming circles at AHS. How does he immediately show an interest in Sam and begin to subvert expectations?

8. Shep and her mother's relationship is very different from Sam's with Junius. In what ways is that true? How are they similar?
9. Special interests play a large part in autistic experiences. Many people are familiar with certain stereotypes about this, from trains to Pokémon. Sam's is a very serious topic. Do you think Sam's life experiences will change their engagement with their special interest? How?
10. One of the ongoing tensions in the book involves Sky's ex, who refuses to accept his sexuality. In what ways can you see the effect of this on Sky and the others around him?
11. Sam mentions that they struggle with the impulse to self-harm when overstimulated. In what ways do Sam, Junius, and Sam's friends help them redirect this impulse?
12. Billy Clement's death greatly affected this small town. Describe the tension between Sam and Shep's interest in the mystery and the lingering effects on the townspeople of Astoria. How do the adults display discomfort? How do Sam and Shep navigate that discomfort?
13. There are many different examples of father-child relationships in the book that range from indifferent to antagonistic to protective and loving. In what ways do each of the book's father figures display their characteristics? How does this affect the characters connected to them, and in what ways do these father figures reach outside their own families?
14. Both Sam and Shep experience phenomena they can't explain, whether feelings or events. Whether you believe in the preternatural working on the story or not, how does this shared experience shape their growing bond? How do these phenomena relate to each character individually and together? Why might that be?
15. Music plays a large role in the story, particularly that of icon David Bowie. Describe three instances in which music acts upon the plot of the story or upon the characters' development.
16. Margarie Frankel attempts to connect with Sam from the beginning. What motivates her to do this? What do you think this tells you about her personality and her character?
17. The aurora borealis features in several aspects of the book and also subtly connects Sam with the book their class is reading at school, Jack London's *Call of the Wild*, which takes place in the cold, Alaskan wilderness where the landscape itself is an antagonistic force. How do think the aurora borealis as a symbol relates to Sam's experience of trauma? Think about where people are able to observe this natural phenomenon and what sort of landscapes exist in the Alaskan wilds as well as Montana. What do these lights in the sky symbolize for Sam? Why do you think Sam chose to include them in their tattoo?
18. Sam struggles throughout the book to recognize overtures of friendship. Navigating social cues can be very difficult for autistic people. In what ways does Sam demonstrate both their personal struggles and coping mechanisms they have learned? Describe three examples.

19. Trust is an important theme for Sam throughout the book. Describe how this shows in Sam's interactions with different characters. How does this change throughout the book? Is Sam's trust ever misplaced? Why?

20. In their own class discussion, Sam says, "When you see how fragile the illusion of safety really is, other people don't always believe you. It makes them uncomfortable to confront even the possibility of danger." What do you think they mean? Do you agree? Why or why not?

21. We see several examples throughout the book of people who mean well harming others, in contrast to people who mean to harm also causing harm. To what extent does their intent change the outcome? Does it change the outcome of these actions? Why or why not?