

# LOVE, Penelope: A Guide for Readers & Educators

## DISCUSSION

### The Book

What is your favorite scene, and why?

What is the significance of the title **LOVE, Penelope**?



**LOVE, Penelope** is written

in journal form, but it is also a novel in the following ways: (1) There is a beginning, a middle, and a definite ending. (2) The main character grows and changes. (3) The story begins on a day that is different. To discuss these aspects of the novel:

- \* Summarize the beginning, the middle, and the end of **LOVE, Penelope**.
- \* Describe how Penelope grows and changes.
- \* Explain why you think the author decided to begin the story on the day of Monday, November 24th, 2014.

In what ways does the theme of belonging show up in the book? Among friends? Among family? Among the larger community? Why do you think it plays such a big role?

### Penelope

Why do you think Penelope originally fabricated her connection to the Ohlone? Why do you think she kept putting off telling her teacher the truth? Have you ever known someone who was quick to tell “fabrications?” Why do you think that was?

How does Penelope feel after she has finally been honest about her “fabrication?” Why do you think that is?

Why do you think Penelope is willing to tell things to her baby sister that she isn’t willing to tell others? How does that compare to the secret stairwell? Why do some things need more secrecy than others?

How does the Penelope’s love for the Warriors shape her as a person?



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## Family

What do you think was the most important thing Penelope learned in researching the Ohlone?

What does it mean to be related by love, not DNA?

Why does Penelope wish that her parents would get married?



## Friends

How are the three main characters alike? How do they differ?

What are the fears/problems of each of them? How do they gather strength from one another in dealing with their concerns?

If Gabby doesn't talk a lot, how was she able to help bring all three girls together?

What role did the goat play in Hazel's life? Why was she willing to take such drastic measures to try to keep it?

Describe the way Penelope's relationship with Hazel changes throughout the book. What prompts the change? What misjudgments does Penelope make about Hazel?

What misjudgments does Hazel make about Penelope? Why do they make those judgments? What causes their opinions to change?



## Community

How do you think Penelope would define her "community" at the beginning of the book? How would she define it at the end of the book? If it has changed, why do you think that is?

How would you define your own community? How might that change in the future? What could cause that change?

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## ACTIVITIES

### Your City

Penelope loves Oakland, California, and wants everyone to love it as much as she does.

What city or town do you live in? Make a list similar to Penelope's describing what is special to you about your city.

### Secret Places

Oakland has secret stairways all over town.

Illustrate, in words or a drawing, a place in your neighborhood that offers you privacy and peace, with or without your friends. How do you feel when you are there?

### Family

Penelope loves Sundae Mondays, singing with her parents, watching TV as a family, etc.

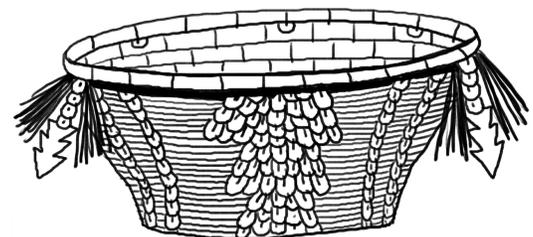
What fun, special activities do your family members do together? Can you think of some activities you would like to encourage?

### Ancestry

Penelope describes a year in which she is very interested in discovering more about her ancestry, so much so that she lies about it!

What is your ancestral heritage? What are the traditions or ceremonies in your family related to your family history?

Do you know of an artifact from your family heritage? Can you illustrate it in words and/or a drawing?



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## Ancestry (cont.)

Is there a recipe from your heritage you can share?

Conduct an interview with a family member about your heritage.

If you don't know much about your heritage, describe a tradition (or an artifact or recipe) that is important to your family right now. Do you think in fifty years your family still will be following the tradition?

## Friends

Create a Venn diagram of Penelope, Hazel, and Gabby with respect to their similarities and differences.

Do the same for you and some of your best friends. What helps you get along? What makes it sometimes challenging?



## Words

Penelope loves thinking about words and their meanings. Sometimes the meanings of words surprise her. "Sheepish" has nothing to do with sheep, she discovers.

Are there words that surprise and interest you? See how many you can think of!

Make up your own word. What would it mean?

## Social Injustice

Penelope is concerned about racism and ignorant prejudice about same-sex marriages.

What are some issues in society that concern you? Research what people are doing to alleviate those concerns. How can you help?

How does it help to be aware of what's going on? Even when it's happening to other people?

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## Sports

Penelope and her friends love basketball and the Golden State Warriors. But Penelope begins to think about her idols as “real people,” not just sports stars. She wonders if any Warriors themselves have ever experienced racism. She begins to think of LeBron James as a family man, not just an opposing player.

What is your favorite sport or team? Conduct an interview with a friend, with one of you pretending to be a sportscaster asking the questions, the other a favorite player. (Then switch!)

What would you like to know about a particular player’s life? Record the interview and/or write down the questions and responses. What did you find surprising about the process?

## Your Own Journal

If you kept a journal, is there anything special, interesting, or puzzling in your life you would like to write about? Would you write it to another person? Would you use an illustration or two in your first entry? Write that first entry today. Perhaps you will feel like writing more on other days as well.



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## INTERVIEW WITH JOANNE ROCKLIN



Joanne Rocklin is the author of many books for children, including *One Day and One Amazing Morning on Orange Street*, *Fleabrain Loves Fanny*, and *The Five Lives of Our Cat Zook*, which won the Golden Kite Award and was named to Florida's Sunshine State Young Readers Award master list.

This interview originally ran on the [KidLitFrenzy.com](http://KidLitFrenzy.com) blog and is best read after viewing the book trailer at [bit.ly/LovePenelopeVid](http://bit.ly/LovePenelopeVid).

**Kid Lit Frenzy (KLF):** The book consists of letters (in journal form) from (almost) 11-year-old Penny to her sibling in utero. Why did you choose this form for the novel?

**Joanne Rocklin (JR):** Penny is overjoyed that she will be a big sister and takes her role very seriously. Even though the baby won't be born for another eight months, the fact of "You's" existence is very real to Penny, so she decides to describe the world to You right away.

I love writing in first person for the middle grades, and have done it in diary/letter form before. It is an age of increased introspection, an intense pondering of identity, and a growing desire to examine one's place in the world, which the form allows. There are also many opportunities for humor (both conscious and unconscious) as my narrator expresses observations that are innocent, open, and sometimes erroneous.



The form of the novel is also a "metaphor" for Penny's own development—the birth of her discovery of life's surprises and complexities.

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**KLF:** Penny draws pictures on her letters to her sister. Amulet Books asked illustrator and comics creator Lucy Knisley to envision Penny’s drawings. What does Lucy add to the story?



**JR:** Lucy’s illustrations add whimsy, humor, poignancy, wisdom, all while looking like a ten-year-old drew them (which is a difficult feat)! I love the depictions of the development of the baby, and especially treasure the one of Penny imagining she is meeting Martin Luther King in person!

**Lucy Knisley** is a critically acclaimed comic creator and author of the graphic memoirs **Relish**, **An Age of License**, **French Milk**, and **Something New**. In addition to illustrating **Love, Penelope**, she has illustrated the picture book **Margaret and the Moon**.

**KLF:** What is the significance of the date June 26, 2015, listed at the end of the book trailer?

**JR:** That is the date that the U.S. Supreme Court ended the ban of same-sex marriage across the nation.

June 26, 2015

**KLF:** The trailer says that Penny is “not Ohlone by DNA, but... Ohlone by love.” What can you share about Penny’s adopted Ohlone family?

**JR:** Penny’s mama, Sammy, is not her biological mother. She adopted Penny when Penny was a toddler. Sammy’s mother is Ohlone, and Sammy’s Native American heritage is a big part of Sammy’s identity. To feel as close to Sammy and Sammy’s family as she can, Penny reads and learns about the Ohlone culture throughout the story. She shares what she has learned in the letters to her unborn sibling.

Elementary school students in California study the Ohlone, who have lived in the area where Penny lives for thousands and thousands of years. But Penny acquires an even deeper appreciation of their ongoing struggles to save their heritage and sacred areas. And she connects with the Ohlone’s deep love for the earth and all of nature, as

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well as with the beauty and significance of their artifacts. Penny also discovers that, long ago, the Ohlone may even have invented basketball!

**KLF:** As a children’s book creator in Oakland, California, do you, like Penny, find the “Golden State Warriors are the greatest team in the NBA. On the planet—probably”?

**JR:** Yes. And, of course, it has nothing to do with living in Oakland, California. They just are.

**KLF:** How do Penny’s friends make her a bigger, better person?

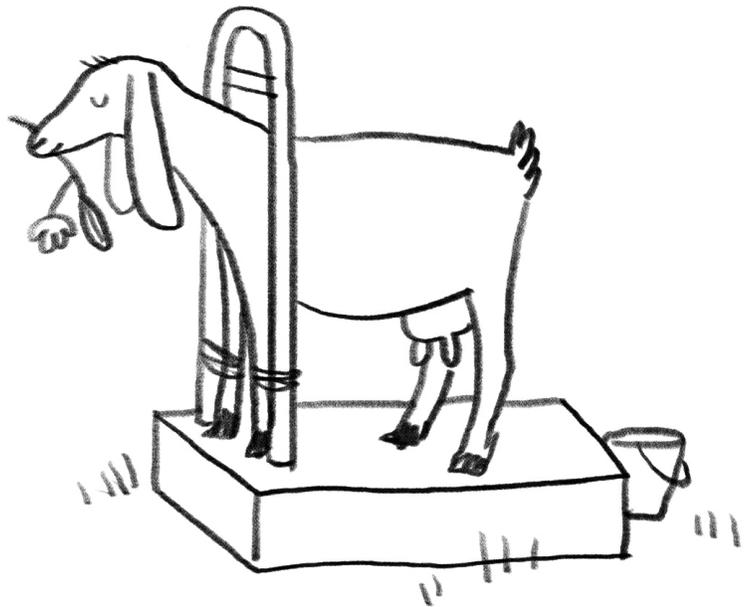
**JR:** Penny thought she knew about tolerance, empathy, and forgiveness, but sometimes important words are just plain old words until your friends teach you what they really mean in real life. Gabby, and Hazel, and Kenny, and Penny’s Secret Impossible Love all have their own stories, and Penny writes them down in her letters.

“Dear You,” Penny writes. “So much has happened this year. Or does it just seem like a lot happened because I wrote it down? Mr. Chen calls that a RHETORICAL QUESTION. A question without an answer. No, there is an answer. A lot happened. And I wrote it down. Love, Penelope.”

And as Penny writes it all down, she grows. Just like the baby inside Mama.

**KLF:** Banana slugs or goats?

**JR:** As Penny says, banana slugs are easy to draw, but very hard to love. Especially when compared to goats. Penny and I agree that bright yellow slimy slow-moving unfriendly garden banana slugs are not huggable. Goats are huggable. And in Penny’s world, goats keep secrets and give very good advice, just when you need it.



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**KLF:** Your starred review in *Booklist* called your book a “joyous testament to our complicated world.” How do you find joy in this complicated world?

**JR:**

Penny and I find joy in family  
friends  
community  
dogs  
cats  
nature, (ok, even banana slugs,  
which are SO amusing to look at!)



Wait, there's more!  
Food! Food from all around the  
world!  
Books!  
Singing!

And then there's that joy that comes from honing the wondrous superpower of empathy—when you really learn to understand someone else's point of view and can actually feel your mind and heart grow bigger and bigger.

And of course, there's the joy of love, which is what it's all about. Nothing beats it.

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## COMMON CORE STANDARDS



English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature: CCSS.ELA - Literacy. RL.3.1, RL.3.3, RL.3.4, RL.3.10, RL.4.1, RL.4.3, RL.4.4, RL.4.10, RL.5.4, RL.5.6, RL.5.10, RL.6.1, RL.6.4, RL.6.6, RL.6.10, RL.7.1, RL.7.6, RL.7.10



English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Foundational Skills: CCSS.ELA - Literacy. RF.3.3, RF.3.3.c, RF.3.3.d, RF.3.4, RF.3.4.a, RF.4.3, RF.4.4, RF.4.4.a, RF.5.3, RF.5.4, RF.5.4.a



English Language Arts Standards » Writing: CCSS.ELA - Literacy. W.3.2, W.3.3, W.3.4, W.4.2, W.4.3, W.4.4, W.5.2, W.5.3, W.5.4, W.6.2, W.6.3, W.6.4, W.7.2, W.7.3, W.7.4



English Language Arts Standards » Speaking & Listening: CCSS.ELA - Literacy. SL.3.1, SL.3.1.d, SL.3.6, SL.4.1, SL.4.1.d, SL.5.1, SL.5.1.d, SL.6.1, SL.7.1



English Language Arts Standards » Language: CCSS.ELA - Literacy. L.3.1, L.3.1.a, L.3.4, L.3.5, L.4.4, L.4.4.a, L.4.5, L.5.5.a, L.6.5, L.7.5

This guide was a collaborative project between author Joanne Rocklin, children's book author and former classroom teacher Ann Braden, and the children's literature engagement folks at Curious City.

