

DISCUSSION GUIDE TO
I KISSED SHARA WHEELER
BY CASEY MCQUISTON



ABOUT THE BOOK

A debut YA romantic comedy from the New York Times bestselling author Casey McQuiston, about chasing down what you want, only to find what you need . . .

A month before graduating from Willowgrove Christian Academy, the principal's perfect daughter, prom queen Shara Wheeler, kisses Chloe Green and vanishes.

On a furious hunt for answers, Chloe discovers she's not the only one Shara kissed. There's also Smith, Shara's long-time sweetheart, and Rory, Shara's bad-boy neighbour with a crush. Thrown into an unlikely alliance, Chloe, Smith and Rory follow Shara's trail of annoyingly cryptic clues, and Chloe starts to suspect that there might be more to this small town – and to Shara – than she thought.

Fierce, funny, and frank, Casey McQuiston's *I Kissed Shara Wheeler* is about breaking the rules, getting messy, and finding love in unexpected places.


ABOUT CASEY MCQUISTON

Casey McQuiston is the New York Times bestselling author of *Red, White & Royal Blue*, *One Last Stop*, and *I Kissed Shara Wheeler*, as well as a pie enthusiast. She writes books about smart people with bad manners falling in love. Born and raised in southern Louisiana, she now lives in New York City with her poodle mix and personal assistant, Pepper.



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THIS GUIDE WAS WRITTEN BY DR ERICA GILLINGHAM.

Erica is a queer poet, writer, and bookseller with a PhD in lesbian love stories in young adult literature and graphic novels. (She wrote a lot about kissing.) Originally from California, she now lives in London, England, and works at Gay's The Word, the UK's oldest LGBTQ+ bookshop.



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PRE-READING REFLECTION

In *I Kissed Shara Wheeler*, Casey McQuiston deliberately sets their novel in False Beach, Alabama, a fictional town in the southern United States. What assumptions do you have about the American South? Who do you think lives there? How might a teenager who identifies as LGBTQ+ or gender non-conforming feel growing up there?

- In *I Kissed Shara Wheeler*, Casey McQuiston deliberately sets their novel in False Beach, Alabama, a fictional town in the southern United States. Before reading, make some notes about who and what you expect to find in a novel set in a place like False Beach. Write down anything that comes to mind.
- Once you've completed the book, on a separate page, make new notes about what surprised you or challenged your expectations.
- Then, compare your thoughts before and after. Were your assumptions correct? Did you find anything unexpected? Who stood out to you? What assumptions do you have about the American South? Who do you think lives there? How might a teenager who identifies as LGBTQ+ or gender non-conforming feel growing up there?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Author's Note) Why does McQuiston include an Author's Note for their novel? What information do they want the reader to know before they begin the book?

(Chapter 1) After both Chloe Green and Rory Heron confess to kissing Shara Wheeler, Chloe asks Rory to not tell anyone at school that Shara kissed her. Why?

(Chapter 2) When Chloe and Rory meet up with Smith Parker for the first time, he thinks that the notes are '... some kind of puzzle Shara set up for us, and we all have a piece of it.' What basis do they have to trust each other? Why are each of them invested?

(Chapter 3/Chapter 20) Who is Bucky the Buck and Jefferson Davis? How do details like these add to the world-building McQuiston uses when creating False Beach, Alabama?

(Chapter 3) McQuiston repeatedly uses intertextual references to shape their story and characters. In this chapter, Chloe's best friend Georgia is reading *Emma* by Jane Austen. How does *Emma* relate to the plot of *I Kissed Shara Wheeler*, if at all? What are some of the other intertextual references McQuiston employs especially in Shara's notes to Chloe?

(Chapter 4) The principal, Mr Wheeler, is described as a 'Good Old Alabama Boy'. What does this tell the reader about the principal of Willowgrove Christian Academy? How is Mr Wheeler positioned in contrast to Valerie Green, Chloe's mum and the principal's former classmate?

(Chapter 5) Chloe suspects that the choir teacher, Mr Truman, is a gay man who, like all Willowgrove teachers, has willingly signed a 'morality clause' in order to teach at the school. Why does Mr Truman work there if he may have to hide who he is? Are there any real-life instances where similar restrictions have been required for teachers in schools?

(Chapter 7) Ace Torres loves the song 'Mr Brightside' by The Killers, in part because the singer 'never says if he's jealous of the guy or the girl'. How does McQuiston use this song – and Ace's interpretation of it – throughout the novel?

(Chapter 7) In a conversation with Smith after the party, Chloe clarifies that she identifies as bisexual. How does Smith react? What other characters are identified as non-heterosexual and/or gender non-conforming in the novel?

(Chapter 8) Chloe has been so preoccupied by Shara's notes that she doesn't realize that she is neglecting her close friendships with Georgia, Benjy and Ash. How does the reader know (when Chloe doesn't) that these relationships are taking a hit?

(Chapter 10) Rory breaks the rules differently from Chloe, who says that her deliberate dress-code violations are a form of control in how she is perceived. What is Chloe trying to control, and for what reason?

(Chapter 13) Ash says, 'My ideal body is no body at all.' What do they mean? How and why does this open up a conversation about being non-binary between Ash and Smith?

(From the Burn Pile: Chapter 15) 'When I was a kid, my mom used to tell me I was infinite the way the Holy Spirit was infinite.' What does this mean and how has that changed for Smith? How does this religious belief compare to other depictions of Christianity in the novel?

(Chapter 15) Georgia decides not to go to NYU with Chloe. What are the factors in Georgia's decision to go to Auburn? How does money factor into other characters' plans after graduation, particularly in regards to university?

(Chapter 17) Chloe refers to Shara and Smith's relationship as 'the Willowgrove version of a lavender marriage' after Smith admits to dating Shara to be closer to Rory. What is a 'lavender marriage' and how might it relate, as a metaphor, to the novel as a whole?

(Chapter 19) What does Chloe mean when she says, 'This is the real tragedy: Everything extraordinary about [Shara] is trapped behind the myth'? What is 'the myth' and who created it?

(Chapter 23) After meeting her for the first time, Chloe's mum tells Shara that 'if this town doesn't feel right to you, you're allowed to leave. You're allowed to exist. Even if it means existing somewhere else.' How does this contrast to Georgia's decision to stay?

(From the Burn Pile) McQuiston includes notes, scraps of conversations, speech drafts, and essay prompt rewrites at the beginning of each chapter. How do these additional textual elements add to the story? Do their meanings shift once the reader learns they will be burned at the end of the novel?

(Chapter 25) At the senior bonfire, Shara agrees to burn the notes she left for Chloe, Rory, and Smith. Does this action provide a resolution, a new beginning or both?



POST-READING EXERCISES

Reflection: From the start of *I Kissed Shara Wheeler*, Chloe is very clear in her disdain for False Beach, Alabama. Even when people like her best friend Georgia try to tell her that there are some things they actually like about their hometown, Chloe doesn't hear it.

To change her mind, Chloe needs the experiences Shara leads her on to '[start] to understand what it means to be from here' (Chapter 5). At the same time, Chloe also comes to recognize that '[s]hame is a way of life here' because 'if she'd grown up here, she might never have come out at all' (Chapter 20).

In a written reflection, consider Chloe's feelings about False Beach at the start of the novel compared to her understanding by the end. Can you relate to Chloe and her friends? What does it mean to be from somewhere? And what if it's complicated?

Creative Writing Exercise: 'All [Chloe] ever wanted was to launch a revolution at Willowgrove. Somehow, it looks like her graduation ban may have done it by accident.' (Chapter 20).

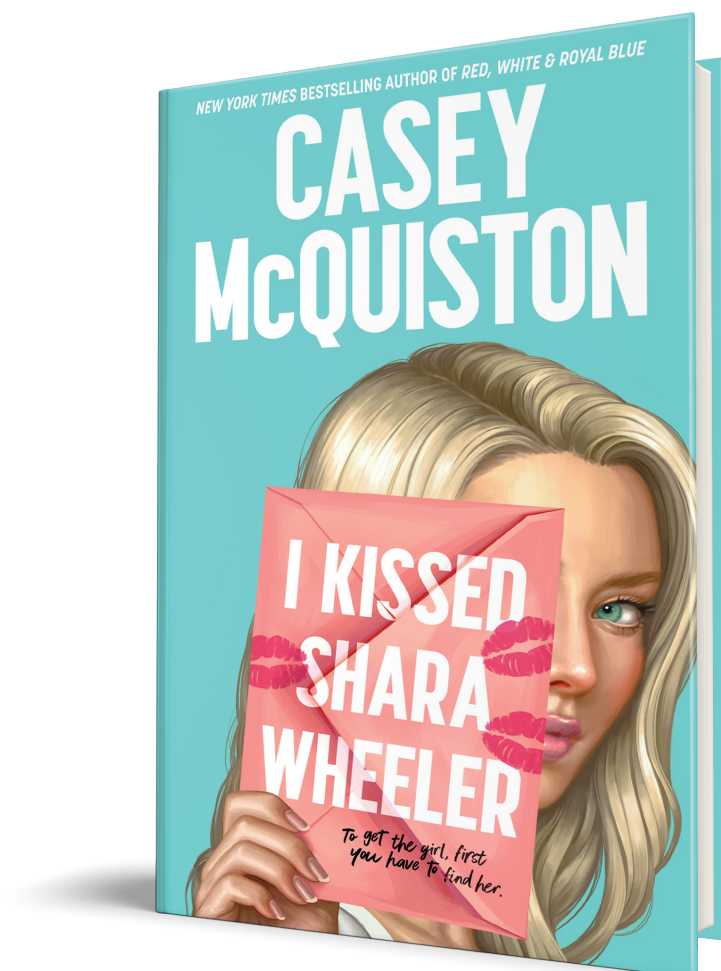
In fiction for young adults, protests and alternative events can often provide a context for conflict, discussion and change. These scenarios can also be a way of centring marginalized people or experiences in a setting in which they may or may not have been previously welcome. For example, prom has been used in young adult novels to foreground a LGBTQ+ character or same-sex couple in a story about a romance or school dance. In *I Kissed Shara Wheeler*, the protest graduation sparked by Chloe's ban unexpectedly brings together more than a third of the senior class, classmates who may have otherwise graduated without realizing they had things in common.

As a prompt for a short story, create a fictional protest or alternative event that will be the main focus of the narrative. Consider where it will take place, who will be there – and who is organizing it – and how it might challenge mainstream events or established ways of thinking. Such an event can take on serious issues, but have fun with it too. After all, there's always room for a bit of glitter!

'Raise your hand if you've been personally victimised by this funny, weird, razor-sharp, intensely compassionate, subversive, sweet, electrifyingly romantic knockout of a book. Casey freaking McQuiston, you've done it again.'

Becky Albertalli, author of *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*

GET THE GIRL? GET A CLUE!



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