

My Life as a Rhombus
by Varian Johnson

About the book:

Boys + Love = Trouble
Right?

Staying on track at school means a boy-free equation for Rhonda Lee, who spends most evenings doing homework and eating Chinese takeout with her dad. While Rhonda needs a scholarship for college, some kids at her private high school, like beautiful Sarah Gamble, seem to coast along on popularity and their parents' money.

When forced to tutor Sarah in trigonometry, Rhonda recognizes all too well the symptoms—queasiness, puking, exhaustion—that Sarah is trying to mask. On a sudden impulse, Rhonda shares her past with Sarah. Exchanging their secrets adds up to more truths than either girl would have dreamed.

About the author:

Growing up, Varian Johnson couldn't decide whether he wanted to be an engineer or a writer, so he decided to do both. Born and raised in Florence, South Carolina, he now lives in Austin, Texas with his wife and two cocker spaniels. In preparation for this novel, Varian memorized Pi to the tenth decimal place, relearned how to triple integrate a fifth-order polynomial, and bought his first home pregnancy kit. Check him out at www.varianjohnson.com for more interesting, but totally useless information.

Author interview:

1. What was the most difficult part of writing in the first person female voice?

It actually wasn't that difficult, although it took me a few drafts to find Rhonda's voice—to find the balance between Rhonda the girl and Rhonda the tutor. My critique group was very helpful in pointing out little things that didn't sound authentic.

2. What would you say to those who will read the summary of this book and shy away from its subject matter?

I would ask the potential reader to take a chance, to be brave, to try reading something that's perhaps a little outside of his or her comfort zone. Rhonda's story is much bigger than the topics of pregnancy and abortion.

3. What the best piece of writing advice you ever received?

The best advice that I was given was that the real work of being a writer takes place during revision. A first draft is just an outline that points you in the general direction that you want to travel as a writer. It isn't until you start revising and editing that you really get down to the nuts and bolts of creating character and plot.

Pre-reading:

What's the most difficult decision you've ever made? How did you come to the conclusion that you did? Have you ever had any regrets about something?

Read chapter one then make a list of five questions you think will be answered in the first ten chapters. How do authors reveal information about their characters?

Discussion guide:

1. Rhonda sees the world through a math looking glass. How does she describe events and people using formulas? What does this tell you about the way she thinks? What would be the angle at which you see the world?
2. What is Rhonda's connection to Sarah and David Gamble? What does she recognize in Sarah that few would likely see? When does their arrangement move from paid service to actual friendship?
3. Describe Rhonda's best friends- Gail and Xavier. How are they different than Sarah's "friends?" What expectations does Gail have for her friends? Who would you rather have as a friend- Gail or Sarah? Why?
4. Why did Rhonda feel the need to create her own list of "elements." Why did she feel the need to develop them in the first place? Do you have a list of rules that you live by too?
5. Who is Helen Cassidy? What role does she play in Rhonda's life? What types of things does Rhonda do while with Helen? Do you have a safe haven like Rhonda does?
6. How does Judge Gamble influence the actions of people around her? Why does she feel more of a connection to Rhonda than her own daughter? If she were a man would she be considered ruthless too?

7. Do you think the loss of Rhonda's mother contributed to her poor decisions in the past or not? How did her dad cope with the loss of his wife? Describe Rhonda's relationship with her dad. How does it change over the course of the novel?
8. What is Sarah's plan for her pregnancy? What decision does she finally make about it? Why do you think she puts off telling the most important people in her life for so long? What would you do?
9. When things get passionate between David and Rhonda she becomes angry. At whom? Why? Is passion inevitable between teens? What is the best course to prevent teen pregnancy? Like Sarah said, can anyone be in this situation?
10. How does David react when he learns who is the father of Sarah's baby? Do you think his anger is justified? Who deserves his wrath?
11. Explain how Rhonda finally comes to terms with what happened between her and Christopher. How does he finally get what he deserves? By controlling her urge to act physically how is Rhonda able to make a more devastating blow?
12. What are the repercussions physically, socially and emotionally of Rhonda's abortion. Does she use it as an excuse to push her father and David away? How does she heal herself? Did the novel make you think about the procedure in any new ways?

Projects:

Language arts:

Write five journal entries or letters through the eyes of five different characters from the story. Choose five different points in the story to write your piece from.

Math:

Like Rhonda, create at least two graphs to represent events or relationships in your own life in a mathematical formula or graphic organizer. On the back write an explanation of how you came to this formula.

Art:

Create a collage album like Rhonda made at Helen's house. Create at least three pages to represent this school year.

This guide was created by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, a reading specialist and children's author. Visit her website to find hundreds of guides to children's and young adult literature.