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The

A novel

Sapphires

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Shirley Ross Loeb



This is a coming-of-age story that will satisfy adolescents and adults. The 12-year-old protagonist, too tall and too fat, is lost in the new world of high school. She's funny, lovable, and reads people accurately. She joins the Y Sapphires, a club of the "not-so-popular" and begins a friendship with a sophisticated but troubled classmate. Can she remain true to herself and still fit in the club she loves?

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ENTERING HIGH SCHOOL

“Everybody will be confused. Just do what everybody else does.”

Advice from Mom. What does she know? It’s been a hundred years since she went to the gymnasia (pronounced jim-nauzzea) in Poland. She doesn’t know what goes on in this country. She acts like I’m always making a big deal out of everything, like it would all be so easy for her. She’d just walk into high school and know what to do, real cool.

I leave home early with all my instructions in an envelope, but when I get into the building that says Dorchester Academy, I don’t know where to go. How am I supposed to know where Math and Science is and that there are different buildings for different subjects? I ask some guy where registration is, and he grumbles “Administration.” I stand there not knowing where to go until he turns around slowly, lets out a breath like I’m an idiot, and points to the middle building. My little school had only one building and it was all on one floor.

My heart is beating fast, and I’m out of breath from running. There’s the bulletin board. Lists and lists and pages and pages. I’m so tall that on my tiptoes I can see over most heads, but some guy keeps spitting on his thumb so he can flip the pages faster. Now he has his thumb plastered over a page while he’s talking to someone so nobody else can look. I’d like to kick him in the shins.

There’s the warning bell. At least everyone’s leaving. Entering Students—that should be me. I’m not here, not on this list. Pre-registered Students—that’s me. Oh no, not here! My grade is going to be so big. They told us at orientation there will be two hundred in my class. My old class had twenty-two students and we were all friends. Well, not friends, but not strangers. I’ll never meet anyone. I’ll never know anyone. I’ll never like anyone. My stomach is starting to hurt. Here I am—Transfer Entering Students—Galileo 12. Where’s Galileo 12? Here’s the map. I can’t read maps. The arrow—you are here. It’s so far away. Why are you standing here? *Run.*

That’s the second bell. I run up the stairs. This is it. Galileo 12. My hands are as cold as the knob on the door. I’m scared to go in. I’m

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going to the bathroom and then home. You can't. There's not a soul in the hallways. It's so dark in here. It's only nine o'clock in the morning, and it looks like ten at night. Maybe it's the green, dark green puke-y walls and the black floor with a swirly pattern that makes me feel tired and a little sick, like someone pulled a dark bedspread over the whole world. I turn the handle slowly and quietly. Good, it's the door to the back of the room. It's a man teacher calling roll.

"Sylvia Gold?"

"Present," my voice squeaks, and everyone turns to look at me.

"Thank you for joining us. I hope we didn't take you away from something more important."

Some of the kids snicker. Those are the ones who are going to be the goody-goodies. Others keep their heads down. "We don't send out engraved invitations. Class starts at nine."

He looks like a rooster with his fluffed-up curly red hair and his chest pushed out. "Sorry, Mr. ..." I look at his name on the board. It's spelled M-c-C-u-t-c-h-e-o-n. Now I'm in trouble. I don't know how to pronounce it. "Mr. Who?"

I take a stab. "Mac...cut...chee...on." More laughter. "Well, Queen of Sheba, if you had gotten here on time you would know it was Cut-Chin, Cut-Chin. Sit down, Sylvia., life is now in session."

Oh, I hate this. I miss my little school where everyone was nice. I want to pee.

WHAT SHOULD I BE?

I walk home with my new books, assignment list, supply list, weekly schedule, school holidays, and other stuff, and I feel stupid.

My good person inside says, “There’s no reason for you to feel stupid. You were valedictorian, and Mrs. Golden told you your IQ scores were as high as Teddy Lewin’s. At first I didn’t believe her and asked her to look again. She smiled and nodded her head yes. I got excited and rushed home to tell Mom.

Mom was in the kitchen, hunched over the stove, moving the wooden spoon slowly and carefully like it was really important.

“Guess what!” I said. “My IQ is as high as Teddy Lewin’s.” She didn’t turn around, just said, “So? Good.” And that was all.

I stuck my nose into the space between the spoon and the pot. “So, Mom, if I’m that smart, maybe I should be something. Teddy Lewin is going to be a doctor and he’s twelve so maybe I should decide what I want to be because I’m twelve. I don’t want to lose all my smart stuff, and if I don’t know what I want to be, maybe I’ll lose it. Teddy has a stethoscope already. I should be thinking of what I want to be.”

“What’s to think?” My mother stays fixed on the stirring. “You’ll be a teacher. It’s a good job and you get the summers off.”

“I don’t want to be a teacher. If I’m as smart as Teddy, maybe I should be something better than a teacher.”

“Listen to her—better than a teacher. A teacher is a respectable profession.”

Why do I have to be a teacher? Some of the boys have chosen glamorous stuff. Like Snoops, he says he wants to be a newspaperman, or a radio newsman. He wants to smell out stories. Snoops is so funny. He has a big nose so it’s easy to think of him as a dog with his nose to the ground smelling out stories.

Mom is still talking to the pot. “Girls can be secretaries and teachers and sometimes nurses. The best thing a girl can do is get married and raise a family. IQ isn’t that important—it’s good to be a smart girl but not too smart.” Stir, stir, stop.

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She turns the flame down, takes her apron off and puts it on the back of the chair.

I grab her arm which surprises her. I let it go. “I don’t know, Mom. I mean, why would I be smart as Teddy Lewin if there was nothing special and important for me to do with it?”

“Special and important yet. So what do you want to be?”

“I don’t know.” That sad feeling I get when I talk to Mom comes back.

“So if you don’t know, I can’t help you. Don’t make me crazy. Set the table for dinner. Make yourself useful at least.”

For her the conversation is over. I play with her apron, keeping my eyes down. “Well, Mom, if I think of all the things that girls can do, maybe I’ll find something I haven’t thought of yet.”

“You’ll think and you’ll think and you’ll make yourself crazy. Be a teacher and put out the butter. I’m going to lie down.”

I’m stuck. I don’t want to be a teacher, and I don’t want to be a doctor. Cutting people open, ugh, ugh, ugh. I’m not beautiful, so I’m not going to Hollywood to be an actress. I’d like to do something where people will say, “You really helped me. Thank you. I can see how smart you are, and you want to help, and because of you, things are going to be OK.” I’d be happy in that kind of work, but I’m not going to be a salesgirl, or a waitress, even though they always say, “Can I help you?”

I love these grahams dunked in milk—the right moment to eat them is that second after they’re soft and before they drown.

I’d like to do something where I’m always learning new things and where I meet a lot of people from different backgrounds. Most people I know are like my family. Everybody does the same things all the time except for those people Mom says we don’t like to talk about.

Sometimes when a name is mentioned, like Mr. Sherman, Mom gives Dad a look. I heard them talking once that he gambled, would take his paycheck on Friday from the fruit stand where he worked and play poker. Sometimes he lost all his money on Friday night. They didn’t even own their house. Everybody on our block owned their house, but the Shermans were renters, which was not a good thing to be. Also, Mrs. Sherman was “not” as my mother said, in a voice heavy

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with some kind of meaning that you had to guess at but couldn't ask about, "very clean" meaning you "couldn't eat off the floors." I never understood why that was such a compliment. Nobody wants to eat off the floors, but when Mom talks about a woman and says, "Her house, oh boy! You could eat off the floors!" that's the best thing you could ever say.

Whatever work I do, I want to talk really straight to the people I help. I don't want to talk about them behind their backs to someone else. I want to look right at them and say, "How can I help you," and then I want them to tell me the truth. They can say, "You can't eat off the floors in my house, did you know that?" I'll nod and say, "I understand, and it's OK. It's not important at all, and please don't feel bad about it."

I still can't think of anything I want to be. Maybe I should just get married, but they say the best ones get picked first. I'm not going to be picked first, if at all, so I'm going to have to do something. I'm scooping up the last of the graham cracker crumbs with my wet finger. Anyway, none of this matters right now. I hope I make some friends at school. The only one I saw from my little school was Abby, and she and I weren't really good friends. We didn't even talk when we passed in the hallway today, just half smiled at each other.

I keep thinking about Mr. McCutcheon. Even though only a few kids laughed when he made fun of me, nobody talked to me after. Nobody said he's a dork, or you better come on time. It was like I was invisible. Maybe it's my fault. I should have talked to more people, said anything, but nobody was friendly. Nobody was nice. Everybody was running back and forth from classroom to classroom. Those bells were ringing all day. I'm going to have to work so hard at school, and I don't even know why I'm doing it. At least when Teddy works, he knows he's studying to be Doctor Teddy. I don't know anything.

Tomorrow I'm not bringing a sandwich. I was embarrassed at the chopped liver. Some of the girls had peanut butter and celery sticks and little apple juices. I'm going to bring some cheese slices and an apple. That's the safest, and I'm going to force myself to talk to people, no matter what.

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“Sylvia, you ate all those graham crackers, and you’re always complaining about being fat. What about your dinner?” Mom is stirring the pot again. Stir, stir, stir.

Things will get better tomorrow, I’m sure—at least I hope so. I am going to stay with this until something pops up and I know for sure what I want to do. Then at least I’ll know where I’m going.



This is a coming-of-age story that will satisfy adolescents and adults. The 12-year-old protagonist, too tall and too fat, is lost in the new world of high school. She's funny, lovable, and reads people accurately. She joins the Y Sapphires, a club of the "not-so-popular" and begins a friendship with a sophisticated but troubled classmate. Can she remain true to herself and still fit in the club she loves?

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