



# BOOK RESUME: THE YEAR MY LIFE WENT DOWN THE TOILET

## BOOK SYNOPSIS

A hilariously honest book about surviving middle school while navigating a chronic illness from the Stonewall Honor-winning author of *Almost Flying*. Twelve-year-old Al Schneider is too scared to talk about the two biggest things in her life:

1. Her stomach hurts all the time and she has no idea why.
2. She's almost definitely 100% sure she likes girls.

**Title:** The Year My Life Went Down the Toilet  
**Author:** Jake Maia Arlow  
**Imprint:** Dial Books  
**Publisher:** Penguin Young Readers  
**On sale date:** August 1, 2023  
**ISBN:** 9780593112960 and 9780593112977  
**Format:** Hardcover and Paperback  
**Age Range\*:** 10-14  
**Grade Range:** Gr 5 Up  
(Recommended by *School Library Journal*)

So she holds it in...until she can't. After nearly having an accident of the lavatorial variety in gym class, Al finds herself getting a colonoscopy and an answer—she has Crohn's disease. But rather than solving all her problems, Al's diagnosis just makes everything worse. It's scary and embarrassing. And worst of all, everyone wants her to *talk* about it—her overprotective mom, her best friend, and most annoyingly her gastroenterologist, who keeps trying to get her to go to a support group for kids with similar chronic illnesses. But, who wants to talk about what you do in the bathroom?

*The Year My Life Went Down the Toilet* is a wildly funny and honest story about finding community, telling the truth even when it's hard, and the many indignities of middle school life.

## REVIEWS AND PRAISE

★“Ashkenazi Jewish seventh grader Al would much rather be “a brain in a jar connected to a supercomputer” than have to manage the complications that come with a chronic illness or navigate her burgeoning feelings for another girl. This proves especially true as, following a visit to a porta potty during gym because she can't control her aching *kishkes* (“guts” in Yiddish), an appointment with a gastroenterologist reveals she has Crohn's disease. At her mother and doctor's urging, Al joins a middle school inflammatory bowel disease support group, which the attendees affectionately dub the Bathroom Club, to meet kids like her. She immediately crushes on Mina, who also has Crohn's. But even as Al gets closer to her new friends, she struggles with adapting to her diagnosis and dealing with feelings of loneliness when her best friend Leo joins the drama club and begins spending less time with her. Via Al's plucky, plain-spoken first-person narration, Arlow (*How to Excavate a Heart*) presents an honest and exceptional story of a tween's experience dealing with rapid and abundant change, while tenderly reflecting upon themes of chronic illness, found family, interdependence, and queerness. Supporting characters are intersectionally diverse.”—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

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“All Al wants is to be a brain without a body. Then she wouldn't have to deal with her freshly diagnosed Crohn's disease or her secret attraction to girls. Not to mention her very best friend and next-door neighbor Leo's suddenly ditching her for the drama club. And the little matter of her own mom's starting to date Leo's mom. When all hope seems lost, into Al's life comes The Bathroom Club, a truly nurturing inflammatory bowel disease support group made up of kids who are also queer. With new friends, a new crush, and Leo drifting further away from her, keeping her symptoms and struggles bottled up is becoming an insurmountable challenge for Al. Arlow dives into Al's physical concerns, painting a picture both of the nitty-gritty of illness and the overwhelming embarrassments and anxieties of her particular experience of middle school. Al feels all things deeply and gets in her own way, traversing the highest highs and lowest lows on her journey to developing pride in all that she is. Her sweet romance with fellow club member Mina and deep friendship with Leo are strengths, and the highlight of Al's story is the camaraderie among a group of chronically ill queer kids providing each other with dignity and nonjudgmental support. The supporting cast is racially diverse; Al, Leo (whose dad is Filipino), Mina, and some other characters are Jewish. Offers humorous honesty and heartfelt relationships.”  
—*Kirkus*

“Stomach pain and the urgent need to run to the restroom are frequent occurrences for twelve-year-old Al, something she finds excruciatingly embarrassing. And that's not the only thing making her anxious: she has realized she's attracted to girls but isn't ready to share that. Her mom's constant worrying about Al's digestive issues is annoying; and Mom's evolving relationship with Al's best friend's mother changes things for everyone involved. After Al learns she has Crohn's disease, some of the stress of her diagnosis is offset by an inflammatory bowel disease support group, one of whose members becomes a romantic interest. Though Al struggles to open up about multiple aspects of her life, the book reassuringly shows that what makes her feel alone is more common than she thinks: she's not the only one who's queer, and she's also not the only "Bathroom Club" member texting from the toilet. Her first-person narration is frank and doesn't lean on euphemisms. Humor is plentiful but not zany; the emphasis on Al's emotions makes it easy to empathize with her. Al and many other characters are Jewish (statistically likely given the IBD subject matter), and the casual, varied Jewish representation is another plus.” —*The Horn Book*

“Seventh grade is not off to a great start for Al. She has been diagnosed with Crohn's disease, her best friend Leo is deserting her to try out for the drama club's annual play, and her mom is getting weirdly friendly with Leo's mom. To make matters worse, when Al starts to attend a support group for other kids with Crohn's (nicknamed "The Bathroom Club"), she ends up developing a crush on a girl named Mina and isn't sure who to talk to about it. As she gets closer with the support group and more invested in spending time with Mina, Al's thoughts remain inwardly focused, and she starts to neglect her family and her best friend. This is a heartfelt story that will have readers empathizing with Al and even learning a bit from her experiences. Arlow's (*Almost Flying*, 2021) heartfelt and humorous latest offers readers a story of friendship, self-discovery, gender, sexuality, complicated family dynamics, and, you guessed it, poop.” —*Booklist*

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“Seventh grade is off to a rough start for Al: She’s just been diagnosed with Crohn’s disease. This explains the stomach pain she’s been having, but it doesn’t make it any less embarrassing to leave class every time she needs to use the bathroom—or worse, has an accident at school. Though she’s initially reluctant to attend, Al (white and Jewish) finds unexpected friendships and solidarity in a support group for kids with Crohn’s or ulcerative colitis; to her surprise, the kids there talk openly about, and even find humor in, their symptoms. These new friendships are especially welcome since Al’s best friend, Leo (Filipino American, Jewish), hardly has time for her now that he’s been cast in the school play. And at home, Al’s relationship with her single mom—who constantly questions Al’s food choices and recently started dating a woman—is strained. Al, too, has started dating a girl from her support group, but now she feels she can’t come out. What if everyone thinks she’s just copying her mom? While it does not shy away from describing the physical and emotional toll of chronic illness, this well-balanced novel shows that chronically ill children can thrive when provided with the right support system and a space to talk about their experiences without shame.”  
—Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC)

“Stonewall Honoree Arlow (*Almost Flying*) takes readers on a fun, messy ride with their latest. This heartfelt exploration of queerness and chronic disease features seventh grader Al (she/her, at least for now), recently diagnosed with Crohn’s, who can barely make it through the day without dying of embarrassment. To complicate matters, her best friend Leo has decided to dedicate all his time to theater just as Al and Leo’s moms start dating each other! Luckily, Al finds friendship in a middle school IBD support group (which doubles as an LGBTQIA+ support group) where she meets Mina, who is “cute and knows everything about giant tube worms and makes [their] armpits sweat and who [they] think [they] might have a crush on.” Through it all, Al must puzzle out how to embrace all parts of herself—even the uncomfortable bits—and of people they love. Arlow crafts a rapidly paced tween drama featuring a layered cast. Al and her mother are Jewish; Leo’s mother is Jewish and his father is Latinx. The majority of named characters are queer. Al’s inner dialogue is particularly evocative and readers’ secondhand embarrassment is powerful. Through a hurricane of family, friendships, crushes, and chronic illness, Al shines. VERDICT Funny, emotional, and full of poop; a first purchase!” —*School Library Journal*

#### **AWARDS AND ACCOLADES**

- An ALA Rainbow Book
- A NYPL Best Book for Kids
- A NPR Best Book of the Year
- A NYT Kids Year of Books selection
- A CCBC Choices Selection
- Capitol Choices, Ages 10-14 (Washington D.C.)
- Massachusetts Children’s Book Award, Grades 4-6 (Massachusetts)
- MISelf in Books, Middle School (Michigan)
- Garden State Children’s Book Awards— Fiction (New Jersey)

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## **MEDIA AND RESOURCES**

- [King 5 Seattle Author Interview](#)
- [E Train Talks Books Author Interview](#)
- [Read Across America Discussion Questions](#)

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