

LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR

Pirkko Saisio, translated from Finnish by Mia Spangenberg

1. In *Lowest Common Denominator's* opening scene, eight-year-old Pirkko distinguishes between “she” and “I” by writing sentences in her head. What tone does this act of self-definition set for the book?
2. Young Pirkko has a deep desire to be seen by those she loves. In her view, what prevents this recognition, and what strategies does she develop to be seen, both by herself and others?
3. How does *Lowest Common Denominator* represent the experience of learning about gender as a child? Who and what does Pirkko learn about gender from, what appeals to her, and what conclusions does she reach on her own?
4. What role does humor play in the book?
5. A large portion of *Lowest Common Denominator* portrays the narrator’s summers with her grandparents. What do her memories highlight from this time, and what significance does it have for her?
6. How does the narrator’s experience of her father’s aging impact the book’s structure and its themes?
7. Many things happen that young Pirkko is “too little to understand,” but *Lowest Common Denominator* also includes the perspective of older adult Pirkko (pg. 100). What literary strategies does the book use to distinguish and interweave these perspectives?
8. How does Pirkko’s coming of age map onto changes in her own family and in the political and social environment in Finland?
9. *Lowest Common Denominator* is part of a long history of coming-of-age books including *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson, *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown, and *The Summer Book* by Tove Jansson. What universal experiences does the book represent? What experiences are unique to Pirkko’s 1950s Finnish context, or to her in particular?



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