



Four keys.
Two friends.
One Answer.

Jeremy Fink
and the Meaning of Life

wendy mass

Chapter 1: The Box

June 22

“Did you ever notice how the colors seem brighter the first day of summer vacation?” I ask Lizzy. “The birds sing louder? The air is alive with possibility?”

“Huh?” Lizzy mutters, fingering through the comic books on the wall of my Uncle Arthur’s store, Fink’s Comics and Magic. “Yeah, sure. Brighter, louder, alive.”

It would bother some people if their best friend only half-listened to them, but I figure talking to Lizzy is one step better than talking to myself. At least this way people on the street don’t stare at me.

Over the next two months I plan on learning a new magic trick or two, borrowing the eighth grade textbooks from the library to get a jump on my assignments (but not telling Lizzy, who would make fun of me), and sleeping as late as I want. This is going to be a summer of leisure, and smack in the middle, the state fair and my long-awaited thirteenth birthday. Usually I love going to the fair, but this year I actually have to enter one of the competitions, and I’m dreading it. At least my birthday comes the same week. I am so tired of being considered a “kid” and am eager to officially become a teenager. I will finally learn the secret code of Teendom.

I hope there's a handshake. I've always wanted to belong to a club with a secret handshake.

"Run!" Lizzy whispers sharply in my ear. Lizzy saying *run* in my ear can mean only one thing — she has stolen something. She is lucky my uncle and cousin Mitch are in the back room and didn't see her. They do not look kindly upon shoplifters.

By the time I manage to thrust my comic back on the shelf, she is halfway out the door. In her rush, she's knocked over my backpack, which I had propped up carefully on the floor between us. All the stuff flies out the unzipped top for the other shoppers to see. I grab the bag and quickly toss back in my dog-eared copy of *Time Travel for Dummies*, a half-eaten peanut butter sandwich, a pack of Starburst, two bite-sized Peppermint Patties, assorted magic tricks that I've collected over the years, the bottle of water that I always have on me because one can never be too hydrated, the astronaut pen that allows me to write in all conditions (including underwater and while lying on my back), and finally my wallet, which always has at least eight dollars in it because my dad once told me that if a man has eight dollars on him, he can always get home. Then I take back out one of the Peppermint Patties, quickly unwrap it, and stick in my mouth. I blame my dad for my sweet tooth. His motto was *Life is short; eat dessert first*. How can I argue with that?

Slinging the backpack over my shoulder, I slip out the door and look up and down the street for Lizzy. Her red hair makes her easy to spot. She's leaning against the win-

dow of Larry's Locks and Clocks, admiring her newest treasure — an orange flyer advertising the debut of a *Betty and Veronica* double issue. Only moments ago it had been taped up to the wall in the store.

"Can't you use your talents for good instead of evil?" I ask, swallowing the last of my Peppermint Pattie.

She doesn't answer, just folds the paper haphazardly and tucks it in her back pocket.

"Why, Lizzy?" I ask as we start walking down the block toward home. "Why?"

"Why what?" she asks, popping a piece of grape Bazooka in her mouth. She offers me one, but I shake my head. Grape and peppermint just don't mix.

"Why steal something that has no monetary value?"

"Would you rather I'd stolen something that *does* have monetary value?"

"Of course not."

"Well stop complaining then," she says. "You know I can't explain the reasons for the things I take. I don't choose them, they choose me."

"What about all the customers who won't learn about the new *Betty and Veronica* because of you?"

She shrugs. "Nobody reads Archie comics anymore."

It's true that the Archie comics are always the last ones left at the end of the month. Archie was my dad's favorite when he was a boy, so he always made sure to stock them. Uncle Arthur doesn't know enough about comics to tell the difference between *Mutant X-Men from Outer Space* and *Richie Rich*, so he keeps ordering all of them.

In one month Jeremy Fink will turn thirteen. But does he have what it takes to be a teenager?

He collects mutant candy, he won't venture more than four blocks from his apartment if he can help it, and he definitely doesn't like surprises. On the other hand, his best friend, Lizzy, isn't afraid of anything, even if that might get her into trouble now and then.

Jeremy's summer takes an unexpected turn when a mysterious wooden box arrives in the mail. According to the writing on the box, it holds the meaning of life! Jeremy is supposed to open it on his thirteenth birthday. The problem is, the keys are missing, and the box is made so that only the keys will open it without destroying what's inside. Will Jeremy and Lizzy be able to find the keys and open the box?

Lively characters, surprising twists, and thought-provoking ideas make Wendy Mass's latest novel an unforgettable read.

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— *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Mass fashions an adventure in which both journey and destination are worth the trip."

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