

a Teacher's Guide

Author Interview • Discussion Guide • Project Ideas

▼ About the Book

When Rachel's mom runs away from home she knows just who to blame—her dad, because the possibility that she could somehow have been the cause is too painful to think about. A remarkable look at how just two people can become a family and how one year can change everything a girl has ever known.

▼ About the Author

Susan Taylor Brown is the author of several books for children. She always dreamed of being a writer though it took her many years to get the courage to actually sit down and do it. Her fans are certainly glad she finally did. **You can read more about Susan on her website at www.susantaylorbrown.com or her blog susanwrites.livejournal.com**

▼ Author Interview



1. How did you decide to tell Rachel's story in verse?

The short answer is that it was the right format for Rachel's story. The long answer is that it took several years and many tries to figure that out. I started Rachel's story as a straight prose novel but it went nowhere. I knew what the story was about but I couldn't get to the level of caring that I knew was needed for the main character. And if I didn't care about her there was no way that the reader would. Part of the problem was, I'm sure, that I wasn't going deep enough to the painful parts of me that I needed to access in order to bring the level of pain to Rachel. The other part was that no matter what I tried, I couldn't find her voice. At that time in my life I was working a lot of hours which meant I didn't have a lot of time to write. A friend of mine suggested that I use my pockets of writing time to play with poetry. It made sense. My time was short. Poems were short. She was hoping it would help me understand the characters and the plot better. What happened instead was that it gave birth to the voice and showed me the perfect format for the book.

2. *What's the best part of being a children's author? What's the most difficult?*

For me the best part about being a children's author is the best part about being a writer; I get paid to play with words which is my most favorite thing in the world to do. Writing for children means being able to write for my own inner child (who seems to be stuck at about 10 years old). I think everything I write in one way or another is to try and help the child I used to be find her way in the world.

The most difficult part? Getting a publisher's attention. It's a major accomplishment to even finish writing a book from start to finish but that's the only thing I have any control over. Getting a publisher to buy a book is just plain tough and depends on many things that are way out of my control.

3. *What books have most inspired you as a writer?*

This is always a difficult question for me and I wish I was one of those people who could cite a book or books that marked a turning point in me or my writing. The fact is that as long as I can remember I have been inspired by books and it all depends on what it is I am working on at the time. In the realm of verse novels I have to say that *Stop Pretending* by Sonya Sones and *Loose Threads* by Lorie Ann Grover were two books that had tremendous impact on me. I still remember the day that Emma Dryden put an ARC (advance reading copy) of *Loose Threads* in my hand and told me how powerful she felt it was. Because of the subject matter (breast cancer) it took me a few months to get up the nerve to read the book and when I finished it, I went right back to the beginning and read it again.

4. *What can your fans look forward to next?*

I'm in the process of working on several books right now. One is another middle-grade verse novel that is loosely based on my year as the writer-in-residence with at-risk kids. Another is a young adult coming-of-age novel in straight prose set in the aviation world.

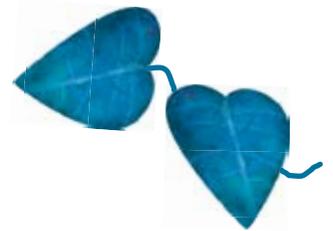
Pre-Reading

Questions to ask before assigning the reading

Can parents run away from home?

How would your life change if one of your parents just left one day?

What would be the most difficult part?



Discussion Guide

1. Rachel says, "I thought you loved us. Loved me. / I'll be good. I promise." (p. 13) To whom is she talking? Why is she promising to be good? What is she hoping for?

2. Describe Rachel's relationship with her father at the beginning of the book. For example, what is his "disappearing face"? How are things awkward between them?

3. Who does Rachel blame for her mother leaving? Why? Who do you think deserves the blame? Should a child ever feel responsible for a parent's leaving? Why or why not?
4. How does Grandma try to help? Does it work? What does Rachel learn by listening to her grandmother? Do you think it is a good idea that Rachel and her dad are on their own, or should they let Grandma stay? Why?
5. Discuss the friendship between Rachel and Sara. How are the two girls alike? How are they different? Describe the differences in their families. Would you rather live with Rachel or Sara? Why?
6. How do Rachel, her dad, and even her mother's dog, Madison, react to her mother leaving? What types of things are most difficult at first? How do they get easier over time? What do you think would be the worst part?
7. How do Rachel and her dad finally start connecting with each other? What types of things do they begin to do together? What must each of them learn along the way?



How can you be a good friend?

8. Why does Rachel say, "Sometimes / Sara says / too much." (p. 85) Is Sara being a good friend overall or not? What do you think Sara should say to Rachel? How can you be a good friend to someone who is going through a difficult time in their family?
9. Rachel describes her mom like this, "She built a fence around herself / that only let me close enough / to see what I couldn't have." (p. 92) What does she mean by this? How was Rachel's mom not really there even before she left?
10. Why is the photo album left in the garage an important artifact for Rachel's life? What does Rachel learn because of it? Do you think that her mother's earlier troubles make it harder for Rachel to understand or easier? Why?
11. What does Rachel learn about why her mother calls each week to talk? How does it make her feel? How would it make you feel? Would you want to continue taking her calls? Why or why not?
12. How have Rachel and her dad forged a relationship after a year? Do you think they are actually better off without her mom? Why? What do you think Rachel will be like in five years? In ten? Do you think she'll ever try to see her mom again?

Projects

Language Arts

Write a list poem like “Reasons Mom Left” (p. 61) You might consider the following topics (or create one of your own): What I Believe, What I Know, What I Dream, Reasons I’m Here, etc.

or

Which poem is your favorite in the novel? Why? Inspired by this example, write your own narrative poem about another girl’s story. Choose one scene from your new character’s life and reveal it through a free-verse poem.

Art

Using magazine pictures and other print advertisements create a piece of art that represents the inside of Rachel’s mind. What images swirl around and represent how she feels? What colors will you use? In a brief journal, explain your piece.

or

Using the book as inspiration, create your own sculpture using any materials you like. It can be abstract or realistic, but you must explain your piece in a brief artist’s statement.

Drama

Write a scene between Rachel and her mom that takes place two years after the close of the novel.

Music

Choose one scene in the novel and try to find a piece of music (with or without lyrics) that you think would work best for the movie adaptation. In a journal, explain how the mood of the music matches the storyline.

or

Create an entire movie sound track for the book. Choose at least eight songs that you think would work best. Explain your choices in a brief journal.

This guide was created by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, a reading specialist and children’s author. Visit her website to find hundreds of teacher’s guides! www.tracievaughnzimmer.com

