

## Novel Resource #2

*Runaway*

By Wendelin Van Draanen

Published 2006

Random House



Wendeline Van Draanen's website:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/kids/vandraanen/>

### **Other books by Van Draanen:**

*Swear to Howdy*

*Flipped*-Winner of California Young Reader Medal

*Shredderman*

*The Sammy Keys Mysteries* (twelve in the series)

### **Information about Wendeline Van Draanen:**

She is a former computer science teacher and published her first book in 1997. She lives in California, the main setting of the book.

### **Van Draanen's Connection to the book:**

Wendeline Van Draanen first introduced the character of Holly in her book *Sammy Keyes and the Sisters of Mercy*. When a friend commented he would like to know more about this character, Van Draanen decided to write a book with the main character of Holly. To research the idea of life on the streets, Van Draanen stayed in homeless shelters and even in the cargo hold of a Greyhound bus.

### **Annotation:**

Van Draanen, Wendeline. *Runaway*. New York: Random House, 2006.

Wendeline Van Draanen, known for her *Sammy Keys* mysteries, takes a serious look at homeless youth in America in *Runaway*. Van Draanen introduces us to Holly, a 12-year-old girl who escapes abusive foster parents. Rather than write in third person, the entire novel is journal entries from Holly's perspective. We read about the risks Holly takes as she flees and her constant struggle for food, companionship, and safety. Van Draanen does a powerful job introducing us to an unfamiliar and dark world of homeless youth,

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but manages to keep things from becoming too depressing thanks to the resilient and darkly funny character of Holly, a girl who deserves a home.

**Genres:**

Adventure/Survival Fiction  
Contemporary Fiction  
Realistic Fiction

**Point of View:**

First person. Written in a diary/journal format

**Themes:**

Runaways, homeless teenagers, orphans, survival

Though others may look at Holly as a runaway or homeless, she prefers to see herself as a gypsy: one who is free and hasn't succumbed to the horror of being homeless. The fact that the title is *Runaway* rather than *Gypsy* might be a final acknowledgement by Holly that while on the run, her world was not glamorous. Try as she might, she was not a gypsy, free to do anything she wanted, but a frightened girl trying to make it through each night.

**Conflict:**

Holly escapes an abusive foster home only to become a homeless twelve-year-old all alone with little money and no one to turn to for help. In the beginning of the book, her conflict is external, with her foster parents. Once Holly runs away, she has both internal and external conflict. She must figure out how to survive on the streets with little money and no friends or family. She also must deal with things outside her control, such as the intense heat and unpredictable rain and winds.

**Conflict Resolution:**

After much struggle and months on the run, Holly finds a new home with two women in California who enroll her in school and promise she can stay with them no matter what. Much of Holly's internal conflict subsides when she finds a new home with Vera and Meg. Holly realizes she finally has friends and people who can help her with her problems and that she doesn't have to try to "fix" everything on her own.

**Characters:**

Holly-a twelve-year-old runaway with no parents. She has bad memories of living with her mother, a woman addicted to drugs who hid her addiction from her daughter. Holly and her mom spent time living in a van.

Ms. Leone-Holly's teacher, who made an assignment for Holly to write in a journal. At first Holly resents Ms. Leone's assignment and writes what she thinks Ms. Leone wants, rather than the actual truth. Once Holly runs away, the journal is the one constant item in Holly's life and she depends on it as a way to figure things out.

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Mr. and Mrs. Bender-foster parents of Holly who abuse her physically and mentally and make her sleep in the laundry room

Venus-a homeless teen who is jealous of Holly and envious of her journal

Valerie and Walt-farmers who give Holly a place to sleep for a night, but call child protective services on her

Sammy-a fellow runaway who befriends Holly and helps her find a home

Vera and Meg-A mother and daughter who end up taking Holly in permanently. Meg shares her own journal with Holly. After reading Meg's journal, Holly realizes Meg and Vera have also had difficult lives. Holly eventually trusts the women enough to let them read her journal.

**Setting:**

The present, Arizona and California, including Los Angeles and Beverly Hills

**Interest Level and Reading Level :**

Interest Level: Grades 6-12

Reading Level 4.7 Lexile Score 740 (<http://www.perma-bound.com>)

**Booktalk:**

“My name is Holly. My foster parents act all nice and sweet when people come to check on me. But do you want to hear the truth? The truth is I sleep in the laundry room, on the floor. I have a mat, a blanket, and a bucket to pee in. And if that isn't enough, Mr. Bender, my foster father, keeps trying to touch me. It creeps me out. What am I supposed to do? No one will believe me if I complain. Who would I even tell? I don't have any friends. I'm failing school. My parents are dead. I am alone. The only thing I can do is to run away. I have no money and no car but I have to escape—somehow.”  
In *Runaway*, read Holly's journal as she runs away from her foster parents and becomes a homeless youth.

**Discussion Questions:**

The entire book is written in a diary/journal format. Some entries are one sentence long, while other entries are two pages. Some days have multiple entries and some dates are missing. I divided up the book into three parts. The three parts are divided by the following events:

- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| p. 1-82    | 1. Holly's life and decision to run away                            |
| p. 84-144  | 2. Holly trying to survive in California                            |
| p. 145-245 | 3. Holly's attempts to build her own home and her eventual “rescue” |

**Pages 1-82**

Pre-Reading

1. Look at the title and picture of this book. What predictions can you make about the subject matter and the mood/tone of the book?

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### During Reading

1. Where is Holly's "real" room? What would you do if this was your room?
2. What options does Holly have? List as many as you can think of.
3. Throughout the book, Holly will have a connection to dogs. What do dogs represent for her? List at least two things.
4. Holly doesn't just keep her hair long for appearance's sake. Why is it long?
5. List the things Holly takes with her when she runs away from the Bender's house (p. 17). Is there anything she didn't take that she should have?
6. Holly thinks of herself as a gypsy, not a homeless person (p. 22-23). In your opinion, is there a difference? Explain. Why does Holly insist she is a gypsy? What does being a gypsy mean to her?
7. Explain Louise K. Palmer: why did Holly choose her as her "mother" and what history did Holly make up about her?
8. Reread "The Ballad of Lady Louise" on p. 54-55. What are your impressions of the ballad? What would Louise Palmer think about it?
9. When Holly hides in the school, she has a phone, but is sad "because of all the millions of people there are in this world, [she] has no one to call" (62). Who would you call if you had run away and wanted to talk to someone? Why that person?
10. Where on the bus does Holly hide out? (p. 67) Would you ever think of doing this? What are some of the risks?
11. Holly is pretty graphic describing her personal hygiene and using the bathroom in a Gatorade bottle (p. 70). Do these details help make Holly's journey seem believable?
12. Holly tells Ms. Leone how she wishes her teacher would have introduced her on p. 74. Why do you think Ms. Leone didn't say anything like that, instead explaining some of Holly's hardships?
13. Think about new students that have enrolled in your classes during the school year. Do the teachers introduce the students? Do the introductions make a difference? If the students aren't introduced, are they still welcomed by their classmates?
14. Holly admits to Ms. Leone that she was listening to the lesson on the Underground Railroad, even though she pretended she wasn't (p. 76). Why do students sometimes stay quiet during class, refusing to answer questions, or contribute to discussions? Why do you think Holly stayed silent in school?
15. Even though Holly reaches the Los Angeles River, it is cement. Under a cement overpass she met a Spanish family who offered her hash and tortillas (p. 81). What did these people represent, or symbolize, for Holly?

### Post Reading

16. Now that Holly is in Los Angeles, what do you think will happen to her? Will people still continue to look for her? Where will she live?
17. Are there any choices that Holly made that you strongly agree or disagree with? Explain.

### Pages 84-144

#### Pre-Reading

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1. Have you ever run away from home before or thought about it? Why did you have these feelings?
2. Do you think teenage runaways are a serious problem? Why or why not?

#### During Reading

3. Give four reasons why libraries are good places for Holly.
4. Holly writes about “the Look” she gets from people. What look is she referring to? Do you ever get this look from adults? When? Why?
5. Reread Holly’s story about the Blue Lady (p. 91-93). She writes, “I also loved the power of the Blue Lady. The strength she gave us on the inside. Like we could hold on because she and her army of angels were on a mission to protect us from evil” (93). What does the Blue Lady symbolize for Holly? Does she have anyone in her life who could be a “substitute” Blue Lady?
6. Holly pretends to be French when the police question her (p. 95). How is this, in a way, a tribute to Louise Palmer?
7. Holly is in survival mode, eating out of trash cans and sleeping in back yards. However, she is also in Beverly Hills, one of the wealthiest places in California. Do you think it would be harder to be homeless in Beverly Hills compared to a more “normal” place? Why or why not?
8. Explain how Holly connects poodles to some of the people in California. (pages 111-112)
9. Why does Holly make a point of smiling when going into stores and shops? (p. 110-111) Does her reasoning make sense to you? Explain.
10. Holly openly admits she regularly steals things. Why then did she have such a difficult time stealing the bathing suit?
11. Holly is going through incredibly challenging times and yet she also finds beauty in her surroundings and writes, “Watching the sun set over the ocean is *breathtaking*” (118). Is it possible to notice and appreciate beauty when you are in a state of despair? Explain.
12. Holly thinks she has a friend in Venus, but why is Venus not a sea gypsy?
13. Venus wants to read Holly’s journal, but Holly is very possessive of her writing. What does that tell us about the role of the journal in Holly’s life? Think back to the beginning of the book when Holly deeply resented writing in the journal. How would you describe Holly’s current feelings about her journal?
14. Give two reasons why Venus would make fun of Holly.
15. How did the parent/daughter relationship between Holly and her mom change forever after the van accident?

#### Post Reading

16. Holly met Venus, who she thought was a friend. Venus thought Holly acted like a snob. Does Holly act better than Venus? Explain

### **Pages 145-245**

#### Pre-Reading

1. Counselors tried repeatedly to get Holly to talk about her mom but she refused. Why was she able to write about her mom in her journal, but not speak at her out loud?

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2. Reread Holly's plan on page 146. Is it realistic? She believes, "If I really try, I can make it work" (147). Is that true?
3. On page 150 Holly makes a list of all the things she is mad about. If you were Holly, what three things would you add to her list? Why those three things?
4. Why does Holly continually think about school and even about creating her own school? (p. 152) What does school symbolize for Holly?
5. Holly hears people talking about a sweep of the homeless. Do homeless sweeps happen in your town? In your state? How do you know?
6. What one promise did Holly make to her mother regarding hitch-hikers? Was this a good promise to make?
7. On pages 162-3, Holly remembers her mother trying to find a doctor. They ended up "in a really scary part of town, with barbed wire and graffiti everywhere" (162). What conclusion or inference can we make about where her mother was really going?
8. Valerie and Walt make a call to someone about Holly. Why did they report her? Give one reason why it was a good decision and one reason why it was a bad decision.
9. Holly has a great day when she finds seventeen dollars on the ground. She believes it's her lucky day. Have you ever found money? How much? What could Holly do with \$17? What would you do if you were her?
10. Holly faces a big dilemma when she realizes the things she found do belong to someone. What should she do: keep the things or give them back to Hog? Do you think there will be any repercussions for Holly taking the items in the first place?
11. Reread the descriptions of the school on pages 197-198. Does your school fit this description? How/how not?
12. Holly remembers her mom's Thanksgiving tradition of KFC chicken on p. 213-4. Do you think homeless adults, teens, and families are able to continue and/or start traditions? Why might traditions be difficult to keep?
13. Explain Holly's joy in creating and building her own home (204). Have you ever felt that much pride and joy about something you created?
14. Why do you think Meg shared her journal with Holly when her entries are quite different than Holly's?
15. Notice that Vera and Meg had a dog, Lucy. Do you think Holly would have been happy with the two women if they didn't have a dog?

#### Post Reading

16. Read the Author's Note at the end, specifically the last two paragraphs. This book is dedicated to the teachers "who care enough to make a difference even if they're never thanked" (250). Do you have any teachers that have impacted you that you never thanked? (Think back to preschool teachers, piano teachers, coaches, etc.)
17. What did this teacher do that helped you? Why didn't you thank the teacher?
18. Do you think this book was realistic? Can you imagine a twelve-year-old doing these things?
19. Why do you think the author decided to make Holly twelve? What obstacles would have occurred if Holly was 15 or 16? How would the books' events needed to change?

20. Throughout Holly’s journey, she is concerned about her teeth and even buys a toothbrush and toothpaste. What items would you not be able to live without? Why?

**Language (Spelling/Vocabulary)**

Definitions—found at <http://www.dictionary.com> and rewritten in more “accessible” language

Vocabulary Word	Definitions	Page Found
catapult	v- to move quickly or suddenly (Megan Fox’s performance in <i>Transformers</i> <u>catapulted</u> her to sudden fame.)	41
panhandle	v- another word for “beg”	43
narc (also can be spelled nark)	n-someone who works for the police or government tracking down illegal drugs and works undercover	44
curtsy	N or v- another word for “bow.” In a curtsy, a person puts their right leg behind them and then bends over. Curtsies are usually done by females and often at the end of ballets, theater performances, etc.	52
loath	Adj- Unwilling to do something	53
Swap	v- to exchange something for something else. Another word for “trade.”	68
eureka	Interjection- Said in excitement when something has been discovered or figured out. (“ <u>Eureka!</u> ” the scientist screamed. “I just figured out the hypothesis is correct after all!”)	75
Vicious	Adj- something that is horrible, awful, wrong	77
benevolent	Adj-wanting to help others and do good things	84
scone	n-similar to a muffin. A small biscuit-like bread, often with fruit inside. A common snack in Great Britain.	98
gruff	Adj-rough, not saying anything extra, not kind or concerned	121
uppity	Adj-acting better than everyone else, snobby	131
valiant	Adj-brave, honorable. (The soldier was honored for her <u>valiant</u> behavior in the battle.)	139
pillage	v-to steal everything. Another word for “loot.”	154
flophouse	n-a cheap place to stay, often a run-down motel	165
rancid	Adj-smelling and/or tasting horrible, stale, or old	170
tilling	v-the plowing of land to get ready for planting	195
somber	Adj-very sad, gloomy, depressing	199

**Indiana Academic Standards**

**Language Arts:**

6.1.5, 6.2.7, 6.3.2, 6.3.3, 6.3.5, 6.3.6

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7.1.3, 7.2.4, 7.3.3, 7.3.4  
8.1.3, 8.2.6, 8.3.2, 8.3.4, 8.3.5

### **Family and Consumer Science:**

M-FLR-1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1

### **Anticipation Statements-Runaway**

1. Homeless people on the street should be ignored.
2. People who are homeless don't want a permanent place to live.
3. It's possible for addicts to stop using drugs and alcohol if they try hard enough.
4. Stealing is never right, no matter what the circumstances.
5. The foster care system in the United States does a fairly good job, considering how many children they oversee.
6. You can tell a lot about a person by their appearance.
7. It's good to keep a journal or diary.
8. You should always respect your elders.

### **Read-Aloud Pages/Passages**

1. Page 12-16 (Sunday, May 23<sup>rd</sup> entry)—  
Holly explains the abuse she suffered from Mr. Bender.
2. Page 76—all of page—  
Holly explains her connection to Harriet Tubman and the importance of freedom
3. Page 118-119 (7:45 pm entry)—  
Holly describes watching her first sunset and the four poems she writes about the event

### **Read-Alikes**

- Keesha's House* by Helen Frost
  - Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen
  - The Rules of Survival* by Nancy Werlin
  - The Pinballs* by Betsy Byars
  - Homecoming* by Cynthia Voigt
  - Leaving Home: Stories* by Hazel Rochman and Darlene Z. McCampbell
- Books with more adult material and themes. Suggested for mature readers only (or interested parents/guardians):**
- Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich
  - A Child Called It* by Dave Pelzer
- Suggested books by Wendelin Van Draanen:**
- Flipped*
  - Sammy Keys and the Sisters of Mercy*—Holly is a character in this book too.

### **Across the Curriculum Connections**

1. Throughout *Runaway*, Holly creates poems, ballads, and limericks. Pick one of Holly's writings and create a picture to illustrate the writing. You could draw,

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paint, watercolor, sculpt, photograph, etc. Include the lyrics of the poem and page explaining the connection between your artwork and Holly's poem.

**Fine Arts Standards Covered:**

6.9.2, 6.10.1, 6.10.2, 6.10.3

7.8.1, 7.9.2, 7.10.1, 7.10.2, 7.10.3

8.8.1, 8.9.2, 8.10.1, 8.10.2, 8.10.3

Resources to use: *Runaway* book, any notes taken, any questions answered while reading

Supplies Needed: Depends on the type of artwork, but some items include unlined paper, poster board, paints, paintbrushes, watercolor paint, camera, film, clay, markers, colored pencils, etc.

2. When Holly finds \$17, it's her lucky day. What can \$17 buy?

-Make a list of ten items you absolutely cannot live without.

-Make a list of ten favorite foods,

-ten favorite activities (movies, books, concerts, etc.),

-how you earn money (job, allowance, etc.).

If you were going to run away, what would you take with you?

Make a list of 10-20 things you would take. Remember, you would want to blend in and not stand out as a runaway.

**Family and Consumer Science (FACS) Standards Covered:**

M-FLR 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1

Resources to use: knowledge from *Runaway* book and any websites visited already

Supplies Needed: Paper for lists

**Resources**

Resources are suggested materials that students could access if they have a particular interest in the book and its topics. Websites can be visited if students have free time in the library or computer labs. Due to limited class time, movies are not meant to be shown in the classroom; rather they are suggestions for students and parents/guardians to watch at home. Film ratings are included (when possible). Explanations for the film ratings can be found at <http://www.filmratings.org>

Holes. Dir. Andrew Davis. Perf. Sigourney Weaver, Jon Voight. Walt Disney Pictures, 2003. (Rated PG)

*A movie based on the book of the same name that shows the difficulties of "troubled" youth and what they can accomplish through hard work and faith.*

National Coalition for the Homeless. 23 June 2008

<<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/index.html>>.

*A website run by the National Coalition for the Homeless. There are links that provide services, statistics, publications, press, suggestions for helping family members, places to volunteer, etc.*

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National Runaway Hotline. 11 June 2008 <<http://www.1800runaway.org/>>.

*A website that provides statistics and facts about runaway youth. Website also has links to resources and places to go for help.*

Pay It Forward. Dir. Mimi Leder. Perf. Kevin Spacey, Helen Hunt. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2000. (Rated PG-13)

*A movie that shows the power of one young person to make a difference in the world. Based on a book of the same title.*

The Pursuit of Happyness. Dir. Gabriele Muccino. Perf. Will Smith, Jaden Smith. Columbia Pictures, 2006. (Rated PG-13)

*Although homeless, we see a man determined to make a successful life for himself and his young son. The movie is based on a true story.*

"Running Away and Shelters." Teenline Online. 2008. 23 June 2008 <<http://teenlineonline.org/content/view/80/205/>>.

*A website that lists information about shelters and resources available for teenagers who have run away, are homeless, or simply need someone to talk to.*

A Season for Miracles. Dir. Michael Pressman. Perf. David Conrad, Carla Gugino. DVD. Hallmark Hall of Fame, 1999. (Not rated—made for television)

*An aunt takes her niece and nephew when she learns they will be separated. In a new town they realize the true definition of family.*

Where the Heart Is. Dir. Matt Williams. Perf. Natalie Portman, Ashley Judd. DVD. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2000. (Rated PG-13)

*An abandoned teenage single mother finds friends and a surrogate family as she makes a life for herself and her baby. Based on a book of the same name.*

### **Book Activities:**

1. This could be done individually, as a bell ringer assignment, in class, or as homework.

Imagine Holly wrote Ms. Leone when she first ran away. What might Holly have written? What would Ms. Leone write back (if she had an address to write)? Create a letter from Holly and a response from Ms. Leone.

At the end of the book Holly plans to share her journal to Ms. Leone. Write the letter Holly would send with her journal when she mailed it to Ms. Leone. Would Holly's attitude have changed from her first letter to Ms. Leone? How? Why?

### **Language Arts Standards covered:**

6.4.8, 6.4.9, 6.5.4, 6.5.6, 6.5.7, 6.6.4, 6.6.5  
7.4.9, 7.5.2, 7.5.6, 7.5.7, 7.6.5, 7.6.8, 7.6.9

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8.5.6, 8.5.7, 8.6.5, 8.6.6, 8.6.7, 8.5.2

2. This could be done while reading the book. The entire class could do this individually or with one partner. If computer labs are available, a lab could be reserved for one class period.

In the computer lab, open up Microsoft Word and Internet Explorer. You will type the answers to the following questions in Word. Make sure to save your document in your student locker. Spell check before printing.

Go to the following website for National Runaway Switchboard:

<http://www.1800runaway.org/>

1. Find one resource Holly could have used.
  - a. Name of the resource
  - b. Its purpose/mission
  - c. What would Holly have needed to do to be accepted by this resource? What is it? What is its purpose?
  
2. Look at the National Statistics (lower left of page)
  - a. What is your state's statistic?
  - b. Look lower (under the map). What percentage of children who called were twelve (Holly's age)?
  - c. Which age had the highest percentage of callers?
  - d. Why might this be the case?
  - e. What is the main mean of survival for the callers?
  - f. Which of these means of survival did Holly use?

Imagine you are Holly visiting a library. You have no money, are hungry, and alone. Using the Internet, see what resources you can find for a twelve-year-old girl (with no adult) in Los Angeles, California.

Find at least five resources for Holly.

For each resource include the following information:

1. Name of resource. Include web address.
2. What is the resource? What services/assistance is provided?
3. Are there any costs or hidden rules? (Remember, Holly is only 12 and should be in school.)
4. Location of resource. Hours available
5. If Holly knew about this resource, do you think she would have used it? Why or why not?

**Language Arts Standards Covered:**

6.2.1, 6.4.5, 6.4.6, 6.4.7, 6.4.8, 6.4.9, 6.6.4

7.4.7, 7.4.8, 7.4.9, 7.5.2, 7.6.5, 7.6.8

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8.4.4, 8.4.6, 8.4.8, 8.6.5, 8.6.6, 8.6.7, 8.1.3

**Health and Wellness Standards Covered:**

6.3.2, 6.3.4, 6.3.5, 7.3.3, 7.3.5, 8.3.2, 8.3.4, 8.3.5

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<http://www.dictionary.com>

<http://www.perma-bound.com>

<http://www.filmratings.org>

<http://teenlineonline.org/content/view/80/205>

<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/index.html>