



YHBA Novel Resource

If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period

Gennifer Choldenko
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2007

Jennifer Choldenko

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Jennifer Choldenko is the well known author of several books for young adults, including Notes from a Liar and her Dog and Newbery Honor winner, Al Capone Does my Shirts. She was born in Santa Monica, California, the youngest of four children. Being the youngest child in her household, the youngest of all her cousins, and the shortest usually in her classes at school, Gennifer earned nicknames such: Snot-nose, Short Stuff, and Shrimp. As an adult, she takes her writing very seriously. She writes in a tiny “shoebox-sized” room that has a wonderful chair, and she gets “dressed up” for her work in this room as a writer everyday “to remind myself that writing is my job and it’s very important that I perform to the best of my ability every day.”



Many of the ideas for her books either come from an experience from her childhood or from a situation that has happened with her own children. If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period grew from an incident involving racial discrimination at a private school in Northern California that “horrified and obsessed her”. As she began to think about middle school, her own memories of being bussed to a predominately black middle school came flooding back, and the foundations for this book were laid.

Jennifer currently lives in the San Francisco Bay area with her two children and white German Shepherd, named Sophie.

Books

Moonstruck (1997)

Notes from a Liar and her Dog (2003)

Al Capone Does My Shirts (2004)

How to make Friends with a Giant (2006)

If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period (2007)

Louder, Lili (2007)

Al Capone Shines My Shoes (2009)

Awards

Al Capone Does my Shirts

- Newbery Honor
- 2005 CBC-NCSS Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People
- ALA Notable Book
- ALA Notable Recording
- Best American Literacy Corporation Literary Choice Award
- Children's Book of the Month Selection
- Best Book for Young Adults
- Children's Bookseller's Award—
Favorite Novel of the Year
- Junior Library Guild Selection

Notes from a Liar and her Dog

- School Library Journal Best Book of the Year

Annotation

Odds are that Kirsten and Walker would never cross paths, but they do at the exclusive private middle school, Mountain School. Despite their differences in color, sex, family life, and personalities, they are drawn together from the first day of school, and find as time goes on, that they are more connected than they could ever realize. Both face their own issues: Walker is proving to his mother that he can persevere and excel at the educational and social challenges that confront him, and Kirsten fights to find herself amongst weight issues, family troubles, and middle school girl angst with her best friend and other girls of her grade: where does she belong?? Kirsten and Walker learn much about each other and themselves as they work through personal problems and the racial prejudices they encounter at Mountain School. Choldenko alternates her narration of this story through both of their viewpoints as Kirsten finds her spot within her family as well as with her friends, and Walker searches for where he belongs at school, in society, and at home. In If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period, Kirsten and Walker find that the tough middle school years yield great challenges but also great rewards and lessons for life for those that can maintain perspective, compassion, and a sense of humor.

Genre – School Stories; Realistic Fiction; Family Stories; Multicultural

Point of View – If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period is told from two different viewpoints and also through two different forms of narration. The chapters alternate from Kerstin’s narration, which is told in the first person, and Walker’s perspective, which is told in the third person.

Theme(s) – Friendship; Interpersonal Relationships; Race Relations; Family Problems; War; Maturity; Social Classes; Self-Esteem;

Importance of Title – An important symbol in the story, the tree represents constancy and a strong foundation in family relationships as well as in friendships and interpersonal relationships for the main characters in the novel. Kirsten talks about the removal of a tree in the front yard of their home, a bone of contention between her parents, as is most things at this time with them. The tree comes down similarly to her parents’ marriage, her friendships, and her confidence in herself. As the story concludes, a new tree is being planted in their yard, and Kirsten see hope in what this means for her family while she is also finding some resolution with other relationships in her life and the feelings she has about her self worth. Although much “uprooting” happens for Kirsten and Walker, at the end of this book, Walk articulates the importance of all trees, the sounds they make and the roles they play, whether anyone is around to hear or “appreciate” them. So can be said for all people in life, no matter their social class or color. Everyone is important; everyone has roots that belong somewhere and something to offer.

Conflict – There are several conflicts occurring in this novel. For Kirsten, external conflicts occur at home between her and her mother and between her parents. She is also facing external conflicts between: herself and her best friend Rory as their friendship is disintegrating; between herself and Walker as they come to accept their new connection with each other; and between herself and Brianna who is dishonest and manipulative with people in her life. Externally, Walker is in conflict with his mother over life expectations and new found knowledge about his father; between himself and Matteo as he cannot understand why his friend tolerates discrimination and abuse from his classmates; between himself and Kirsten and accepting their connection with each other, and with society as he faces entrenched assumptions about his character and potential because of his race.

Internally, Kirsten struggles with her own self-esteem and confidence which manifests into an eating disorder. Walker struggles with anger and frustration because of society stereotypes that he must either disprove or disregard as he works through adolescence toward maturity and adulthood. Both Kirsten and Walker are struggling internally as they seek to find the answer to the question they are both asking themselves: “Where do I belong?”

Conflict Resolution – Not all the conflicts are resolved completely, but both Kirsten and Walker make progress toward resolving their internal and external conflicts. Kirsten realizes that she does have an eating disorder and agrees to see a doctor to help her with this problem. As the truth about Kirsten’s and Walker’s family

connection comes to light and all characters must face the reality of past events, Kirsten's parent's marriage seems to strengthen. Kirsten still struggles with friendships but she has a better grasp on the definition of true friendship even it is embodied in boys and girls she initially would not have sought as friends. With this realization she also gains courage to talk honestly to Rory about these important issues and to see that she is important and that she will find a place to belong, even if it is not with the same friends she had before. Walker works through his struggles with where he belongs in school, in society, and with his family, but comes a long way by the end of the book in resolving these big issues for himself.

Characters

Kirsten – main character; 7th grader at Mountain School, battling her weight and shifts of friends as she begins a new school year.

Rory – Kirsten's best friend until this year

Brianna Hanna-Hines – classmate, long-haired, queen of the popular group, manipulative, fake

Madison – girl in Brianna's group

Maya – girl in Brianna's group

Lauren – girl in Brianna's group

Kippy – Kirsten's little sister who loves science

Rachel – Kirsten's mother

Mac McKenna – Kirsten's father, an internist

Walker – main character, African-American, new to Mountain School and discovers he is the half-brother of Kirsten

Sylvia – Walker's mother, single mother

Jamal – Walker's cousin

Tanesha – Walker's aunt, Sylvia's sister, Jamal's mother

Shandra – Walker's aunt, Sylvia's sister

Matteo – Walker's friend at Mountain, Hispanic, discriminated against by Brianna

Mr. Balderis – History teacher, older, "with a belly and long hair"

Ms. Scrushy – English teacher, does everything fast

Mrs. Dora Perkins – Librarian

Setting

The events in *If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period*, occur at Mountain School, a private middle school. Most of the scenes in this book take place either in the cafeteria, hallways, library, or classrooms at Mountain. Kirsten's home and Walker's home are the settings for other important moments as Kirsten and Walker work through family issues.

Interest Level/Reading Level – Interest Level: 5-8; Reading Level: 3.1

Classroom Guide

Booktalk

“OK...so you all right in the thick of middle school. Who likes middle school? Who has had an awesome last couple years here in middle school? OK...now....be honest...who has kind of had a hard time, either with getting along in your classes, or with your friends, or with your family.....everything just feels kind of out of whack? Well, you are not alone. Middle school can be a hard time for a lot of, well...middle schoolers....and this YHBA nominee, If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period by Gennifer Choldenko, looks at the lives of two middle schoolers: Kirsten and Walker, who are definitely having a hard time. Kirsten hasn't seen her best friend, Rory, all summer, and now that she does...Rory is acting all weird and is suddenly hanging out with another group of popular girls that don't include Kirsten. She is also stressed out about her weight and her parents arguing all the time, which just makes her eat more and she feels really crummy about herself. Walker comes to Mountain as a new student **and** an African American student, which makes him defensive and uncomfortable although he is very smart and has a great personality....but where does he fit in? Where should he be? He is also wrestling with issues with his mother about his father and what life has in store for him with its preconceptions and stereotypes....and he runs into these at Mountain for himself and others, which really makes him mad and confused. Big issues are going on this book...but there are a lot of laughs too. Both Kirsten and Walk tell this story....and you will definitely want to find out what happens to both of them as they work through issues at home and school....and the big issue that connects them together which is a big surprise. As middle schoolers dealing with your own stuff, read about Kirsten and Walk in If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period, to see how they deal with their stuff!

Vocabulary

Psoriasis (p. 17) – a common chronic, inflammatory skin disease characterized by scaly patches.

Indiana Academic Standards

English/Language Arts 7.3.2, 7.3.3, 7.3.4, 7.3.5, 7.3.7

Guidance 6-8.3.1, 6-8.3.2, 6-8.3.3, 6-8.3.4, 6-8.3.5, 6-8.3.6, 6-8.3.13, 6-8.3.14, 6-8.3.15, 6-8.3.16

Health and Wellness 7.1.1, 7.1.2, 7.2.3, 7.2.4, 7.2.9, 7.4.1, 7.4.3, 7.5.2, 7.5.4, 7.5.6, 7.6.1, 7.7.1, 7.7.2

Science 7.4.6, 7.4.7

Anticipation Statements

Read the statements below. If you agree with the statement, make a check next to the statement in the **Agree** column. If you do not agree with the statement, make a check next to the statement in the **Disagree** column. Write any thoughts or comments you have about these statements in the Comments column.

		<u>If a Tree Falls at Lunch Time</u> By Gennifer Choldenko	Comments
Agree	Disagree	Old teachers never understand middle school students.	
		Parents should always tell their children about mistakes they made in the past.	
		If parents argue, it is a sure sign they are going to separate or divorce.	
		Always cover up for someone if you want them to be your friend.	
		It is difficult for students to get along that come from different social classes or race.	
		You should hang onto old friends for as long as possible.	

Read Aloud Passages

Read-Aloud #1: If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period (pp. 38-42)

“Walk tosses his backpack in a pile and looks around to see what he can do. Kirsten is carrying one end of a projector screen; Matteo grabs the other. Walk gets a stack of books and takes them out in the hall....”

This scene when Walker, Kirsten, and Matteo are serving penance for lateness or anticipatory clearance with Mr. Balderis for a future offense turns dark and sets the tone for the remainder of the book when Kirsten is accused of stealing Mr. Balderis’s wallet. The crime occurs in these pages, and the impact of the accusation is felt acutely by all characters involved in this scene. The reader will feel the dread and the outrage from some type of similar situation that resonates with them...all students have moment that this type of circumstance recreates for them as a bad memory. The future of old and new friendships are affected by this scene, and readers will want to know what happens next to Kirsten, Brianna, Rory, and the witnesses in the class.

Read-Aloud #2: If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period (pp. 45-47)

“At dinner, Sylvia and Walker eat at one end of the table. The other end is piled up with schoolwork. Sylvia teaches two nursing classes, so she always brings home big stacks of papers and marks them with her purple pen....punching the volume up too loud.”

This passage slices into the intimate life between Walker and Sylvia, but it more importantly intensifies the framed/stolen wallet situation that Walker witnessed this day at school. This passage also showcases the first time that Walker mentions Kirsten’s name, and the sharp reader immediately detects something wrong in Sylvia’s response to hearing about this classmate of Walker. Why? Foreshadowing is present here....piquing the interest of the reader to find out what will happen about this peer pressure/framing situation as well as why Sylvia has her hackles up at the mention of Kirsten McKenna.

Read-Aloud #3: If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period (pp. 146-148)

“My Mom has a headache again today. She must feel really lousy to let me make dinner again. Usually she does everything in her power to keep me away from the refrigerator....’Why now all of a sudden? Why didn’t you send him to private school before?’”

This exchange between Kirsten’s parents which she overhears while hiding in the garage is one of the climaxes of the book....when a significant link is acknowledged between Kirsten’s family and a family of one of her classmates at Mountain. An event in the past of Kirsten’s parents creates a tie to her and another student.....but which one? What will happen after this knowledge becomes known to Kirsten, her family, and the other family involved? Students will be on the edge of their seat to know the details of the connection and which is the student involved....as well as what will happen next.

Bibliography

DOE Standards

<http://dc.doe.in.gov/Standards/AcademicStandards/index.shtml>

Dictionary.com

<http://dictionary.reference.com/>

Follett Library Services

<http://www.flr.follett.com/>

Gennifer Choldenko

<http://www.choldenko.com/index.html>

Zionsville West Middle School Media Center home (Destiny)

<http://zcsdestiny.zcs.k12.in.us/common/servlet/logout.do?site=201>