



Disconnect

Lois Peterson

Reading level: 2.3

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Book Summary

Since moving hundreds of miles to a new school, Daria has become increasingly dependent on her cell phone. Texts, Facebook and phone calls are her only connection to her friends in Calgary, and Daria needs to know everything that is going on at home to feel connected to her old life. Her cell phone habit looks a lot like addiction to her mother and to her new friend Cleo. Daria dismisses the idea of technology addiction as foolish until her habit puts a life in danger.

Author Biography

Lois Peterson wrote short stories and articles for adults for twenty years before turning to writing for kids. She was born in England and has lived in Iraq, France and the United States. Recently retired from her job as a librarian, she now lives in Surrey, British Columbia, where she writes, reads and teaches creative writing to adults, teens and children. Lois is the author of several books for children and youth, including *Beyond Repair* in the Orca Currents series.

Connecting to the Text

Character Study

To engage students with the main characters in *Disconnect*, compare the characters of Daria and Cleo in terms of their general attitude toward life and their capacity to adjust to change. Use the following examples as large group discussion topics, individual novel study or writing exercises:

- Consider how Cleo approaches her first day of school. She says, “I love the first day at a new school” (ch. 1) and quickly tries to make friends with Daria. How does Daria approach the same situation?
- Daria has trouble adjusting to her new life in Delta and the many changes it brings. She wants to keep the same friendships and sense of connection she had with her friends in Calgary, “like always” (ch. 6). How does Cleo react to beginning in a new city?
- Compare Daria and Cleo’s attitudes toward babysitting Caden and Emmy, as described in chapter 5. Who would you prefer to look after children you know, and why?
- Rule number three of Daria’s “Code” says to “Stick together [because] high school—and life—are hard enough” (ch. 7). By this she means to stay close to Josie and Selena. How does Cleo’s attitude differ?

Theme

Connection is a dominant theme in *Disconnect* and Lois Peterson provides many examples of characters being or feeling “connected” to their social world of friends, school, work and family. Ask students to reflect on two contrasting examples of “connection” in the novel, describing how each character interprets “connection” differently. How does reflecting on this deepen our understanding of the characters? Examples are below.

Option: You may wish to use this exercise to discuss the author’s use of irony.

- In chapter 2, Daria meets an old lady at the mall who assumes Daria is arranging to meet with friends since she appears “so intent on [her] phone.” The woman tells Daria that she can “hardly get a word out of” her grandsons when they visit. How do the woman and Daria’s sense of interpersonal connection differ?
- In chapter 4, Cleo tells Daria that she doesn’t have a home computer, cell phone, smartphone or iPad, and doesn’t use social media. She says, “It won’t take me long to get connected here...I already met you, didn’t I?” In contrast, Daria responds, “I could never live like that, disconnected from everything.”
- In chapter 9, Daria’s father says to Daria, “Do you know how little time you actually spend speaking to us, face-to-face?...You always seem to be somewhere else. Instead of here.” What does Daria’s father want from Daria in terms of a connection, compared to the connection Daria has with Josie and Selena?

Vocabulary Enrichment

The following words/terms are taken from Daria's experiences in *Disconnect*, and are organized into themes: babysitting, Caden's accident and addiction. Invite students to use the vocabulary words below for writing exercises. For ideas, see the examples.

Babysitting

- Write a credo for babysitting using three of the words below. What is important to remember when babysitting, both for yourself and the children?
- Choose two words below to describe Daria's behavior. When babysitting, was she careful? Reliable? Serious? Trustworthy?

attention	earn	mischief	reliable
careful	First Aid	patience/patient	serious
eight dollars an hour	important	phone number	trust/trustworthy

Caden's Accident

- Imagine you were with Daria when Caden fell. Using three of the words below, describe what happened as if you were being interviewed by the local news or a police officer. What happened? How did Daria react?
- If you were Daria, is there anything you would have done differently, or did she respond well to the situation? Use two words in your response.

ambulance	dresser	patient	twisted
accident	first aid	phone	unconscious
blood	panic	sirens	white
dial 9-1-1	paramedics	touch	wound

Addiction

- Imagine you are a friend of Daria's. How could you convince her that she has a problem? Write a script for what you would tell her, using three of the words below.

addicted	dependent	journal	sponsor
adrift	habit	recover	symptom
alcoholic	hooked	shaking	technology
anxiety	illness	side effects	withdrawal

Connecting to the Curriculum**Art**

To engage students in the novel's themes and in the characters of Daria and Cleo, invite them to create an art project that illustrates, through comparison, the personality and temperament of each character. One idea is to ask students to draw

a large oval on a piece of paper, dividing it with a line in the center from top to bottom. On one side, illustrate the face of Daria. What is she like? Where is her attention? What is important to her? What emotions does she show others? On the other side, illustrate Cleo. You may wish to use word art or collage. For either, have a selection of magazines available and a printer if students are searching for images online. Once complete, ask students to conduct a gallery walk showcasing their projects. For each, can students identify which side is Daria and which is Cleo?

Option: Ask students to incorporate into their art projects quotes from the novel that capture the personalities of each character. For example:

Daria *Keep your head down and mind your own business.* (ch. 2)

Cleo *There's enough love in the world for everyone...You've got me!* (ch. 6).

Option: Introduce students to the concept of juxtaposition, or intentionally placing two things beside each other in order to solicit meaning. This technique, often seen in advertising, typically has a “shock value” or sense of the unexpected.

Geography

Daria lives in Delta, British Columbia, and was hoping to travel to Calgary, Alberta, then to Quebec. As a geography exercise, ask students to map out the journey. What is the distance from each city to the next? (You will need to choose a city in Quebec, as the specific destination is not indicated in the novel.) Can you find an interesting site in each city that you would like to see, or an event you'd enjoy?

Social Studies

In chapter 4, Cleo tells Daria about her grandfather, a Vietnam War draft dodger who lived “off the grid” in Canada. They had no running water or electricity and grew all their own food. Although Daria describes this self-sufficient lifestyle as out of *Little House on the Prairie*, there are cultures that live in similar ways now, such as intentional communities, eco-villages and communes. What values do these people share? What is the closest one to where you live? In what ways does it differ from your community?

Connecting to the Students—Ideas for Exploration

1. When Daria and Cleo are researching technology addiction, Cleo learns about some schools in the US that conducted a “Project Disconnect”: “The school banned all [social media] devices. For a whole month. Not even teachers could use them on school time” (ch. 15). What teachers observed is noted in chapter 12. Find out more about internet or technology addiction using Cleo’s method for research, as outlined in chapter 5: “What? Who? Where? When? And How?”
2. Cleo is familiar with addiction because her father is an alcoholic. She notes that technology can become an addiction as well: “Social media. Email, texting, online searching, games...Twitter. Facebook” (ch. 4). As a research project, create a checklist of warning signs for Internet or technology addiction. How many of these warning signs did Daria demonstrate in the novel? (A web search using keywords “technology addiction” and “quiz” or “warning signs” should yield results. Be sure to preview to ensure content is suitable for your students.)

Option: Have students create posters that outline the warning signs and provide information on where to get help or find out more.

3. In chapters 11 and 12, Daria describes how it feels to suddenly have no access to her computer or phone. She experiences feeling “Twitchy. Nervous. Spaced out,” as well as a “short temper” and “anxiety.” She also expresses that she feels “Adrift...Like I’m stuck out here, out of touch with everything that’s going on.” In a group discussion, talk about how students have felt when they experienced a change, such as moving to a new home, the first day in a new school, or an illness in their family. Sometimes a change (even a positive one) can bring about similar physical and emotional reactions as those described by Daria. When students experience nervousness, anxiety or feeling adrift, what are some techniques to help them feel grounded again? (For example, yoga, deep breathing, journaling, sports and exercise, etc.)

Web Resources

www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2011/04/06/technology-addiction-students.html
www.planetfriendly.net/community.html