



Breathing Fire

Sarah Yi-Mei Tsiang

Reading level: 4.5

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Book Summary

The day Ally's mother is killed by a city bus, Ally's life changes forever. Placed in foster care, she has \$200, the clothes on her back, and her mother's ashes in a cardboard box. Ally's life with her mom hadn't been all that great; they had moved around a lot, and her mother had suffered from depression, but Ally did have a home and a mother. Now she has nothing and no one. On the beach one night, Ally meets Tate, a fire-breathing juggler, and they begin performing together. When Tate moves on, Ally follows him and, though she feels guilty (and knows better), steals his bag of supplies so she can perform on her own. Completely unsuccessful and running out of options, she meets two women street performers with whom she finds a slice of happiness—and hope for her future.

Prereading Idea

Ask students to investigate the life of street performers and the laws that govern their rights to perform. How do these street performers live? What types of acts do they perform? Where and when do they perform? Who are they? Students should also define the term "busking." Ask students to share their findings in a class discussion.

Connecting to the World—Writing and Research Ideas

- Ally's mother suffered from chronic depression, which can lead to attempted suicide, irrational decisions and isolation. In small groups, ask students to investigate the symptoms, causes, and therapies for depression in both teens and adults. Each group should prepare an informational brochure that can be shared with the faculty and student body to raise awareness of the disease.
- Ally is left totally alone after her mother's death with no alternative other than foster care. To determine trends, ask students to investigate statistics on the foster care system both nationally and in their community over a ten year period. In small groups, have students research one of the following areas: age, gender, race and ethnicity, length of stay, placements, number of foster homes, and reasons for exiting the system. Have each group make a visual representation of their findings to share with the class.
- In chapter 4, Ally imagines what it would be like to have a supportive, caring mother and to live a "normal" life, one she hopes to find with Lorna and Sandy. Ask students to write a poem, a letter or an essay about what they consider to be a "normal" life. They should include specific examples and use figurative language. Have students share their writing in small groups of five or six.

Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel

Character

The characters Ally meets while she is street performing all have similar characteristics, including Tate, Sandy and Lorna, and the whip man. Have students search YouTube for videos of street performers to help them find additional common traits. Have students create a list of the characteristics that one must possess to be a street performer, and a list of Ally's personality and character traits that make her good at what she does. Have students work with a partner. One partner will write a "Help Wanted" advertisement based on the "job requirements" of a street performer. One partner will write a letter from Ally requesting an interview for the job of street performer based on her "qualifications." Have partners share their creations with other partners. Post advertisements and inquiry letters in the classroom.

Theme

The chorus of a popular Rolling Stones' song is:

*You can't always get what you want
But if you try sometime you just might find
You get what you need*

Ask students to write a justification for how this chorus could be the theme to *Breathing Fire* and an illustration of Ally's life. Students should include specific textual evidence to support their ideas. Post justifications in the classroom.

Point of View

This story is told from Ally's point of view, so the only way readers know what the other characters do and say is through what Ally describes. In pairs, ask students to choose a scene involving Ally and another character and to write two skits of that scene—one from each character's point of view. Have students practice and then perform the two scenes back-to-back for their classmates.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. When the social worker takes Ally to her apartment to pick up her things in chapter 2, how does Ally decide what to take and what to leave? What emotions does Ally experience at her apartment?
2. Why is Ally so angry at her mother? How does Ally redirect her anger to others?
3. Ally says in chapter 3, "We were never moving *to* a new place, we were always moving *away* from where we were." What is the difference? In what ways does Ally continue with that same behavior?
4. How does Rachel help Ally in the foster home? What influence does Rachel have over Ally?
5. In what ways does Ally demonstrate courage and independence as she begins her new life? How does her gymnastic training benefit her?
6. How does Tate change Ally's life? Why does Ally steal his fire-breathing supplies?
7. Why is Ally convinced that her mother committed suicide by stepping in front of the bus? How does Lorna convince her otherwise?

Writer's Craft**Vocabulary**

Challenge students to select one vocabulary word as the title of a poem and to use "found" phrases from the novel, synonyms, antonyms, and ideas of their own to create a short word poem. Students can read their poems to the class.

acid	ch. 6	decrepit	ch. 6	intact	ch. 10
boasts	ch. 9	falter	ch. 4	saunter	ch. 2
careens	ch. 4	harbingers	ch. 8	surly	ch. 2

Author Biography

Sarah Yi-Mei Tsiang has been a storyteller all her life, entertaining her friends with stories during recess. She started writing one-word stories at four-years-old and is now an award-winning author and poet. Sarah earned her degree at the University of British Columbia and has worked as a creative writing instructor at numerous colleges and universities. Her work has been published and translated internationally.