



Cuts Like a Knife

Darlene Ryan

Reading Level: 4.0

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Book Summary

After the death of her grandmother, Mac moves to town to live with her uncle whom she despises. Mac and Daniel have several classes together, and they soon become friends. Daniel has never had a friend like Mac; she takes risks, she has a talent for writing music and lyrics, she keeps her life a mystery and she is mature beyond her years. They have a great friendship, but Daniel would like for it to be more. He gets his wish, but when he realizes Mac is giving away all of her favorite possessions to her friends, he understands that what Mac has given him is a farewell gift. Convinced Mac is going to take her life, Daniel goes to great lengths to save her—even though he knows that in saving her life, he will lose her friendship.

Prereading Idea

Give students the lyrics and ask them to listen to the old Irish song “Danny Boy.” Then discuss the meaning of the song and the possible connections it might have to a story about friendship and loss.

Connecting to the World—Writing and Research Ideas

- With teen suicide skyrocketing, *Cuts Like a Knife* focuses on just one girl and her compelling story. In groups of three, ask students to investigate teen suicide. Have one student research reasons for teen suicide and its increase, one student look for statistics of both attempted suicides and deaths, and one student look for programs available to teens in trouble. Have students use their findings as part of a class project on teen suicide awareness and prevention within their school and community.
- Mac chooses to give away all of her favorite possessions before she attempts to kill herself. Ask students to select one person to whom Mac gives a gift and to write a thank-you note from that person to Mac, expressing what the gift means to them. Students may use details found in the book as well as adding ideas of their own; each note should reveal the personality of the character “writing the note.” Have students share in groups of four or five and post thank-you notes on a classroom bulletin board.
- Mac can write musical lyrics and music as well as poetry. Ask students to write a poem about some aspect of the book: a character, an event or a reaction to a character or an event. Students can choose to write from the point of view of any character or from their own. Have students select music to accompany their poem. Then have students share their poems in a poetry reading with the selected music.

Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel***Characterization***

Using both direct and indirect characterization, the author clearly describes Mac and Daniel and enables the reader to understand their actions and reactions. As a whole class, ask students to make a list of the traits Mac and Daniel possess and determine how the author relates this to the reader. Then have students work in groups to create a characterization poster of either Mac or Daniel. Each group should include an illustration of the character and passages from the text to support and accompany the listed traits. Display posters around the classroom.

Theme

Friendship is portrayed throughout the book and could be considered one of the major themes. With a partner, ask students to examine the friendships between the characters: Daniel and Mac’s friendship, Ren and Alex’s friendship with each other and their friendship with Mac, Daniel and his mother’s friendship, or others. Then have students find a quote that best exemplifies each of the relationships. The quotes can be written on sentence strips and posted in the classroom.

Conclusion

The author leaves a question in the minds of the reader. Based on what the reader knows about Mac's and Daniel's characters and their relationship, will they remain friends? Ask students to write a dialog between the two characters showing how they resolve the fact that Daniel saved Mac's life when clearly she wanted to die. The students can set the conversation at any point in the future of their lives. Challenge students to write stage directions of character actions to accompany the dialogue. Have students practice and present their dialogs staying true to the character's voice and personality.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. What attracts Daniel to Mac? Why does Mac befriend Daniel?
2. The author begins the story with Daniel's reflection on what happens with Mac. Daniels states, "I didn't do it perfectly, but I did the best I could" (chapter 1). What could Daniel have done differently?
3. Why doesn't Daniel always use good judgment when he is with Mac? What is an example of one of his poor choices?
4. Why doesn't Mac want to write down the poems and lyrics that she had written on the walls in her grandmother's house?
5. Why does Mac relate Daniel to the song "Danny Boy"? How does the song relate to Mac's life?
6. Why is Daniel so surprised to learn that Mac had a date with Gavin? What happens at the dance that so upsets Mac?
7. Ren and Alex profess to be Mac's friends. How do they show their loyalty to Mac? Why are neither of them concerned about Mac's disappearance?
8. As Daniel begins to piece together Mac's plan, his fear for her life intensifies. What is Daniel's conflict about trying to find Mac? What convinces him that he needs to pursue looking for her?
9. Why does Daniel finally allow his mother to help? How does his mother help him save Mac's life? What is her attitude toward Daniel and the situation?
10. How does the title of the book relate to the story? Is the title appropriate? Why or why not?

Writer's Craft***Foreshadowing***

When Mac shows Daniel her grandmother's house, she says, "By tomorrow this house will be gone. Everything will be gone. It's too late" (chapter 3). How could this have been a clue to Mac's intention to kill herself? Ask students to make a list of other possible clues Mac gave Daniel. Then ask students to justify the statement "Hindsight is 20/20" based on their list.

Author Biography

Darlene Ryan has been writing all of her life—as a teacher, a scientist, a late-night disk jockey, a producer, an entertainment columnist, a consumer reporter, a news reader and a copywriter. As a child she was taken to the library every two weeks for a stack of books that was never enough to last the two weeks. Being an avid reader led her to writing, and in third grade she won a poetry contest. The characters she creates are real to life, and she places them in situations that hit home to her many readers. Ms. Ryan has received the Dr. Marilyn Trenholme Counsell Early Childhood Literacy poetry award from the Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick.