



The Water You're Swimming In

Teacher Guide

After Noah's older brother runs away to Halifax, Noah tries to keep being the good, dependable kid he has always been so his parents don't have more to worry about—but after his anxiety escalates, he decides to take off alone and find his brother himself.

Key Themes

Mental health | Family | Siblings | Friendship | Runaway | Small town

Pre-Reading Discussion Questions

1. What does the title *The Water You're Swimming In* mean?
2. Judge a book by its cover! What do you think this book is about based on the cover and the title?
3. Who is the author? Do some research on the author. Why do you think she decided to write this book?
4. In your opinion, what is a good book? What qualities does a book need to have to make you want to read it?
5. What is the last book you read, and how do you think it will compare to this book? Discuss your favorite scene from the book. Why does it stand out to you? What makes it meaningful?

Chapter 1–10 Reading Discussion

1. How does tradition shape Noah's family's identity?
2. Noah describes a big fight Jamie and his mom had. Right after the fight, Noah loses a swimming competition. Do you think someone's mental state can affect their performance?
3. Do you notice any similarities between Jamie and his Mom?
4. Noah feels invisible at school. What makes someone feel invisible?
5. Noah talks about a knot in his stomach that won't go away. How do you think he is feeling and how do you know?
6. Noah says, "When everyone expects you to win, somehow that gold medal feels hollow." What does he mean by this?



About the author

Rachel Schwartz Fagan is a storyteller and Ontario certified teacher. She holds an MPhil in children's literature and her work has been longlisted for CANSCAIP's Writing for Children Competition. As a settler in Tkaronto, Rachel works in arts and education spaces and brings a passion for facilitating creativity and environmental stewardship. Rachel is an avid zinester, and her work was nominated for the Broken Pencil Zine Awards in 2018 and 2020. She is also an emerging textile artist. In her spare time, Rachel climbs on rocks, listens to the ocean and argues with her dog.



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7. Jessica has never bullied Noah before, but now she's bullying him in front of her friends. Why do you think Jessica's behavior has changed? What are your predictions?
8. Noah tears apart Jamie's room looking for something. What do you think he is expecting to find? Were you surprised when he didn't find anything? Why or why not?
9. Noah asks the question, "If no one worries about you, do you really matter at all?" What do you think he means by this? How is Noah feeling in this scene and why?

Chapter 11–20 Reading Discussion

1. Grandma Aisling uses a lot of figures of speech like "fill yer boots." Does your family have any expressions you use frequently?
2. If you were telling a friend about this book, how would you describe Grandma Aisling?
3. Grandma Aisling tells Noah, "Don't forget that to take care of everyone else, you need to take care of yourself too." What does this mean?
4. Noah often talks about feeling heavy or feeling like there is a weight on him. What does he mean by this?
5. Noah's family is going through a difficult time, and Noah is struggling with his mental health. If you knew a friend was feeling depressed, what would you do?
6. Why did Noah choose not to tell his parents about the note? Do you think he made the right decision? Why or why not?
7. Noah says the pool always feels safe. Why does he feel this way?
8. Why do you think Jamie called Noah? How is Jamie feeling in this scene and how do you know?
9. Noah uses the simile, "The music washed over me like an old blanket." What is a simile? What does Noah mean by this?
10. Jamie texts Noah, and then never replies. Why do you think that is?
11. Noah looks at the note Jamie left him every night before he goes to bed. Why does he do this?

Chapter 21–30 Reading Discussion

1. Do you think Noah will win the swimming competition? Make a prediction.
2. Noah feels betrayed by Alysha, and Alysha doesn't think she's done anything wrong. What do you think and why?
3. Have you ever lost a contest or competition? What would you say to a friend who just lost an important event?
4. Noah makes a plan to find Jamie in Halifax. Do you think there are any flaws in his plan?
5. What are some alternative options Jamie could have tried instead of running away?
6. Do you think Noah will find Jamie? Predict what will happen next.
7. Were you surprised that Jessica and Alysha had been spending time together? Before Alysha tells Noah, are there any clues in the book that reveal she is friends with Jessica?
8. Noah's decision to go to Halifax is out of character for him. Why do you think he makes this decision?





9. How do you think Noah feels at the end of the day in Halifax, and how do you think his parents are feeling?

Chapter 31–36 Reading Discussion

1. Were you surprised when Jessica explained why she was bullying Noah?
2. Do you think Noah should forgive Jessica? Why or why not?
3. When Noah's mom reveals she ran away as a kid, did that change your perspective on her relationship with Jamie?
4. The last chapter is called "The Ocean's Reprise." What does the chapter title mean?
5. At the beginning of the book Noah thinks, "I once heard a teacher say to Jamie, 'Why can't you be a good student like your brother?' It made me cringe just thinking about it. I knew it was way better to be popular than smart." What did you think when you first read that, and did your feelings change by the end of the book?

Post-Reading Discussion Questions

1. What is the main theme of *The Water You're Swimming In*?
2. Why do you think the author chose the name Noah?
3. If you could ask the author one question about *The Water You're Swimming In*, what would you ask?
4. Would you recommend this book to a friend?
5. Foreshadowing is when there is a clue or warning about something to come in the future. Did you notice any examples of foreshadowing in *The Water You're Swimming In*?
6. Did anything about this book surprise you?
7. If you could rewrite this book, what would you change and why?

Activities

1. Create a new book cover for *The Water You're Swimming In*.
2. Create an eight-panel comic of your favorite scene from *The Water You're Swimming In*.
3. When Noah and Jamie finally talk, they realize they haven't understood each other's perspectives. Write down a time when you had a disagreement with a friend. First, write the disagreement from your perspective. Then, write the disagreement from their perspective. Did this activity change your perspective on the situation? Share with a friend.
4. Write a letter from Alysha's perspective of her fight with Noah. What would she say?
5. Like lots of kids, Noah experiences depression. Research resources kids can use if they are struggling with mental health. Share the resources with your class.
6. When Grandma Aisling arrives, Noah says the house feels like a home again. What does home mean to you? Create a mind map to explore what you think of when you think of home.
7. There are a lot of songs in *The Water You're Swimming In*. Pick one song and illustrate an album cover.





8. Create a mental wellness booklet with strategies for positive mental health and stress management. You can include: coping strategies for stress, empowering statements and activities that help you feel relaxed.
9. Noah learns a lot about plants from Grandma Aisling and her herbalism books. Pick a common plant you see near your home or school. Research the plant and find out how it is part of your ecosystem. How does it spread? What animals use it for food?
10. Create an anonymous worry box with your class. Each week write an anonymous worry and put it in the box. At the end of the week, the teacher will read out the worries to the class. Offer suggestions or support for each worry. All worries remain anonymous.
11. On a scrap of paper, write something that makes you feel stressed and put it in a hat. Then, assign each corner of the class a number from one to four. One means “this isn’t stressful for me” and four means “this is very stressful for me.” When the teacher reads out each stressful sentence, move to the corner of the room that indicates your level of stress. At the end, discuss with your class how the activity made you feel.
12. Draw a map of the setting from *The Water You’re Swimming In*. Don’t forget to add the Salmon River, Bible Hill, Truro and Halifax.
13. Reframe negative self-talk. Create a list of negative self-talk with your class. Examples are “I can’t do math” and “I’m probably going to fail the test.” Rewrite each sentence in a positive voice. An example is, “Math is difficult for me, but I studied really hard for the last math test.”
14. I See What You See In Me Activity: Write your name on a blank piece of paper. Pass the paper the classmate to your right. Everyone should have a new paper in front of them. Write one positive quality about the person whose name is on the piece of paper. Keep passing the papers to your right until everyone has added one positive quality about each of their classmates, then return each paper to the correct student.
15. Learning from Failure Activity: Research a famous failure from history or current events. An example is Michael Jordan, who famously said he missed over 9000 shots in his career and lost over 300 games. Create a gallery of famous failures.
16. With your class write a letter to the author with your comments, questions and any art you’ve done that you would like to share. Send your letter to her email: rachelschwartzfagan.author@gmail.com. She will write back to you!

