

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for I Never Promised You a Rose Garden by Joanne Greenberg

Book Information

Joanne Greenberg, I Never Promised You a Rose Garden

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Book Level: 6.7

Interest Level: UG

A bout with mental illness gives rise to a rebirth of wonder and the awakening of compassion in a hitherto unresponsive girl.

Topics: Community Life, Mental Illness; Family Life, Growing Up; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship

Main Characters

Carla and Miss Coral patients at the hospital, who are Deborah's friends

Deborah Blau the principal character of the story; a sixteen-year-old girl struggling with mental illness

Dr. Fried (Furii) Deborah's wise and sensitive psychologist

Jacob and Esther Blau Deborah's concerned and loving parents

Suzy Blau Deborah's little sister

The gods, the Collect and the Censor characters in Deborah's secret world of Yr

Vocabulary

acerbic sharpness of speech, manner, or temper

dybbuk a wandering soul, believed in Jewish folklore to enter the body of a man and control his actions until exorcised by a religious rite

masochism emotional disorder in which one gets pleasure from suffering pain or humiliation at the hands of another

omniscient knowing everything; having unlimited knowledge

precocity showing advanced skill or mental development at an unusually early age

reticence caution or hesitation, especially in speaking

sardonic bitter; mocking

schizophrenia any of a group of severe mental diseases marked by withdrawal into a stupor, splitting of the personality, hallucinations and delusions, and a lack of contact with reality

Synopsis

Sixteen-year-old Deborah Blau is mentally ill. Although her parents Jacob and Esther have denied their daughter's sickness for years, Deborah's suicide attempt makes it apparent that she needs help. After doctors advise that Deborah be institutionalized, Jacob and Esther commit her. When her heavy-hearted parents first leave Deborah at the mental institution, they have no idea that their daughter's journey to mental health will take three painful years.

In those three years, Deborah endures extreme mental anguish. Fortunately, her psychologist, Dr. Fried, is honest, gently supportive, and sensitive to Deborah's nightmarish struggles. Dr. Fried helps Deborah unravel the painful memories of her childhood. Deborah reveals the trauma of an operation she experienced as a five-year-old. She recalls the "unmerciful" pain she felt when the doctors removed a tumor from her "feminine, secret part." She also remembers her anger at the doctors for lying, telling her the operation would be pain-free. She tells Dr. Fried about the prejudice she experienced at school and summer camp for being a wealthy Jew. She speaks frankly of her feelings of aloneness. One experience that left her feeling abandoned occurred when her mother miscarried twins. When her mother went away to recuperate, she left Deborah in the care of a heartless nurse. She also confides the jealousy she felt for her baby sister Suzy and her attempt to murder her.

Deborah's struggles are many, but one struggle is dominant. Deborah is tormented by two worlds: her life on Earth and a world she herself has created, called Yr. As a child, when life became burdensome and the lies she heard became unbearable, Deborah slipped comfortably into an imaginary place of peace and beauty where she felt accepted.

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However, as time passes, Deborah discovers the dark side to her secret world. There are evil characters who possess her and tell her she is separate from humans. They speak to her in a unique language Deborah has created and cause her to suffer.

Her suffering intensifies when she confides in Dr. Fried about Yr. She feels tremendous feelings of guilt and panic. She hears the bitter and terrifying voices of the Yr gods and demons calling to her, demanding she keep their existence a secret. Then, she is dealt "the Punishment." When the Punishment strikes, Deborah loses control and goes into a rage, and then becomes unconscious. In dark and desperate periods, when she feels torn between the two worlds, Deborah causes herself harm. In one section of the story, she burns herself with cigarette butts to release "the volcano" or sickness inside her.

Gradually, with Dr. Fried's help, Deborah's feelings of oppression begin to lift. She attends school to take her high school equivalency test. Her distorted, gray vision disappears, allowing her to see everyone and everything in color. She is able to reach out to the patients in the hospital. In one scene, she recognizes that her friend Carla is in a state of panic and calms her by holding her hands. She also begins to see herself as different from the patients on Ward D. In a crucial scene, Deborah attempts to burn herself again and finds that she is unable to because she feels the pain. In another important scene, Deborah discovers that she never actually took the steps to murder her baby sister. Dr. Fried tells her that she was experiencing natural feelings of sibling jealousy and only imagined herself harming her sister. She feels great relief and elation when she realizes she is not the murderess she imagined herself to be. However, Deborah's mental wellness is most clearly recognized when she talks to Anterrabae, a Yr god, and defies him by admitting she is human. Poignantly, she adds, "I am going to hang with the world."

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

The Blau family struggles with Deborah's mental illness. Jacob and Esther constantly battle with feelings of fear, shame, loss, and guilt. They are never free of worry for their daughter. How does Suzy respond to her sister's illness?

Although Suzy is sympathetic to her sister's illness, she feels burdened by it in a different way than her parents. She resents her parents' preoccupation with Deborah and feels cheated. She thinks her social life suffers because of her sister, and she feels she deserves more attention and praise from her parents.

Literary Analysis

After Dr. Fried meets with the hospital staff and speaks about Deborah, Dr. Halle makes the following comment about Dr. Fried: "She [Dr. Fried] is brainy ... but after you know her awhile, you'll find out that with little Clara Fried, brains are only the beginning." What does Dr. Halle mean?

Dr. Halle is referring to Dr. Fried's virtues. She is a woman of compassion, determination, and depth.

Inferential Comprehension

How did Deborah's grandfather, Pop, influence Deborah's family?

He was a domineering, self-made financial success. He demanded that his children succeed, mostly as a means of "getting back" at a society that looked down on him. He was unhappy with his son-in-law, Jacob, criticized him for not being a financial success, and placed great demands and great stresses on Deborah's family.

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Constructing Meaning

When Deborah learns that Carmen's father took her from the hospital, she realizes that she is grateful to her parents for allowing her to stay, despite her setbacks. Esther was really responsible for Deborah's extended hospital stay. She understood that her daughter needed time. Jacob, with his quick temper, might have taken her home prematurely. What would have happened to Deborah if she had been released from the hospital as Carmen was?

Deborah's future would have been bleak. She probably would have slid even further into her world of madness, and she might have eventually attempted suicide.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Deborah is admitted into the mental hospital in the late 1940s. Some of the practices the hospital staff uses to calm patients are described in the book. For example, several references are made throughout the book to the "cold-sheet pack." Patients are bound like mummies with ice-cold sheets, then strapped to a bed with canvas strips. A hot water bottle is placed by the patient's feet and an ice pack is put under the patient's neck. Patients are left bound until their pulses lower. At one point in the book, Deborah is left bound for seven hours and suffers painful circulation problems. The method described above seems archaic. Invite a psychologist to the classroom to talk about modern techniques, approaches, and medications used for treating the mentally ill.

Comparing and Contrasting Deborah is sensitive to lies. In one scene, Dr. Fried says that Deborah is "allergic" to lying. From Deborah's point of view, all lies are abominable and unforgivable, and she reacts to them with disgust. For example, when Deborah goes home for a visit, she is showered with praise. She feels uncomfortable about the praise, thinking that it is superficial. She sees the compliments as lies. She also recognizes that Suzy, out of duty to her "prodigal" sister, has stayed home instead of going out with her friends. She knows that Suzy is

really unhappy with the situation and sees her front as a lie. Readers understand that Suzy's family is nervous about Debbie's homecoming, and they are attempting to make Deborah feel comfortable. Have the students skim the book and take note of the different lies told. Discuss why they were told. Were they serious lies or "white lies"?

Making Predictions By the book's end, Deborah's future looks bright. She has passed her high-school equivalency exam and joined the church choir. She also becomes aware of her artistic talent and her gift for helping others. Ask the students to imagine themselves as guidance counselors. In writing, have them describe what they think would be a good career path for Deborah to follow.

Responding to Literature Deborah's informational file at the hospital describes her as showing a typical "schizophrenic pattern" with "compulsive and masochistic" components. Discuss the terms used in this description. Have the students research schizophrenia. What are the characteristics of the illness? Are there any known causes? What are the available treatments? As an extension activity, students might research other mental illnesses, such as manic-depression or depression.