

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Kissing Doorknobs

by

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Book Information

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Fourteen-year-old Tara describes how her increasingly strange compulsions begin to take over her life and affect her relationships with her family and friends.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; YALSA Top Ten

Topics: Behavior, Misc./Other; Community Life, Mental Illness; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - High School (Theme: Tough Decisions); Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks; Recommended Reading, YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant YA

Main Characters

Anna one of Tara's childhood friends who is very athletic

Donna DeLuca a tough, loner girl who smokes, steals and uses drugs and also befriends Tara

Greta Sullivan Tara's younger, self-confident sister, who often stands up for and supports Tara

Keesha one of Tara's childhood friends, who tries to remain friends with Tara despite Tara's illness

Kristen one of Tara's childhood friends, who is anorexic and wants to become a model

Mr. Sullivan Tara's teetotaling father, who believes Tara's obsessions will pass

Mrs. Sullivan Tara's confused and frustrated mother, who tries to punish Tara to make her stop her odd behaviors and then resorts to drinking in order to cope with Tara

Sam a teenage boy who also has obsessive-compulsive disorder and tries to help Tara conquer her fears

Susan Leonardi the therapist who helps diagnose and treat Tara for obsessive-compulsive disorder

Tara Sullivan a young girl who is plagued by obsessive thoughts and behaviors

Vocabulary

eczema a noncontagious skin condition marked by itchy and dry patches; it can be made worse by stress

facade an artificial or false appearance given by a person

futility a feeling of being ineffectual or unable to effect a change

inconsolable unable to be comforted

monotonous boring, happening repeatedly

quirk an unusual personal behavior

Synopsis

When Tara Sullivan starts kindergarten, she cries often and worries that something terrible will happen to her mother while she is gone. This causes her eczema to flair up, and she sometimes scratches her arms raw. Eventually her separation anxiety lessens, but other concerns take its place in her mind. Teachers try to comfort her and everyone hopes she will outgrow her worries. She takes comfort in God even though she worries that she is constantly committing sins. Most of the time she performs well in school and has many friends, so the adults don't worry too much.

When Tara is eleven, she overhears a boy say, "Step on a crack and break your mother's back." This phrase sets off an overwhelming series of concerns for Tara. It becomes almost impossible for Tara to walk to school on time or with friends because she has to count the cracks without interruption. She cannot explain to others that this is something she must do. Most of her friends do not understand and pull away from Tara. Her younger sister, Greta, defends and comforts her. The neighbor lady thinks she is using drugs. Her father

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thinks her obsessions "will pass," and her mother becomes frustrated and angry with her. Her mother swears at Tara and begins to drink alcohol more often in an attempt to cope with Tara. Tara habitually prays for her mother, and this only makes her mother more frustrated.

Occasionally Tara's parents take her for professional help. She is subsequently diagnosed with insecurities, self-esteem problems, attention deficit disorder, immaturity, borderline anorexia, and anger issues. Each time, the professionals assure Tara's parents that they have the correct diagnosis and that Tara can be treated; however, Tara's problems only seem to worsen. At one point Tara's mother becomes so frustrated that she publicly shakes Tara for praying. Tara seems to get better when she becomes friends with a loner girl, Donna DeLuca, who has problems of her own. Donna, though only fourteen, uses drugs, drinks, steals, and engages in unprotected sex. Tara and Donna become good friends mostly because they generally accept each other's behaviors.

After a Christmas play at which Tara panics and can't perform her part, her obsessive behaviors escalate to the point that she cannot leave the house without kissing the doorknob in a certain way. Mr. Jacobson, a friend of Mr. Sullivan, tells the Sullivans that he believes she has obsessive-compulsive disorder or OCD. He has a student, Sam, who has been diagnosed with the same problem. Tara and Mrs. Sullivan meet Sam, and though Sam has a different form of OCD, the Sullivans believe Tara indeed suffers from OCD.

The Sullivans take Tara to meet Susan Leonardi, the therapist who is treating Sam. Ms. Leonardi evaluates Tara and diagnoses her with OCD. She explains the condition and Tara begins treatment. Sam supports Tara through the difficult treatment and Tara begins to recover. In the meantime, Tara's friend Donna has become pregnant and is sent away to a special school for expectant mothers. Tara reconnects with her friends Keesha and Anna and becomes friends with Sam. As the story ends, Tara is progressing nicely, but her friend Sam has

regressed. Tara goes to visit him, give him support, and let him know that she will not give up on him.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What is so disturbing about Kristen signing a modeling contract while being treated for anorexia?

Even with treatment, anorexia can be a life-threatening illness. Often the patients who do the best in their treatment have the support of family and friends and are able to accept that they have a problem. Kristen does not seem to believe that she has a problem. It also appears that her parents do not understand the serious nature of her illness. If they did understand, they never would have allowed her to sign a modeling contract. Her agent does not accept that Kristen has a problem either. Given all these factors, it appears that Kristen will continue to have an eating disorder and will potentially risk death if her disease becomes too overpowering.

Literary Analysis

Greta tells Tara that she isn't crazy. How would you define the word "crazy"? Do you think Tara is crazy?

Students answers may vary. Crazyness can be compared with insanity, which refers to a condition in which a person loses contact with reality and generally cannot be held responsible for his or her own actions. In some respects Tara does lose connection with reality since it is not normal for a person to do the things she does to that extreme. However, Tara is always fully aware of what she is doing and aware that it is strange behavior. Tara is unable to control her thoughts and actions. In some people's minds this would constitute insanity.

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Inferential Comprehension

How did Tara's illness affect the different members of her family?

The effects of Tara's problems on her family are typical of the effects that many illnesses, both physical and mental, can have on a family. Greta was put in the role of Tara's protector. This role helped make Greta strong and understanding. Tara's illness sent Mrs. Sullivan into alcoholism. Mrs. Sullivan became extremely frustrated and did not know what to do to help Tara. In desperation she reached for alcohol as a way of escaping reality and numbing herself to her pain over her daughter's illness. Tara's father was in denial. He did not want to believe his child had a problem since he was incapable of helping her with it. He generally withdrew and avoided the situation by not being home to witness it.

Constructing Meaning

The following phrase is quoted in the book: "...A coward dies a thousand deaths but a brave man dies just once." What does this mean?

When a person is brave and faces a problem, the problem is usually solved, or at the very least it no longer needs to be feared. In a worst case scenario a problem may result in the death of the brave person attacking it, as can happen with fighting a fire. A coward would avoid the situation. Avoidance usually does not make a problem go away; thus the coward must face it again and again. It can also mean that the coward feels recurring guilt for not having tried to face the problem.

Teachable Skills

Comparing and Contrasting When Sam explained the options for treatment of OCD to Tara and her mother, he mentioned that medication has its own set of problems. Provide students with lists of medications for both physical and mental illnesses. Ask them to read about the benefits and risks of each medication. Students might create a chart of pros and cons and then discuss or present a position paper on

whether they believe they would take the medications if they were faced with serious illnesses.

Understanding the Main Idea Sam and Susan Leonardi explained that there are many forms of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Invite a therapist or patient to the classroom to explain the different varieties of this illness and perhaps other forms of mental illness.

Understanding Literary Features This book could be classified in the fiction section of the library catalog under obsessive-compulsive disorder, mental illness, family life, and friendship. Allow students to work in pairs and find examples of how the book explores or touches on each of these subjects. Students might write a paper summarizing how each topic is addressed in the book.

Recognizing Cause and Effect In times of crisis many people find solace by seeking a connection to God or a higher power. Tara sought comfort from her problems through her religion. Have the students discuss the value of this action and the power that individuals can gain through it. Ask the students whether there can ever be a point or time when this could become detrimental to an individual.