

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Silent to the Bone

by

### E.L. Konigsburg

### Book Information

E.L. Konigsburg, Silent to the Bone

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When he is wrongly accused of gravely injuring his baby half sister, Branwell loses his power of speech and only his friend, Connor, is able to reach him and uncover the truth about what really happened.

**Award:** Blue Spruce Award/Nominee; Booklist Editors' Choice; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Edgar Award/Honor Book; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Publishers Weekly Best Book; SLJ Best Book; YALSA Top Ten

**Topics:** Community Life, Child Abuse; Emotions, Fear; Family Life, Brothers; Family Life, Sisters; Health & Wellness, Accidents/Prevention; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Power Lessons AR, Grade 7; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - High School (Theme: Tough Decisions); Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Recommended Reading, YALSA Best Books for YA; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks; Recommended Reading, YARP

### Main Characters

Branwell Zamborska a thirteen-year-old boy who is struck dumb after allegedly dropping his infant half sister, Nikki

Connor Kane Branwell Zamborska's thirteen-year-old best friend who is asked to visit Branwell at a detention center to see if he can get Branwell to speak again

Gretchen Silver the lawyer hired by Dr. Zamborska to defend Branwell in the event he is charged with harming his half sister, Nikki

Margaret Rose Kane Connor's older half sister and Branwell's former babysitter; she helps Connor as he works with Branwell

Morris Ditmer a pizza delivery man who was having a relationship with Vivian at the time Nikki was hurt

Mr. and Mrs. Branwell (The Ancestors) Branwell's maternal grandparents, whom Branwell visits each summer at their condominium in Florida

Mr. Kane (The Registrar) Connor and Margaret's father, who is the registrar at the university

Mrs. Kane Connor's mother; a professor of psychology at the university

Nikki Zamborska Branwell's infant half sister, who falls into a coma after being injured

Tina Zamborska Branwell's stepmother, Nikki's mother

Vivian Shawcort the young English woman hired by the Zamborskas to work as an au pair for Nikki

Yolanda a woman who does housework for the Zamborskas

### Vocabulary

**au pair** a young foreigner who works as a childcare provider for a family in exchange for room and board and the opportunity to learn about the culture of the host family

**barrister** a British lawyer

**deposition** a witness's statement that is written down or recorded for use in court at a later date

**fugitive** a person who flees and hides from the authorities in order to avoid being arrested

**infatuation** a superficial romantic love that one person feels for another, usually associated with adolescents

**respirator** a machine that is used to assist critically ill patients with breathing

**stonewalling** using tactics, such as lying or refusing to answer questions, to delay some event

### Synopsis

Branwell Zamborska places a 911 call after finding his infant half sister, Nikki, listless and having great difficulty breathing in her crib. After dialing the

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phone, Branwell is unable to speak a word. Nikki's au pair, Vivian Shawcort, then takes the phone and tells the operator to send an ambulance because Branwell dropped the baby, and she won't wake up. Nikki is taken to the hospital where she falls into a coma. In Branwell's silence Vivian accuses Branwell of causing Nikki's injuries. Branwell is taken to the local juvenile Behavioral Center where he remains unable to utter a single word.

Branwell's father, Dr. Zamborska, hires a lawyer, Gretchen Silver, to defend Branwell and asks Branwell's best friend, Connor Kane, to visit Branwell to see if he can make Branwell speak. Connor reluctantly goes to the Clarion County Juvenile Behavioral Center to see Branwell, who by now is in a zombie-like state. He is unable to communicate with Branwell on the first visit. On subsequent visits, Connor devises a system of communication that involves Branwell responding to flashcards by blinking. Using this method, Connor determines he must first speak to his own half sister, Margaret. Margaret was Branwell's babysitter after his mother died in a car accident. Margaret understands Branwell because both he and Margaret are older half siblings who feel alienated from their fathers.

Connor continues to visit Branwell daily. Each day Branwell indicates a new topic or person for Connor to investigate. Each day Connor updates Branwell on Nikki's recovery, which seems to parallel Branwell's progress.

Through his visits, Connor learns he should investigate the 911 tape. Connor has the tape analyzed and discovers another person was present at the time of the call: Morris Ditmer, a pizza delivery man who has been having a relationship with Vivian. Morris soon admits that he was there, but does not know how Nikki was hurt. He also reveals Vivian's worries that Branwell will say she had been smoking, which would prevent her reassignment as an au pair. Branwell next sends Connor to Yolanda, who does some housework for the Zamborskas. Yolanda confirms that she had caught Vivian smoking.

After seeing Vivian's deposition, Branwell becomes adamant that Connor tell the agency that Vivian smokes in order to prevent her from getting another placement as an au pair.

Margaret agrees to write a letter to the agency and sends it to Morris as well. Morris, afraid of being accused of harboring a fugitive, tells Margaret and Connor that Vivian was sometimes mean to Nikki and that on the day she was injured, Vivian did something that suddenly quieted her. He also admitted wiping up blood from the bathroom floor after Branwell found Nikki.

Branwell finally breaks his silence and tells Connor that on Columbus Day Vivian lured him into the bathroom while she bathed. He responded sexually to Vivian, which caused him great shame. After this incident, Branwell, and not Vivian, took care of Nikki every day after school. Branwell believes he was struck dumb as punishment for his failure to tell his father and stepmother that Vivian was not taking care of Nikki.

Branwell is released from the Behavioral Center but, out of guilt, refuses to go home until Nikki is well. He moves in with Margaret and gets counseling. Within days Dr. Zamborska and Tina arrive at Margaret's home with Nikki and take both children home.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

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#### Initial Understanding

Margaret and Connor discussed that there are different reasons for lying. What are some reasons a person would lie? Is lying ever justifiable?

*There can be many reasons for people to lie. They may lie to protect themselves or someone else from harm, punishment, or pain. They may lie because they don't like someone. They may lie in order to trick someone into telling the truth or to influence a person's behavior. They may lie because they are trying to delay someone from finding out the truth. Some people might argue that there is no justifiable reason to lie. They believe life can only be lived properly if everyone tells the truth and deals with the consequences as they happen. Others may believe there are good reasons to tell lies, especially "white lies." They believe the lie they tell will do no harm or perhaps that it must be told to protect someone.*

#### Literary Analysis

Why do you think the Branwells deliberately tried to keep Branwell away from Tina's family?

*There are a couple of possible explanations. The Branwells appear to have many misconceptions and biases about Tina's culture. These feelings probably made them uncomfortable around Tina and her family, and they may have thought Branwell would be also. They said they were trying to protect Branwell from feeling as if he didn't fit in. The Branwells probably also felt a bit jealous of the new extended family Branwell would be gaining and feared they would be left out of his life in the future. They may have been afraid he would get to know Tina's family and not want to spend time with them anymore.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

When Margaret wrote the letter to the Summerhill Agency about Vivian, she asked her father to read it and give his opinion of the letter. Why did she do this?

*Margaret was trying to show her father some respect and attempting to make him feel better. She recognized, with Connor's help, that he would like to have more contact with her, and she likely wanted more contact with him again. She is a professional woman who runs her own highly successful business and probably often writes letters like this. She clearly did not really need his help. She was trying to reach out and make a connection with him again.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Connor said that waiting for Nikki to recover and Branwell to speak again was very tiring. He said that waiting is one of the hardest things to do in life. Why is it so tiring to wait for something or someone?

*There are many examples of times we have to wait in life. One reason waiting is so difficult is that we sometimes don't know what is going to happen next. At these times our mind goes over and over the possibilities, and this can make a person mentally exhausted. Another reason waiting is difficult is that it can make us feel anxious, and anxiety has a physical effect on the body. Anxiety can increase a person's heart rate and cause perspiration, both of which drain energy from the body.*

### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Cause and Effect** At one point in the story Connor says that his mother explained to him how Dr. Zamborska had experienced survivor's guilt after his wife was killed in the car accident. Branwell appeared to be suffering from his own guilt, and if Nikki had died, it could be predicted that he also would have experienced survivor's guilt. In order to help students understand survivor's guilt, invite a psychologist, psychiatrist, or another person who has experienced this phenomenon to explain what it

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is, what causes it to occur, how it affects people, and how a person experiencing this can be helped.

**Understanding Dialogue** Since Branwell was unable to speak, Connor had to devise a way to communicate with him. He decided to have Branwell look at a set of flashcards and blink when he found the one he wanted. There are many ways of communicating that do not involve speech. Have the students research nonverbal communication. The students can work in pairs to choose a method and demonstrate it to the class.

**Identifying Reading Strategies** Throughout the book, Connor mentions different thought-provoking quotes from literature and everyday life. (For example, "If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it still make a noise?"; "God is in the details."; "The cruelest lies are told in silence.") He describes how he and Branwell would debate the meaning of some of these quotes. He also uses quotes to illuminate what is happening in the story. Collect some well-known quotes and randomly distribute them to your students. Have the students think about the quote, discuss it with someone, write notes about what it may mean, and then either write a persuasive paper or present a speech about what they believe the quote means.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The Branwells had some definite opinions and beliefs about the Vietnamese culture. Many of their comments were based on stereotypes. Stereotypes drive wedges between individuals in the world. For example, sometimes stereotypes are applied by adults to young people. Have the students discuss these stereotypes and prepare a presentation that dispels stereotypes, including examples of individuals who do not fit the stereotypes.