

Sparrow

Written by Sherri L. Smith

Teacher's guide



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About this Book

Family sticks with family. That's the golden rule G'ma taught Kendall. But once G'ma's gone, Kendall has no family left—except for an aunt G'ma asked for at the end, who Kendall barely remembers. Only Aunt Janet knows what G'ma had in mind, but she never even shows up at the funeral. With child services on Kendall's case and just 10 days to get her apartment lease renewed, Kendall sets out for Janet's home in New Orleans to get her life in order—and her questions answered.

But what she finds are new friends, like Evie, who is confined to a wheelchair, but can sing like the women on G'ma's old records; Miss Clare, who needs Kendall's help as much as Kendall needs hers; and Marcus, who is younger than them all, but still knows how to get by. And when Mardi Gras arrives, with its parades and prizes and music, anything seems possible—even making a fresh start, with or without Janet.

About the Author

Sherri L. Smith was born in Chicago, Illinois and spent most of her childhood reading books. She currently lives in Los Angeles, where she has worked in movies, animation, comic books and construction. Sherri's first book, *Lucy the Giant* (Random House, 2002), was an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults in 2003. Translated into Dutch as *Lucy XXL* (Gottmer, 2005), her novel was awarded an Honorable Mention at the 2005 De Gouden Zoen, or Golden Kiss, Awards for Children's Literature. Sherri's second novel, *Sparrow* (Random House) will be released in July 2006. She is currently at work on her third novel. You can learn more about Sherri and her books on her website, www.sherrilsmith.com.

Teaching Ideas

Sparrow tells the story of Kendall Washington's search for her last living relative, as well as that of the friends she makes along the way, especially Evie. The importance and definition of family are key themes to explore in Sparrow, along with self-reliance and the need for support from others.

Thematic Connections

Importance of Family: Kendall is raised to believe that “family takes care of family.” This is why her search for Janet is so important. Ask students to discuss how Kendall's belief helps or hinders her path to happiness. Why does she think Janet will support her? How do the other families in the story relate to one another, and to Kendall?

Defining the word “Family”: Ask the class to define what makes a family. What makes Kendall's Kendall does not have a traditional family, as she is raised by her grandmother. Likewise, Clare and Evie are a single-parent unit. At the end of the story, Kendall has made a new family with Clare, Evie and her other friends. Ask the students to discuss what elements can make a family, besides being blood-related.

Independence: When we meet Kendall, she is just shy of her 18th birthday, which will make her a legal adult. Part of her struggle is to prove she can take care of herself. Ask students how they would handle Kendall's situation.

Relying on others: Both G'ma and Evie are reliant on other people to help them in their daily lives. Kendall is used to caring for others. At what point does Kendall go from caregiver to someone in need of care? How does her sudden independence affect her? Could her search for Aunt Janet be a way of avoiding self-reliance? At what point does she accept herself as her own responsibility?

Activities Across the Curriculum

Language Arts

Kendall learns a few new words in New Orleans, like *beignet* and *lagniappe*. What other words in our language come from the influence of other cultures?

Marcus reminds Kendall of her little brother, Mackie. Do any of these characters remind you of someone you know? Describe a friend or relative you are close to, and explain why they mean so much to you.

Social Studies

Sparrow takes place in Chicago and New Orleans. Are there any connections between the two cities, such as food, or music? Kendall's journey takes her from one city to another. Have students draw a map of her trip.

In the story, Kendall, Evie and Clare visit the French Quarter. This section of New Orleans has a fascinating history. Have students explore the development of New Orleans, from before the Louisiana Purchase, to today.

Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005. How would the storm have affected Kendall? Have students write a short story imagining the experiences of the characters.

Science

Multiple Sclerosis is a disease that affects the nervous system. Research this disease. Then, discuss what the nervous system controls, and how different conditions can affect the way it works.

Math/Home Economics

What if you had to live on your own? Would you know how to find a place to live, or to get a job? Give your students a budget and have them go through the local newspaper, or a New Orleans or Chicago paper and find a place to spend the week, and find food on their budget.

Art

Ask students to draw a picture of Kendall's family. Include any characters they think belong in the image. Have them explain why they chose each character.

Music

In the book, Evie loves to listen to the music of Sarah Vaughn and Lena Horne. Explore this type of music with the class—what are the themes in the songs? Why would this sort of music appeal to Evie? What are its roots in the South?

New Orleans is considered the birthplace of jazz, and has influenced blues music as far north as Chicago. Explore the origins of jazz, its African influences, and how it in turn has influenced modern rhythm and blues, and hip hop music today.

Reading Skills and Strategies

Point of View: Sparrow is written in the first person present tense. How does it affect the way the story is told? Have students re-write a section of a chapter from another point of view.

Compare and Contrast: Have students choose two characters, i.e. Evie and Kendall, Kendall and Aunt Janet, Clare and G'ma, and discuss their similarities and differences.

Make Judgments and Decisions: Ask students to identify an important decision one of the characters makes, and then use their own judgment: What choice would they have made? Is there a better choice? Why?

Reviews

Booklist

"...the teens' growing friendship is drawn without sentimentality; the girls quarrel and help each other in their pride and loneliness. The mystery surrounding Janet will draw readers in, and as the revelations build to a quiet climax, the warm characters redefine what family means."

Kirkus Reviews

"A moving story that rings true."

Prepared with assistance from Kathryn Hendess, Social Studies Teacher, San Jose, California.