

Peachtree Pointers

☞ SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS AND LIBRARIANS ☞

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My Life and Death by Alexandra Canarsie

By Susan Heyboer O'Keefe

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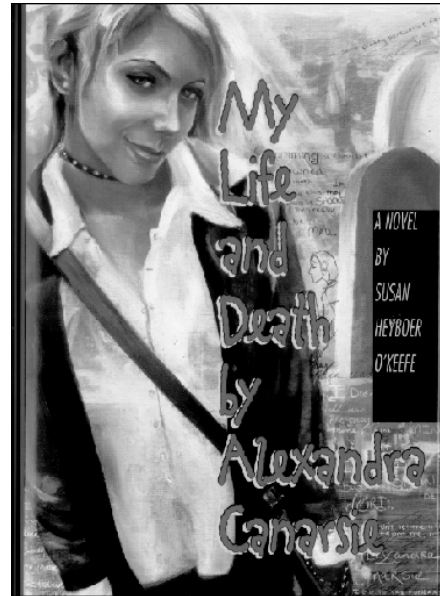
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About the Book

Allie Canarsie and her mother have just moved again for the tenth time in six years. With no place left to go, they've come back to her mother's hometown. There the wisecracking fifteen-year-old starts to attend the funerals of strangers. What begins as a surefire way to annoy her mother becomes a strange source of comfort and belonging. Then when Allie attends the funeral of a boy her own age, she is drawn into the circumstances surrounding his death. Pretending to have been his friend in order to investigate, Allie discovers far-reaching truths not only about his death, but also about her own life.

Themes

- What is the truth?
- The consequences of one's actions
- Responsibility
- Friendship
- Family relationships
- Teen suicide



Praise for My Life and Death by Alexandra Canarsie

"The most remarkable aspect of this novel is Allie's voice. Her character rings clear as a teenager who covers up her hurt and bewilderment with sarcasm and a stony façade of disinterest. Anyone who works with young people will recognize Allie... Readers will be interested in the evolution of Allie and in the way O'Keefe integrates the relationships of her characters in completely real ways."

—VOYA

"The unexpected twists and turns of the plot as [Allie] finds out what home and family really are make the coming-of-age novel a strong first offering for young adults."

—*School Library Journal*

Before You Read

Ask students to think about and discuss the following questions and issues:

■ How well can you know another person? How well do you think others know you? Who knows you best—friends, parents, teachers? Do we always keep a little part of ourselves secret? Why?

■ What do you think the title—*My Life and Death* by Alexandra Canarsie—means? What do you think the book will be about? Can you think of more than one way to interpret the title?

■ Look at the illustration on the book jacket. After considering the cover and title, what kind of character do you expect this story to be about?

As You Read

Ask readers to consider the following questions:

Chapters 1-5

■ Why is Allie unhappy in her new home? What activity does she take up and why? What are the connections that Allie sees between herself and Jimmy? Describe Allie's teachers. What role do you think they'll play in her life? Why do you think Allie's father left? Why won't Dennis talk about Jimmy's death? What makes Allie suspect that Dennis might have had something to do with Jimmy's death?

Chapters 6-10

■ How does Dennis react to Allie's suspicions? What does Allie do before, during, and after the fire drill? Compare her visit to the police to what she tells Dennis. What's Allie's relationship with her mother? Describe Allie and Dennis's visit to the Muller house. Under what circumstances does Allie meet Mr. Wheatley outside of school?

Chapters 11-15

■ Does Allie really believe Dennis is the murderer? Why or why not? Why does the idea appeal to her? Why does she fight with Tom Creighton? Who's at fault there? Describe her argument with her mother. Why is it so bad? After the accident, what does Dennis confess? Who is Queenie? Why does meeting her upset Allie?

Chapters 16-21

■ What does Allie overhear in the cemetery? What conclusions does she come to and how does she act on those conclusions? What are the consequences of her action? Who is responsible for what happens to Mr. Wheatley? What does Allie later discover about her father? How does that discovery influence her next action? What is her ultimate discovery about Jimmy? Her parents? Herself?

After You Read

After discussing the following issues in class, ask students to write a paper or prepare a presentation on one of the topics.

■ Should Allie have destroyed the last entry in Jimmy's journal, the one that revealed that his death was most likely a suicide? Was her mother justified in withholding the truth from Allie about her father? How is one situation different from the other? Are kids entitled to the truth or to protection from it? What about adults?

■ Allie says she never did anything to Tom Creighton. Is that true? How responsible is she for his attack on her? Would Creighton eventually have done something like that anyway? Would that change her responsibility?

■ Whose fault is it that Wheatley had a heart attack? That Tom Creighton was arrested for assault? That Jimmy Muller died?

■ Dennis was torn by fear and guilt, suspecting the truth about how Jimmy died but not really wanting to know it. Should Allie tell Dennis how Jimmy died? How responsible are we for our friends' actions? Can we ever really control another person's behavior?

■ In the final chapters of the book Allie does a few things she never would have done at the beginning. What are they? Do you think these represent real or temporary change in her? What do you think she'll do next?

Writing Activities

■ Write a journal entry. Diaries are important to this book. Allie is always starting a diary but never does it seriously, while Jimmy does keep a diary. Randomly assign students these "seen" and "unseen" characters and ask them to write that person's journal entry at the end of the pivotal day of the showdown in the basement: Dennis, Creighton, Allie's mom, Mrs. Canarsie's boss in the cookie factory, Aunt Darleen, Mr. Wheatley,

Miss Barbosa, Creighton's aunt, the school principal, the emergency room doctor. Read at least one entry from each character aloud. Each person has at least a piece of the "truth." Can any one character see a complete picture of the "truth"? Who has the most complete grasp of the "truth"?

■ Write an imaginary obituary/biography. As homework, have students make a collage of faces—from magazines, newspapers, discarded family photos, etc. In class, have students choose a face from their own or from another student's collage and write an obituary about that person. (To prepare, the teacher may want to bring in a handful of obits from a newspaper, display them on the overhead, and talk about what information they include and what they omit about the deceased.) Or have the students choose a face and write a short, imaginary biography of the person. Discuss how people's appearances can purposely conceal and reveal information about themselves.

Follow-up: Display photos of a variety of well-known people when they were children or teenagers. Include, if possible, school administrators or well-known teachers. Without revealing the identity of the subject, ask students to write a short biography of the person. Afterwards compare the imaginary biographies with the actual facts about the person.

Some internet sites with childhood/young adult photos of famous people:

Mother Teresa
<<http://www.ewtn.com/motherteresa/life.htm>>

Hitler
<<http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/riseofhitler/boyhood.htm>>

Maya Angelou
<<http://www.harryredl.com/angelou.htm>>

Einstein
<http://www.time.com/time/time100/poc/einstein_photo/einstein1.html>

Gandhi
<<http://www.mahatma.org.in/pictures/showpics.jsp?picture=piccat0003&id=1&link=og&cat=pictures>>

Chris Crutcher
<<http://www.aboutcrutcher.com/index.2ts?page=photos>>

■ Write your own obituary. Ask students to imagine they've lived to be ninety and have accomplished all they've wanted to do. Now have the students write their obituaries, following samples first presented on an overhead. What were their personal and professional dreams? How did they come true? What legacy have they left behind?

Group Projects

■ *Class Debate.* Have the class debate whether Allie is a delinquent or a heroine. The premise: Be it resolved that Alexandra Canarsie is a delinquent because of her role in the injuries of Wheatley, her assault on Creighton, her continual distortions of the truth, and her willful disobedience of figures of authority. Divide the class into two teams that will put together arguments to either defend or oppose the premise. Have each team select three speakers to present their side. A quick survey of the rules of debating can be found online on Debate Central at <<http://debate.uvm.edu/meanyparli.html>>. The time limits used in actual debates can be reduced to five minutes per speaker (one to present and one to expand on each side, then one each side to summarize and rebut), so that the total of six speeches can be given within a single class period.

Hear an actual debate first. School debate teams often use real classes as their audiences when hosting teams from other schools. Ask the debate club if they could use the class as an audience for a real or a practice debate. Also, samples of university-level debates can be downloaded from online with RealPlayer at <<http://debate.uvm.edu/parlivid.html>>. When it's time for the class to present its own debate, use the debate team or another class as audience to vote for the winning team.

■ *Mock Trial.* Alexandra Canarsie stands accused of assault against Tom Creighton and for causing injury to Wheatley through her negligence. Students will be needed to play the judge, the bailiff, and the prosecuting and defending attorneys (the attorneys can use legal teams if the class is large enough). Students will also be needed to act as the following defendant/witnesses: Allie, Wheatley, Creighton, Dennis, Miss Barbosa, Mrs. Canarsie, Officer Rivers, and any other actual character in the book who might be relevant. A group of remaining students should be the jury. Each character should prepare a statement beforehand of his or her duties during the trial. The attorneys will need

to prepare opening statements and summations. They should draw up a list of which witnesses they will call for their side and a list of possible questions to ask. The defendant (Allie) and witnesses should prepare a short summary of their character, as well as answers to possible questions they'll be asked. Preparation will need to take place over time and the trial itself can be spread over at least two days for the prosecution and the defense to present their separate cases.

Some internet resources: Sample criminal and civil mock trials can be downloaded from
<<http://www.streetlaw.org/mockt2.html>>

Interdisciplinary Connections

Social Studies

■ Allie goes to live in her mother's hometown after an absence of fifteen years. Homework: Have students find out about their parent's or caretaker's hometown. What was it like fifteen years ago? Today? What are some of the changes and why did they occur?

Psychology/Health: Parenting

■ Allie's mother decides not to tell her daughter about why her marriage broke up. Have students discuss whether she made the right decision. Should parents always tell "the truth" to their children? Have students imagine they are parents and have teenagers of their own. The parents used drugs when they were young. Should they tell their children? Why or why not?

Psychology/Health: Teen Suicide

■ While no teacher's guide or single lesson plan can even begin to address the problem of teen suicide, it shouldn't go unmentioned when part of a book or an assignment. Here are a few resources that might aid in the class discussion of this part of the novel.

Discussion:

According to the American Psychiatric Association, suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth aged 15 to 19. Have students discuss why they think suicide is so widespread, what pressures are unique to today's kids, and what can be done to prevent suicide. Emphasize that suicidal thinking is not a normal response to stress or crisis but that help is

available and relief from the pain that causes such thoughts can be had with treatment.

■ If you would like to make a poster with local information on it, you can find treatment professionals through the local chapter of the American Psychiatric Association, the local community health center, the local hospital's department of psychiatry, or county family services agency. Additionally, or instead, crisis hotline numbers can be displayed in a prominent place for several days. National numbers: National Hopeline Network: 1-800-SUICIDE or 1-800-784-2433; Girls and Boystown National Hotline 1-800-448-3000; Covenant House 1-800-999-9999. You can also check the front of the county phone book for local hotlines.

■ Use the book *My Life and Death by Alexandra Canarsie* as an entry into discussion of suicide. Ask the class to consider these questions. Was Jimmy hiding his pain, or did Dennis simply refuse to see it? If Jimmy had been more open, if he had said, for example, that he was depressed, what should Dennis have said or done? Have the students discuss possible responses, then have them evaluate how effective they think these might have been. Hand out "What to Do When a Friend Is Depressed: a Guide for Students." This three-page booklet from the National Institute of Mental Health and is available as a PDF or as online text from this website:
<<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/friend.cfm>>

Background:

According to the Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide 1999, screening through popular "warning sign" lists can be counterproductive as such behavior is often non-suicidal as well. Such screening may even suggest that suicidal thoughts are a natural and understandable response to stress. A better approach may be to emphasize the "protective factors" that strengthen kids against suicide. The Surgeon General cites the following "protective factors": easy access to a variety of clinical interventions and support for mental, physical, and substance abuse disorders; restricted access to highly lethal methods of suicide; family and community support; support from ongoing medical and mental health care relationships; learned skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, and non-violent handling of disputes. Improved academic performance has also been cited as a preventive measure, especially effective for boys. All programs must be ongoing.

Resources:

■ *Reducing Suicide: A National Imperative* by Goldsmith et al. Institute of Medicine, 2002. A report on suicide, its risk factors, and its prevention, in connection with the National Institute of Mental Health. Available in print; also posted online for free. Chapter Eight focuses on school-based programs. Contents on <<http://books.nap.edu/books/0309083214/html/index.html>>

■ "This Is Teen Reality: Contemplating Suicide" is posted at PBS Teacher Source at <http://www.pbs.org/teachersource/whats_new/health/jun01.shtm>. By Bridget Garza, producer of the film *The Silent Epidemic*, which educates adults and young people on suicide.

■ The Jason Foundation presents educational materials, programs, and in-service training to parents, teachers, youth workers, and teens. Address: 116 Maple Row Blvd., Suite C, Hendersonville, TN 37075. Phone: (615) 264-2323. Website: <<http://www.jasonfoundation.com/flash.html>>.

■ Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE) <<http://www.save.org/>>, FAQs, myths about, reading lists, and more.

■ National Strategy for Suicide Prevention:
Links in Spanish: <<http://www.mentalhealth.org/suicideprevention/espanol.asp>>

State Programs <<http://www.mentalhealth.org/suicideprevention/stateprograms.asp>>

Books:

■ *Night Falls Fast* by Kay Redfield Jamison. Vintage, 2000. A harrowing look at suicide that combines history, biology, and psychology with intimate portraits of suicides. KLIATT calls it "a must read for teachers of the young."

■ *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write about Their Search for Self* by Sara Shandler. Harper Perennial, 1999. In their own words, girls talk about their problems and deepest concerns.

■ *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* by Mary Pipher. Ballantine Books, 1995. A therapist offers portraits of girls struggling to find themselves, then offers concrete suggestions to help girls to build a strong sense of self.

■ *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* by Daniel J. Kindlon and Michael Thompson.

Ballantine Books, 2000. Written by two therapists, the book discusses the anger and fear of boys being raised in the stereotypical masculine atmosphere of cruelty and toughness.

■ *Suicide Prevention: A Crisis Intervention Curriculum for Teenagers and Young Adults* by Judie Smith. Learning Publications, 1989.

■ *The At-Risk Youth: A Comprehensive Resource* by J. Jeffries McWhirter et al. Brooks, Cole, 1997.

Related Lesson Plans

■ Depression

<http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/depression/>

■ Suicide Prevention

<http://www.healthteacher.com/lessonguides/injuries/middle/inj5ms/index.asp>

Notes

About the Author

Neurotically nice, **Susan Heyboer O'Keefe** has secretly longed to mouth off, cut class, and create havoc. A full-time writer, she lives in northern New Jersey with her husband, son, and two parrots named Wallace and Gromit. She is the author of more than a dozen books for children. *MY LIFE AND DEATH BY ALEXANDRA CANARSIE* is her first novel for teens.



And look for these Freestone Books for Young Adults

ELEANOR'S STORY: AN AMERICAN GIRL IN HITLER'S BERLIN by Eleanor Ramrath Garner

HERO by S. L. Rottman

ROUGH WATERS by S. L. Rottman

HEAD ABOVE WATER by S. L. Rottman

MISFITS, INC. NO. 1: THE VANISHING CHIP by Mark Delaney

MISFITS, INC. NO. 2: OF HEROES AND VILLAINS by Mark Delaney

MISFITS, INC. NO. 3: GROWLER'S HORN by Mark Delaney

MISFITS, INC. NO. 4: THE KINGFISHER'S TALE by Mark Delaney

MISFITS, INC. NO. 5: THE PROTESTER'S SONG by Mark Delaney

MISFITS, INC. NO. 6: HIT AND RUN by Mark Delaney

HOGSTY REEF by John Dowd

RARE AND ENDANGERED by John Dowd

CHARLIE'S STORY by Maeve Friel

Peachtree Pointers for *MY LIFE AND DEATH BY ALEXANDRA CANARSIE* was prepared by Susan Heyboer O'Keefe

Many thanks to Gail Langer Karwoski for her suggestions for activities for this guide. She's a former teacher and the author of *SURVIVING JAMESTOWN* and *SEAMAN: THE DOG WHO EXPLORED THE WEST WITH LEWIS AND CLARK*.



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