

READING GROUP GUIDE



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About the Book

Bea Coughlin is a survivor. Born with cerebral palsy, she has learned to navigate a world that was not made for her wheelchair and to overcome the obstacles life has put in her way. After a shooter enters her small and close-knit school, Bea must learn how to heal and survive all over again. With the help of her community and animal therapy, she gains the strength to face her fears and use her voice to advocate for change.

A Note to Teachers: American students are all too familiar with active shooter drills. They know what to do in case of a lockdown or Code Red: *run, hide, fight*. For many students, even a drill can be a scary experience. *Please Pay Attention* handles the depiction of a school shooting with sensitivity and grace, but students may still find some passages difficult to read. Yet this is precisely what makes it an important book to teach. While we prepare students for running and hiding, we do not teach them about what happens afterward: *surviving*.

This guide is focused on the message of hope in Sumner's novel. It will help prepare your students with tools to understand the emotions that come after a traumatic experience, helping them become more resilient and empathetic.

Discussion Questions

1. A novel written as a letter or series of letters is called an *epistolary novel*—this comes from the Greek word *epistole*, which means *letter*. Explore the ways in which this book is a letter to someone. Who do you think is the intended recipient?
2. Why does Bea's school pair sixth graders with kindergarteners? Who is Bea's "Little"? What responsibilities does Bea have as an older Buddy? How do you know she takes her role seriously?
3. Look up the definitions of the qualities Cedar Crest values: leadership, stewardship, friendship (p. 1). What do these qualities have in common? How are they different? How does Bea demonstrate that she has these qualities?
4. Describe the relationships between Bea, Max, Lucy, and Aaron. Although they are not relatives, how have they formed a sort of "found family"? Who are the people in your life that are so important to you that they are like family?
5. How does Ms. Canelli encourage Bea to keep drawing (just not on the desk)? Think of a time that a teacher encouraged you. How did their encouragement help you? Why is it important to be a person that encourages others?

READING GROUP GUIDE

6. Explain the meaning of Max and Bea's promise: "Xs to Xs."
7. Why is Easter especially meaningful to Bea?
8. How does the author show that Josie is experiencing anxiety? How does Bea help her feel better? Why do you think this works? What other things do you think Bea could do to help Josie?
9. At the beginning of the section entitled "Hide," Bea writes, "These are my people, sir, / and it's important that you can picture them" (p. 57). Why is it important for Bea to tell the reader specific details about the people who will be and are impacted by the shooting at her school? How does being able to picture them impact the way you feel about what happens?
10. As Josie's sixth-grade Buddy, one of Bea's jobs is "to show the Little / how to live with Intention" (p. 62). What does it mean to live with intention? What actions reveal the ways that Max, Bea, Lucy, and Trina are living with intention?
11. Pages 70–73 describe Bea's experience during the shooting and evacuation at her school. Why do you think it is important for Bea to describe her experience to the reader? What details about the day does Bea emphasize? How did you feel when you were reading this section?
12. Bea includes very few details about the shooter's identity or motive. Why do you think she did not include these details? What does she want the reader to remember instead?
13. After the shooting, Bea does not want to talk about how she's feeling, and at first she pushes Max away. Why do you think people sometimes respond to a traumatic event by isolating or pushing others away? How can understanding this help you respond with kindness when you see someone who is hurting or struggling? When you are upset, do you seek comfort from others, or do you want space?
14. Why does Bea start to sleep on the porch instead of in her bedroom?
15. How does working with Dumpling help Bea process her feelings? What helps you when you feel anxious or afraid?
16. What causes Bea to fall off Dumpling? How does this relate to her ongoing fears after surviving the shooting?

READING GROUP GUIDE

17. Why does Bea feel like she failed? How does Max reassure her?

18. After falling off her horse, Bea realizes, “I need to go back / before the memory of the fall / grows bigger / than the fall itself” (p. 208). How could this quote apply to the way Bea feels about returning to school? Why do you think it is important to face your fears?

19. On page 9, Bea says, “I’ve never been one to put up much of a fight.” At the end of the book, she has changed her mind and states, “Maybe I *am* a fighter” (p. 206). What helps her decide to not give up? When you want to give up, what helps you keep going?

Poetry Activities

Allusion is a literary term for an author referencing another work of art or literature or another well-known person or event. Allusions often add meaning by making connections. On page 15, Bea writes:

If brick walls can lead to train platforms
and wardrobes to forests
and rabbit holes to tea parties
and twisters to yellow brick roads,
then why can’t my butterfly in purple pen
come to life?

Identify the allusions in this passage. How does recognizing the allusions help you understand Bea?

Close reading is the practice of looking at the way specific words, phrases, and punctuation help create deeper meaning or understanding. You can practice close reading by looking at this passage from page 46 where Bea is watching videos of a magician to learn how to do a card trick:

“Show the little lady whatcha got!”

An order.

A cheer.

A prayer.

Examine the differences between an order, a cheer, and a prayer. How can the magician’s words be all three of these things at the same time? What does it tell you about the way the magician is feeling about the magic trick?

READING GROUP GUIDE

Imagery is the use of words that appeal to the senses like sight, smell, taste, or touch. Poets use imagery to create a sensory experience, allowing readers to connect to their poem more deeply. Look at the section entitled “Arts & Crafts” on pages 123–129 or find another passage in *Please Pay Attention* that uses imagery. What senses do the words appeal to and how does it help you imagine the scene? One way to practice using imagery in writing is to write a detailed description of an item of food. Give each student an item of food (suggestions: a stick of gum, a peppermint, a saltine cracker, a strawberry, a cookie). Read Bea’s description of eating a cherry on pages 13–14, then instruct students to look closely at the food and write descriptive details about what they see, smell, feel, and taste.

Similes and metaphors are forms of figurative language that compare two things that would not normally be compared. By making a connection, the writer can help the reader understand a character’s feelings more deeply. Similes use the words like or a s , while metaphors are a direct comparison.

One example of a simile is on page 28:

“I couldn’t help it!” I squeak,
because Max hardly ever gets mad,
so when she does,
it lands like a too-heavy blanket on my shoulders.

What two things are being compared in this simile? What does this simile help you understand about the way that Bea is feeling? How does it help you understand the relationship between Max and Bea? As you read, look for other similes and metaphors and write them down along with the page number in a notebook. Choose one and write a paragraph that explains how the figurative language deepens your understanding.

Syntax is the way that poets use the arrangement of words to create meaning, including word order, punctuation, sentence length, and spacing. Look at the poem “Dear Sir” on pages 97–98, and identify all the places where syntax helps create meaning or effect.

Symbolism is the use of objects to represent ideas. Symbolism helps deepen a poem’s meaning. How does the author use the symbol of the rainbow? (p. 214–220). What does the rainbow symbolize to Bea? What does it symbolize for the reader?

READING GROUP GUIDE

Writing as Healing

A Note to Teachers: Pages 70–93 describe Bea’s traumatic experience during the shooting and evacuation at her school. **Trauma Theory** is a growing field of literary study that examines how literature deals with events that are traumatic for individual characters or communities. These texts focus on themes of identity, memory, and resilience. Authors use techniques like fragmented narratives to show the way that people experience trauma—where initial memories may be largely sensory and limited and how understanding of what happened and how it has impacted a person unfolds over time. This activity will help you guide your students to think about the ways that writing can help them process an event:

- Have your students think about a time in their life when they had a strong emotional response to an event. This does not need to be a traumatic event.
- Guide students to write about the event in three different ways: First, have them write in the style of a newspaper report. Second, have them write a first-person narrative about the event. Third, have them write a poem about the event in the style of *Please Pay Attention*.
- Afterward, have the students reflect on which account feels the most like the way they felt during the event—in other words, which account makes them feel closer to what they experienced. Which account makes them feel more distant from the experience?
- Ask students to think about why Bea wrote about her experience in poetry. How do they think writing about what happened helped Bea start to heal?
- As a class discuss how and why it could be helpful to write each of the different types of narratives after experiencing something traumatic or difficult.

Extension Activities

1. Bea explains that Intention and Curiosity are two of Ceder Crest’s core values. (p. 62) What are your school’s mission statement and core values? Write a personal essay about the core value that means the most to you, and describe the actions you take (or could take) to demonstrate this value. As an extra activity, work with your teacher and classmates to develop a set of core values for your classroom.

READING GROUP GUIDE

2. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that can occur after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. Research the causes and symptoms of PTSD, and identify places in the text where Bea exhibits these symptoms. What treatments can help people with PTSD? What helps Bea begin to heal?

3. After the shooting, Bea writes, “I am a planet drifting / farther / and / farther / away from everything / I thought was true” (p. 103–104). How does connecting with others help Bea resolve her doubts? Think of a time in your life when you found yourself questioning or challenging something you once believed was true. Write a personal essay about this time. Did you resolve your questions, or are you still in a place of questioning?

4. Max tries to help Bea stop dwelling on her bad memories by encouraging her to sew colorful G-tube pads to donate to the hospital (p. 123–129). Why is helping others good for mental health? Research local or regional projects that you can do to help others. The website <https://createtodonate.org/> is a good place to find ideas, instructions, and tutorials. You may want to choose one item to make and donate as a class project.

5. On pages 171–172, Bea writes about the “Why” questions she had when she was little and the “Why” questions that she has now. Think about your own “Whys” and brainstorm a list of fifteen questions you have, including questions that probably have straightforward answers and questions that may have no set answer. Choose one of your questions to research, and present your findings.

6. After dwelling on failure (p. 201–202), Bea realizes that to move forward, she must shift her mindset: “I focus on what I can do / instead of what I cannot” (p. 205). Make a list of all the things you can do. Use this list to create a personal mantra (an affirmation that you can repeat to yourself when you need encouragement or motivation). Decorate your personal mantra, and put it somewhere you will see it daily.

7. In *Please Pay Attention*, equine-assisted therapy helps Bea process her emotions and start to heal. Using library resources and trusted internet databases, research the roles that animals play in therapy. What are some of the physical and mental health conditions that can be addressed with animal therapy? What roles do the animals play? How are the animals trained?

READING GROUP GUIDE

Note to Teachers: Your local hospital, nursing home, sheriff or fire department may have a therapy dog program. If so, you may want to reach out to see if they can visit your class to talk about the program.

8. Bea helps Josie by being her Buddy, but she also received help from Janae, who was her Buddy when she was little (p. 22). Later, she writes that her therapy horse, Dumpling, is her Buddy (p. 207–213). Write about a time when someone helped you. Why did you need help or encouragement? What did they do to help you? How can you pay that kindness forward the way that Bea does with Josie?

9. Please Pay Attention is written as a letter asking for changes to laws protecting students with special needs and to make it more difficult for people who should not have guns to access them. Think about an issue that you care about, and write a letter to a local or national representative to ask them to fight for changes. Like Bea, introduce yourself and explain why the issue matters to you before you ask them to take a specific action to help.

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