

BOOKNOTES

READERS GUIDE

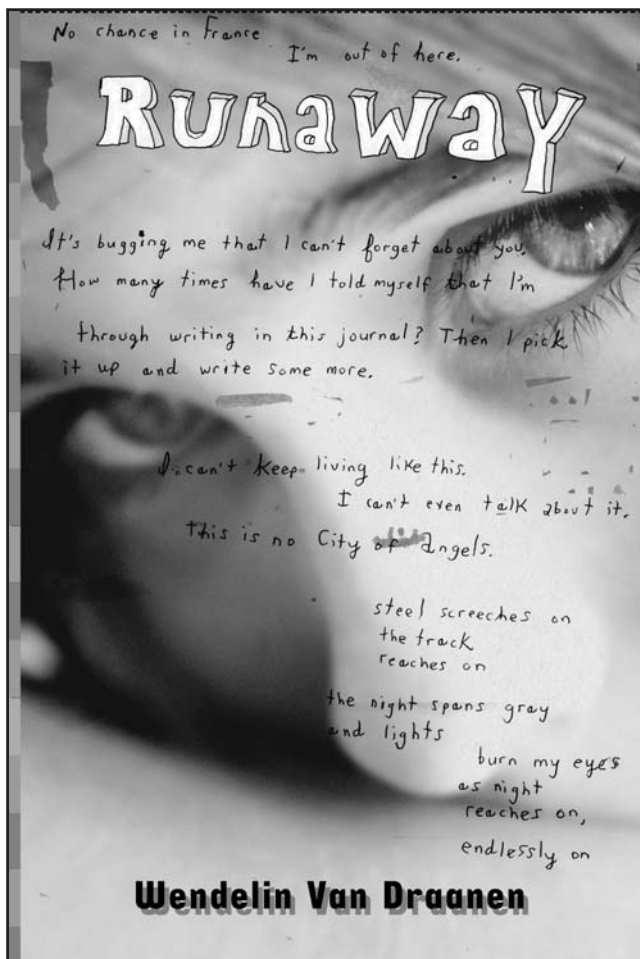
Discussion Questions and Journal Writing Activities Inside!

Grades 5 up

about the book

In this story of 12-year-old runaway Holly Janquell, hope, resilience, forgiveness, and the healing power of words lead this remarkable heroine on a quest for a family and home to call her own.

Holly Janquell is no typical sixth grader. Having spent much of her young life homeless with her drug-addicted mother, Holly becomes a ward of social services after her mother dies from an overdose. Her experience in foster care goes from bad to worse as she endures various forms of abuse, until she decides to escape her circumstances by running away. Holly has the brain, heart, and soul of a poet: gifts that slowly emerge after a kind teacher presents her with a journal and encourages her to write. As she makes her way to California to become a “sea gypsy,” the journal and the words she enters into it become a lifeline of hope, resilience, courage, and strength. Ultimately, Holly realizes that words are not just words, and poetry has the power to heal even the most wounded of hearts.



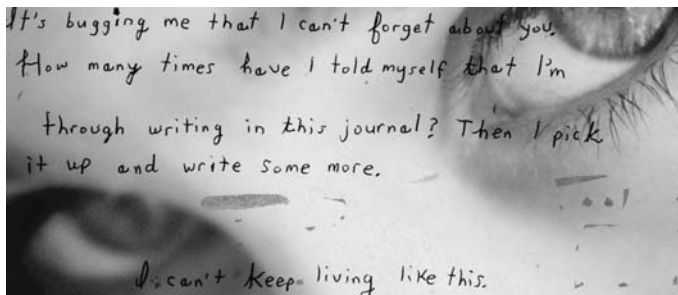
Alfred A. Knopf hardcover: 978-0-375-83522-3 (0-375-83522-9)
GLB: 978-0-375-93522-0 (0-375-93522-3)

**“Just surviving
gets you nowhere.”**

—Holly Janquell in *Runaway*

questions for group discussion

- Holly uses sarcasm throughout the story. What is sarcasm, and why do you think Holly resorts to it so often? Do you use sarcasm? If so, in what situations do you use it? What responses do you tend to get after you make sarcastic comments or statements?
- Before Holly runs away, she endures many types of abuse. Discuss the abuses that Holly has faced, both on the street with her mother, with the Fisks, and with the Evans. Do you think, in light of her circumstances, she made the right decision to run away? Why or why not?



- Early on in the story, Holly claims that her journal is stupid and dangerous. How could a journal, or writing in one, be dangerous? Later in the story, Venus steals the journal and reads it. Why does Holly write, "You can steal my money, you can steal my food, but, man, touch my journal and I'm going to beat the crud out of you!" (p. 127) Why is stealing a person's journal an extreme invasion of privacy?
- Throughout the story, Holly writes a variety of poems. Choose one from the first half of the book and one from the second half. Analyze the meanings of the poems and how Holly grows as a poet. Discuss the themes that her poetry conveys and how those themes parallel her personal evolution.
- Holly is incredibly smart and resourceful. Discuss ways in which Holly uses her resourcefulness and intelligence to survive. In what situations do her survival instincts overcome her smarts and sense of reality?
- Discuss why Holly won't refer to herself as homeless. When in the story does this denial begin to break down? Why does Holly's admission of her situation enable her to finally move toward finding the family she so craves?
- Holly rations food throughout her journey. Discuss what a day would be like without eating the proper amount of food. Explore ways in which the class can help provide food for the homeless in their own community.
- On page 36, a homeless woman says to Holly, "Homeless don't write in journals!" What assumptions have your students made about the homeless? Challenge them to research the facts about homelessness and report their findings to the class.
- Discuss how throughout her struggles, Holly retains her dignity and self-respect. How does she demonstrate compassion for her fellow man, and how does she manage to still appreciate the little she does have?
- After Holly finds what she thinks is a safe house by the cement river, she writes, "Thinking that way fills me with hope. And stupid and naïve or not, without hope, I've got nothing." (p. 82) Discuss why hope is so necessary for one's survival.
- After the rescue wagon lady defends Holly from Venus, Holly writes, "But something about one person noticing that I'm *not* the bad one makes me feel better. Less alone." (p. 132) Explain what Holly means. Why is this moment a personal turning point for her?
- How does writing in her journal help Holly in ways that counselors and social workers cannot?

journal writing activities

Challenge your students to write their own journal entries using the following suggestions:

- Holly's teacher, Mrs. Leone, gives Holly a journal and as a first assignment asks her to put her most embarrassing experience in the form of a cinquain poem. In order to relate to Holly as a character, write your own cinquain poem of an embarrassing moment. (You may want to refer students to the Web site section of this guide to learn about writing cinquain and other forms of poetry).
- Reread the incomplete poem on page 16. In this journal entry, try to "become" Holly and express, in poetry, why she pushed Mrs. Leone away.
- Throughout the story, Holly is constantly in search of the basic things she needs to survive: food, clothing, shelter, light. Take a personal inventory of your stuff. Separate the list into things that you *need* and things that you have because you *want* to have them. Write in your journal how this exercise has caused you to examine the importance of possessions and your level of appreciation for what you have in life.
- Holly fantasizes about how her life will be once she gets settled. Her fantasy contradicts her realities every step of the way. Write about a fantasy you have for your future and how you can turn your fantasy into reality.
- Holly steals to get by. Write about the moral and ethical aspects of her stealing. Is it right or wrong? Is it that simple? When, if ever, is it acceptable to steal?
- In her desperation to escape Aaronville, Holly drops from a tree onto a moving train. She describes it as the scariest thing she's ever done. Write about the scariest thing you've ever done, and if you would do it again.
- In this journal entry, put yourself in Holly's shoes: you are alone in the world with no family, no home, and no friends. Now write about the people you would miss the most and why.
- Holly describes how she and her mother would eat KFC and canned spiced peaches for Thanksgiving dinner instead of roast turkey. Even though she yearned for the traditional Thanksgiving fare, she requested spiced peaches for her first Thanksgiving with Vera and Meg. Write about a tradition in your family that you hold dear, and also about a tradition that you would like to change.

vocabulary/ use of language

Encourage students to identify unfamiliar words, and try to define them using hints from the context of the story. Such words may include: *skittish* (p. 13), *ironic* (p. 35), *shinnied* (p. 39), *loath* (p. 53), *paranoid* (p. 53), *putrid* (p. 64), *plucky* (p. 78), *shrewd* (p. 78), *dilapidated* (p. 90), *uppity* (p. 130), *rancid* (p. 170), and *sabotaged* (p. 217).

related titles

by theme

Harry Sue

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Alfred A. Knopf hardcover:

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about the author

Wendelin Van Draanen began keeping a journal after a family tragedy. Writing started as a way to sort through her feelings and frustrations, but grew into something she enjoyed for its own sake, and eventually became a new and rewarding career. Van Draanen is the author of the Sammy Keyes mysteries and the Shredderman series. She lives in Central California.

For more information about the author, visit

www.wendelinvandraanen.com

internet resources

Stand Up for Kids

www.standupforkids.org

This site's mission is a commitment to the rescue of homeless and street kids, and offers an abundance of facts and information about the realities of runaway children.

Education World

www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr144.shtml

This site contains an article about the benefits of journal writing and writing prompts to facilitate student journal writing.

Forms of Poetry for Children

falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/poeform.htm

This site provides a list of various poetry forms, how to write poems, and examples of popular poetry forms for children.