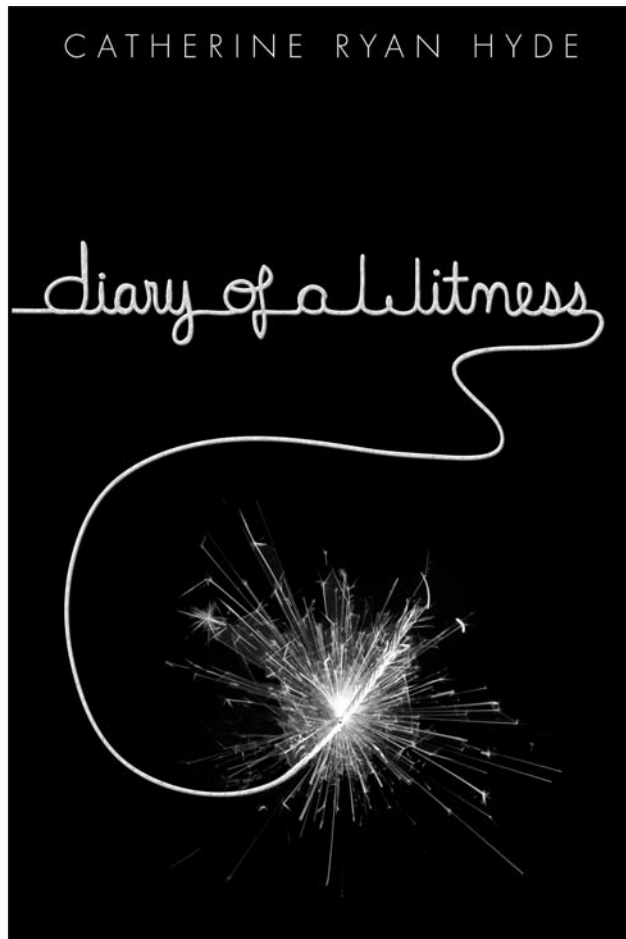


# BOOKNOTES

readers guide



Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-856846  
GLB: 978-0-375-95684-0

## THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Bullies • Social Situations  
Friendship • Family • Making Choices

GRADES 7 UP

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Will and Ernie become best friends by default—Will is a geek, Ernie is obese, and no one else wants to be their friend. Unfortunately, the jocks love nothing better than to terrorize Will and Ernie every chance they get, and, in any given school day, there are plenty of chances. Ernie learns avoidance tactics, but when inundated with the hurtful comments and painful physical jabs, Will feels compelled to confront the jocks. Will's comments only lead to more humiliation and pain, until one day Will decides he isn't going to tolerate the abuse another day. When his attempt to take his own life fails, and Ernie is pushed down a flight of stairs, both boys stay home from school and relish their time away from their tormentors. On their return to school, life is back to normal. But when a girl calls Will a loser, he resolves to change his tortured existence at high school and protect himself and Ernie from the taunts of the bullies. On Will's last day of school, he begs Ernie to go in late and, secretly, Will leaves his house with a gun. But Ernie figures out his friend's plan, and he must call the police before anyone is hurt—anyone, that is, except Will.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Divide students into small groups and ask each group to read about a school shooting that has occurred in the previous ten years. Go to [www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0777958.html](http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0777958.html). This Web site lists school shootings since 1996. As a class, brainstorm with students the similarities and differences of the shootings. For example: the profile of the shooter(s), the type and location of the school, and the eventual outcome of the victims and the shooter(s).

# QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

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- Bullying often occurs in locker rooms and gym class where weaker students feel the most vulnerable. How could adult supervision help prevent bullying? Why are coaches not more readily available to stop these occurrences?
- Why does Ernie say that the jocks are cowards? Does his reasoning hold true throughout the novel? Why or why not?
- Nothing is off limits to the jocks; no topic too sensitive. About what do the jocks tease Ernie and Will that should be left alone? How do Ernie and Will respond differently to the taunts? How does their friendship strengthen through what they experience?
- Ernie tells Mr. Bayliss that the truth is always harder than a lie because it is the truth. (p. 11) What does Ernie mean by this? How does this apply to the tough decisions Ernie has to make to prevent Will from hurting himself and others?
- When Will's brother dies in the boating accident, what changes in Will's home life and at school? How do the changes affect Will's resolve about the bullies and what he is going to do about them?
- When Ernie saves Will's life from his attempted suicide, at the time Will does not appear grateful to Ernie for his intervention. What happens to change Will's attitude toward Ernie for his interference?
- Will does his best to protect and stand up for Ernie, but Ernie does not seem to know how to protect Will. In what ways does Ernie take care of Will? How does each boy benefit from the other's style of care?
- What role do Will's and Ernie's families play in their lives? How does Uncle Max help both of the boys out of serious trouble? Does Uncle Max give Ernie too much freedom to make life-altering decisions? Why or why not?
- After Ernie and Will's trip to the cabin, Will is angry to be home and have to go to school. Ernie becomes worried about how Will will handle returning to school. How does Will's plan to use the pepper spray backfire? What happens to escalate the growing tension between the bullies and Will and Ernie?
- The morning that Ernie stops by Will's house and sees the shotgun missing from the gun rack and the metal shavings on the floor, he knows what Will is going to do. Without hesitation Ernie dials 911 just as soon as Will leaves the house. Did Ernie betray his best friend by reporting Will's intentions? Why or why not? What does Ernie's action say about the friendship between the two boys? How does Will's response affect Ernie?
- When Ernie finally reveals to the cop the magnitude of the harassment and bullying by the jocks, he is relieved of a burden, and the officer's response validates the enormity of what Will and Ernie have endured. Why is the officer surprised that Ernie did not let Will carry out his plan to kill the jocks?
- What is ironic about the fact that the jocks finally leave Ernie alone and return his jacket to him clean?

## WRITING ACTIVITIES

- Ernie keeps a journal of his experience with Will; the story is a result of that journal. Ask students to write from Will's point of view ten to fifteen journal entries of pivotal events throughout the story. Then ask students to compare the journal entries students write to the events in the novel written from Ernie's point of view.
- The thematic last line of the book, "It always seems to boil down to respect," could refer to several characters and several different events in the book. Ask students to select one event and write one page showing how respect or lack of respect play a role in shaping what happens to the character and the outcome of that particular situation. Students can share their written reflections with the class, and as a class discuss implications for students both in and out of school.
- Ernie writes about the day of his great fishing adventure even though it ends in tragedy. Ask students to reread Ernie's day on the fishing boat beginning on page 23, and then ask students to write about a day etched in their memory. Students should use dialogue and powerful verbs. Upon completion of their narratives, place their stories in a class book to share with other classes.

Photo credit: Charlotte Alexander



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Catherine Ryan Hyde** is an acclaimed novelist and award-winning short-story writer whose novel *Pay It Forward* was named an ALA Book of the Year and made into a feature film. Her previous young adult titles include *Becoming Chloe*, *The Year of My Miraculous Reappearance*, and *The Day I Killed James*. She lives in Cambria, California. Her Web site is [www.cryanhyde.com](http://www.cryanhyde.com).

## INTERNET RESOURCES

### Teen Health—Overweight Teens

[kidshealth.org/teen/food\\_fitness/dieting/obesity.html](http://kidshealth.org/teen/food_fitness/dieting/obesity.html)

### Teen Obesity Statistics

[www.troubledteen101.com/articles42.html](http://www.troubledteen101.com/articles42.html)

### News Report on Bullying

[www.abcnews.go.com/US/LegalCenter/story?id=2256089&page=1](http://www.abcnews.go.com/US/LegalCenter/story?id=2256089&page=1)

### High School Bullying on the Rise

[www.associatedcontent.com/article/60287/high\\_school\\_bullying\\_society\\_and\\_the.html](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/60287/high_school_bullying_society_and_the.html)

### Help for Families in Need

[www.familysupportamerica.org](http://www.familysupportamerica.org)

### Teen 411—A Place to Find Help

[www.child.net/teenhelp.htm](http://www.child.net/teenhelp.htm)

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## RELATED TITLES BY THEME



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Tom and Laura McNeal  
Bullies • Social Situations • Friendship • Divorce  
Grades 9-12  
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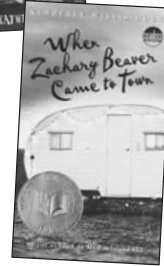
### Life in the Fat Lane

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### Macaroni Boy

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### When Zachary Beaver Came to Town

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