

The Sweet In-Between Reading Group Guide

About This Guide

When a college girl is accidentally shot and killed in the house next door, Kendra Lugo is reminded just how tenuous life is. Not that she needs much in the way of reminders. Ever since her father was sent to prison for drug trafficking, Kenny has been living in a depressed coastal town in Virginia with Aunt Glo -- who isn't actually her aunt, but her dad's girlfriend. The biggest misfit in a house of misfits, Kenny is about to turn eighteen, and this official crossing into adulthood has her all twisted up inside. If a girl with everything can be shot and killed in a moment of confusion, what hope does a girl with nothing have? What will happen to Kenny if Aunt Glo won't let her live in her house anymore? Maybe if she didn't have a girl's body -- if she didn't have to grow up at all -- life would be just a little bit easier. Casting about for her place in the world, Kenny finds redemption in unexpected places in this enchanting and deceptively humble novel by Sheri Reynolds.

Questions for Discussion

1. Kenny appears to be a lesbian -- or at least gender-confused, as Aunt Glo says. But the reality is much more complex. What is your impression of Kenny at the beginning of the book? Do your feelings about her change as you learn why she dresses like a boy? Why does the author slowly dole out the underlying causes of Kenny's eccentric behavior instead of revealing them all at the beginning?

2. Beneath her clothes, Kenny wears several layers of protective clothing, including an ACE bandage strapped around her chest, two pairs of underwear, and biker shorts. She also dresses like a teenage boy. How do boys' clothes serve as another protective layer? Why does she feel safer dressed as a boy? Why does the shooting accident that results in Clara Tinsley's death rattle her sense of security? What does Kenny mean when she says, "I don't know how to look. It's so hard to know how to look" [p.142]?
3. The onset of puberty has made Kenny squeamish and uncomfortable with her body. How does the author's depiction of adolescence compare to your own memories of that time? Can you relate to Kenny's ambivalence?
4. Why do you think Kenny uses the words "sick" and "sicko" so often? How are sickness and sex linked in the novel and how does that relate to her body image?
5. When Kenny and Daphne build a shrine on the beach in the dead college girl's memory, Kenny also wants to create one for the girl's friend Rhonda, who witnessed the tragic accident. Why does Kenny mourn for Rhonda?

6. Many of the characters are addicted to something that dulls their feelings of pain or loss. Why does Kenny call living at Aunt Glo's her "fix" [p. 22]? What does she need from Aunt Glo? Who else is a fix for Kenny and why?
7. Kenny takes care of the household chores and Daphne in order to make herself indispensable to Aunt Glo. She's also proud of the skills she's developed in renovating the workshop. Why does Kenny work so hard? What is she trying to achieve?
8. The burglars in Jarvis's house turn out to be two young women with the wrong address. A little old lady turns out to be a drug dealer. In what other ways in the novel are appearances deceiving? Are women more likely to be judged by appearances than men? How does Kenny wish to be judged?
9. How do Ms. Brady's photography lessons and Aunt Glo's slides illustrate the author's message about appearances?
10. Quincy and his buddy crassly use an orange as a stand-in for the female sex organ. What observation does Kenny later make about the orange rind and the orange membrane and how does that transform the symbolism of the orange?

11. How do you feel about Kenny's decision to stay silent about the ways in which she was bullied and violated? Could she have spoken up? Do you understand why she doesn't?
12. Despite their actions, none of the male characters is depicted as a monster but as a deeply flawed human being. How do you view Tim-Tim, Jarvis, and Kenny's father, Greg? Do your feelings about these characters fluctuate throughout the novel, and if so, why?
13. The raggedy beach town where Kenny lives is undergoing transition, with new developments taking over abandoned sites and wealthy outsiders forcing out longtime residents. Where do you see tensions between the old and the new? What is lost and what is gained?
14. What does Sneaky mean when she tells Kenny, "You're like a boy in all the good ways, and you're kind of like a girl in all the good ways, too" [p. 201]. Which qualities does Kenny possess that are typically associated with being masculine or feminine? Should these qualities be considered gender-specific?
15. How are fish and fishing used as metaphors in the novel? Why is it significant that Kenny photographs the fish carcass on the beach?

16. Discuss the other photographs that Kenny takes. What role does photography play for Kenny? What does the camera finally allow her to do?