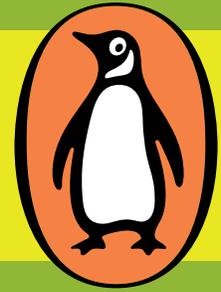
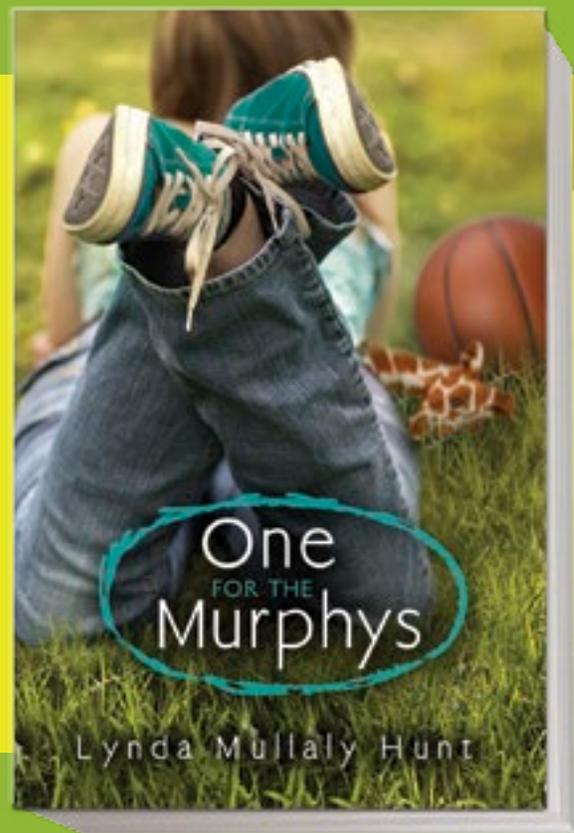
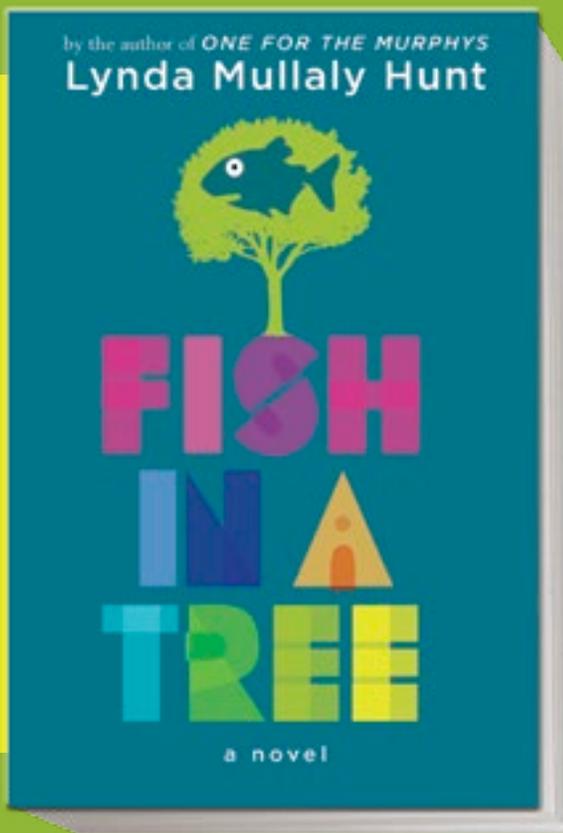


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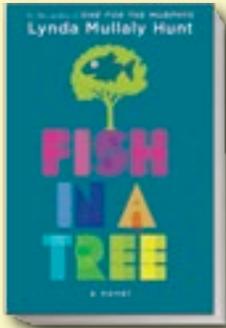
An Educator's Guide to LYNDA MULLALY HUNT



INSPIRE • ENGAGE • EDUCATE

The materials in this guide are aligned to Common Core State Standards for Grades 5–8

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Dear Educator:

The lesson plans outlined within this guide provide an opportunity to teach both *One for the Murphys* and *Fish in a Tree*, and/or recommend these books to your students in literature circles, independent reading sessions and for extra-curricular reading. In exploring Lynda Mullaly Hunt's novels in the classroom, you will uncover themes of courage, family and friendship, perseverance, and staying true to oneself.

The core curriculum lesson plans for *One for the Murphys* present discussion questions and activities that are aligned to Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts for grades 5-8. The lesson plans for *Fish in a Tree* are aligned to Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, History, and Social Studies for grades 5-7.

Both novels offer the opportunity to connect your students with contemporary characters, settings, and relatable issues and dilemmas. It is our hope that you will adopt Lynda's books for your curriculum, and suggest them to your students for further reading and exploration. Thank you for your continued support of our books and our brand.

—Penguin School & Library Marketing Team

About the Author

Lynda Mullaly Hunt is the author of *One for the Murphys*, which has been recognized by 24 states as an award-winning middle-grade novel. She is a former teacher and Scenario Writing coach. Currently, Lynda is the Director of the SCBWI-NE Whispering Pines Retreat. She lives with her husband, two kids, an impetuous beagle and a beagle-loathing cat. *Fish in a Tree* is Lynda's second novel.



Praise for Lynda Mullaly Hunt's *One for the Murphys*

"This novel speaks to the universal experience of growing up but will especially resonate with readers who have questioned the hands they have been dealt and wonder how to move forward nonetheless."

— *The Horn Book*

★ "By the end of this poignant debut, readers will be applauding Carley's strength." — *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ "Readers will be cheering her on." — *Booklist*, starred review

"Undeniably affecting. Hunt's writing is strong and her characters well-developed and believable . . ." — *Publishers Weekly*

"This is a beautiful book, filled with hope. You'll cry and laugh along with Carley as she learns to lower her defenses enough to love—and, more surprisingly, be loved. It's a story you'll long remember."

—Patricia Reilly Giff, Newbery Honor-winning author of *Pictures of Hollis Woods* and *Lily's Crossing*

"Hunt's writing is fearless and *One for the Murphys* is a story that is at once compassionate, thought-provoking and beautifully told. From the first page, I was drawn into Carley's story. She is a character not to be missed or forgotten."

—Jacqueline Woodson, three-time Newbery Honor author

Discussion questions for *One For the Murphys* were written by both Tristan Kennedy Upson, M.Ed., a teacher in New Hampshire, and Lynda Mullaly Hunt, M.Ed., the author, who is also a teacher. Curriculum Lesson Plans for *Fish in a Tree* was created by Jennifer M. Bogard, who taught elementary school for more than ten years. She is a literacy coach in southern Maine and a PhD candidate at Lesley University. Jennifer is also an adjunct professor in the Language and Literacy Division of the Graduate School of Education at Lesley University.



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Classroom Lesson Plans for *Fish in a Tree*

Part One: Pages 1-91

1. The title of the story, *Fish in a Tree*, reflects Albert Einstein's quotation: "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

Ask students to do a Quick Write in their reading or writing notebooks to explore the following questions and then come to small groups prepared to discuss their thoughts.

- Look closely at the cover and predict what the story might be about based on the title, images, and colors.
- When might someone feel as if he or she is a fish in a tree? Have you ever felt this way?
- What big ideas or themes has the author written about in the past?
- Infer why Lynda Mullaly Hunt chose this title.

2. Display and discuss Lynda Mullaly Hunt's dedication page in two stages: first, her dedication for teachers and next, her dedication for kids (below).

For teachers:

- *who see the child before the student*
- *who remind us that we all have special gifts to offer the world*
- *who foster the importance of standing out rather than fitting in.*

Ask students to consider:

- What does it mean to "see the child before the student"?
- What specific words or phrases strike you? Why do you think the author chose these specific words?
- What does the author want teachers to know?

For kids:

- *who find their grit to conquer life's challenges—no matter what those challenges may be.*
- *You are heroes.*
- *This book is for you.*
- Ask students to infer the meaning of grit using the context.
- What does the author want kids to know?

3. Invite small groups to research articles, videos, interviews, and podcasts about the concept of having a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset, which is a popular topic today.

- Have groups summarize the information they find.
- As a class, integrate the information from the different sources and create a visual display or diagram to highlight the important points.
- Have partnerships create a nonlinguistic representation of a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset such as a skit, tableau, or sketch.
- Gather a collection of picture books with the theme of having a growth mindset and grit and begin a chart of titles.

**Correlates to Common Core Standards: SL.5-7.1, RL.5-7.2, RL.5-7.4, L.5-7.4, W.5-7.7, RI.5-7.2, RI.5-7.4, RI.5-7.9

4. At the beginning of the story, we learn that school is painful for Ally and that she doesn't feel as if she fits in with her peers. When thinking about her class, she says, "Maybe they think I can't hear their words: Freak. Dumb. Loser" (p. 3).

- Have students discuss the effect of these word choices.



- Ask students to begin a word collection list in which they collect powerful words or phrases that describe the way Ally sees herself and the way others perceive her.
- Have students describe Ally’s relationship with Mrs. Hall.

5. Ally escapes into mind movies as a relief from the situations she experiences.

- Have students create an ongoing chart in which they explore the cause of each mind movie as they read about them.
- After explaining the cause, have students sketch the mind movie.
- Ask students to respond to the following question in their reading or writing journals: What does this mind movie reveal about Ally?
- As students read further into the text, be sure to highlight the revealing mind movies on pages 68, 74, 159, 191, 200, and 267.
- Ask students to notice the ways in which the author transitions the reader from the mind movie back to present.

6. The author uses many comparisons throughout the story to make her message clear for readers. (We later learn that Albert finds it helpful to think in comparisons or analogies.) Alert students to the use of figurative language.

- On page 2, Ally says, “teachers are like the machines that take quarters for bouncy balls. You know what you’re going to get. Yet, you don’t know, too.”
- Have students consider the relationship among what is being compared.
- In their reader’s notebooks, have students begin a two-column chart to collect and examine the comparisons they find as they read along:

Comparison and Page Number	Explain the Meaning
Teachers are like the machines that take quarters for bouncy balls. You know what you’re going to get. Yet, you don’t know, too. p. 2	
I need attention like a fish needs a snorkel. p. 9	
<p>The letters on the poster look like black beetles marching across the wall. p. 13</p> <p>I think about how me avoiding consequences would be like the rain avoiding the sky. p. 14</p> <p>“I miss my Grandpa,” I say. Three words that hold sadness like a tree holds leaves. p. 19</p>	

*Students will find additional comparisons throughout the book including pages: 20, 23, 24, 29, 35, 40, 46, 53, 67, 124, 146, 189, 191, 214, 245, 267

7. On page 11, Ally says, “I wish I had my Sketchbook of Impossible Things. It’s the only thing that makes me feel like I’m not a waste of space.” In the sketchbook, Ally draws the images she sees in her mind movies.

- Have students discuss: Why does Ally feel like a “waste of space”?
- What are Ally’s strengths?
- Bring students back to this idea once they read along to page 229 when Ally no longer sketches as much because she has developed other interests. Ask: How has Ally grown and changed?

8. Ally had a special relationship with her grandpa.

- Have students locate evidence to describe their relationship.



- Discuss: In what ways does Ally identify with the main character Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*?
- What is the significance of coins in this story? What do they symbolize? How are they meaningful to Ally and to Travis?
- Discuss how Ally and Travis learn that “a coin with a flaw in it makes it far more valuable than regular coins” (p. 32).

9. On page 26, we learn about Travis’s hopes and dreams.

- Have students write to explore the following prompt: What do we know about Travis? What can we infer about Travis? Ask students to use examples from the text to support their ideas.
- Discuss the figurative language of a “silver dollar day.”

10 Have students compare and contrast Mrs. Hall and Mr. Daniels.

Ask students to do a Quick Write to think about:

- How do they set the tone for respect in the classroom?
- How do they treat Ally?
- How does Ally respond to the way they treat her?

11. Have students compare and contrast Ally and Travis.

- How do the characters interact? In what ways do they understand each other?

12. Ally’s classmates have distinct personality traits.

- Organize students into jigsaw groupings in which each group member creates a character splash using Wordle or a character map for a different character, then shares with the group. What are the characters’ traits? Quirks?
- Each group should have a member who locates evidence in the text to describe one of the following characters: Ally, Keisha, Shay, Jessica, Albert, and Oliver.
- Have students meet in their “expert groups” before sharing with their original grouping. “Expert groups” are made up of the members from other groups that share their character.
- Once they have discussed their characters in their expert groups, have members join their original groups and report out.
- Ask students to compare and contrast the characters.

13. What is the significance of the mystery object lesson? Ask students to discuss:

- In what way does this experience empower Ally?
- Have students locate words and phrases in chapter 14, *Boxed in and Boxed Out*, that highlight how this experience is a turning point for Ally.

**Correlates to Common Core Standards: SL.5-7.1, L.5-7.5, RL.5-7.1, RL.5-7.2, RL.5-7.3, W.5-7.5, W.5-7.4

Part Two: Pages 92-175

1. The concept of identity is a central theme throughout the book. Have students reread quotations and excerpts that reveal this big idea. Then, ask students to write an original monologue from the point of view of Ally to express her inner struggle with who she is and how she sees herself in the world.

Consider presenting the following excerpt and quotation:

- Excerpt from page 96:
“And then I think that if someone hung a sign on me that said anything, having that sign there wouldn’t make it so. But people have been calling me “slow” forever. Right in front of me as if I’m too dumb to know what they’re talking about. People act like the words “slow reader” tell them everything that’s inside. Like I’m a can of soup



and they can just read the list of ingredients and know everything about me. There's lots of stuff about the soup inside that they can't put on the label, like how it smells and tastes and makes you feel warm when you eat it. There's got to be more to me than just a kid who can't read well."

- Ally grapples with her identity and says, "I don't know who to be. The one to admit that I can't do it, or the pretender" (p. 98).

2. Like Ally, Albert is a layered character.

Have students discuss:

- How is Albert like the character Flint on the shirt he wears? (page 100)
- Invite students to write an essay to explore the question: What are Albert's challenges? How does he respond to challenges? How does he protect himself?

3. Ally grows and changes through her relationships with others. Have students use the fishbowl technique to explore her interactions with others.

- Give each small group a different character in Ally's life: Mr. Daniels, Travis, Ally's mother, Ally's father, Albert, Shay, and Keisha.
- Before beginning the fishbowl technique, have small groups locate quotations from the text about the messages their character teaches to Ally. (For example, students might find messages from Travis on pages 34, 84, 110; messages from mother on pages 27, 66; messages from father on pages 52, 171; and messages from Mr. Daniels on pages 81, 125, 130, 135, 146, 156, 158, 163, 205.)
- Ask a small group to gather as a circle to discuss the character's relationship with Ally while the other students gather in an outer circle to listen, take notes, and write down questions and comments.
- Discuss expectations for how the fishbowl members will interact (come to discussion prepared, make comments that contribute to the discussion, elaborate on the comments of others in the fishbowl).
- To begin, pose one of the following questions: What moments in the text show the way Ally and (chosen character) interact? What messages does (chosen character) communicate to Ally?
- Have students in the fishbowl discuss the open-ended question.
- Ask the outer circle to provide their thoughts.

4. Invite students to research the symbolism of butterflies and how this applies to Ally and to the other characters in the book.

- After researching, have students reread pages 117-119 and discuss: How does Ally relate to the fallen butterfly?
- Have students work in small groups to create an interpretive dance that demonstrates transformation, growth, and change.

5. On page 121, Shay calls Ally and Albert "uncouth."

- Have students infer the meaning of this word by using the context and by looking up the definition using an online dictionary.
- Discuss: How are words powerful?

6. In the last paragraph on page 124, Ally explains the difference between the concept of *alone* versus the concept of *lonely*.

- Ask half the class to work with the concept of *alone*. Each student picks words or phrases out of the excerpt on page 124 and arranges them into a found poem. Students may also repeat words and add words to communicate meaning. Group two does the same for the concept of *lonely*.
- Ask students to share their poems with the class by recording them as a podcast.

7. On page 137, Ally receives the poetry award from Mr. Daniels but she suspects it is a "pity award."

- Ask students to take a stance and write an argument to answer the question: Is the poetry award an authentic award? Why or why not?
- Have students include details from the text to support their claim.



8. On page 157, Mr. Daniels calls Ally brave.

- Ask students to consider: How is Ally brave? What other character traits does Ally display? How does interacting with Mr. Daniels bring out these characteristics?

9. On page 158, Mr. Daniels inspires Ally with a quote sometimes attributed to Albert Einstein:

“Everyone is smart in different ways. But if you judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree, it will spend its whole life thinking it’s stupid.”

- Ask students to consider: How this quotation speaks to Ally and her experiences. How this moment in the text serves as a turning point for Ally.
- Have students research the origin of the quote, and discuss the meaning and purpose of such a quote.

**Correlates to Common Core Standards: SL.5-7.1, SL.5-7.4, SL.5-7.6, L.5-7.5, RL.5-7.1, RL.5-7.2, RL.5-7.3, W.5-7.5, W.5-7.4, W.5-7.7

Part Three: Pages 176-267

1. Albert describes one of the colorful posters on his wall as “the birth of a star” (p. 181).

- How does the friendship bond among Ally, Albert, and Keisha inspire each of them to believe in themselves?
- In what ways do they accept each other for who they are?
- How is it significant that Ally confides in them on page 183?
- Have students find evidence of how the friends support one another and ask them to come to small groups prepared for discussion.

2. Ask students to consider:

- What do we learn about how Shay’s mother treats her?
- How does it inspire Ally to reach out to her? Why?

3. Albert makes a sign to support Ally for class president. On page 203, he explains how he made use of her name as a homonym: “Ally is your Ally. Give her your vote!”

- Have students use an online resource to further explore the meaning of and examples of homonyms.
- Ask partners to choose a homonym and act it out for the class.
- Create a class chart of homonyms that students can add to as they discover them in their reading.

4. Brainstorm with students a list of themes communicated throughout the text. Themes might include:

- The power of possibility and believing in yourself. (p. 177)
- Be yourself. Be who you are. (p. 184)
- The power of the words we say to one another. (p. 185)
- The power of saying I’m having trouble instead of I can’t. (p. 197)
- The power of role models. (p. 219)
- Everyone is unique and special. (p. 221)
- The value of grit and determination. (p. 240)
- Perseverance. (p. 242, 243)
- Everyone has struggles to overcome. (p. 246)
- The power of asking for help. (p. 262)
- Believe in others. (p. 266)

Have students work in small groups to create a nonlinguistic representation of the theme such as a group tableau, skit, a sequence of movements, or a visual.

5. Mr. Daniels displays pictures of famous people including Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, George Washington, Henry Ford, Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Pablo Picasso, Patricia Polacco, Whoopi Goldberg, Henry Winkler, Muhammad Ali, Winston Churchill, John Lennon, Walt Disney, and John Lennon. Then he reveals that they all had or have dyslexia.



- Have students gather a collection of primary source photographs, pictures of the famous person's accomplishments, quotations, and online interviews, videos or sound bites (when possible).
- Have students read across the texts and summarize their obstacles and achievements.

6. On page 266, Ally says that her brother, Travis, has always believed in her and stood by her.

- Ask students to discuss: How does Ally show Travis that she believes in him?

7. Invite students to complete a RAFT activity:

R (Role): Each student should choose to write as one character (either Ally OR Travis). Students should be writing in this character's voice.

A (Audience): Students will address Ally and Travis's grandpa. While their grandpa was living, he believed in Ally and Travis. They continue to be inspired by him. This will be an opportunity to tell him all of the reasons why he would be proud of them.

F (Format): The format of the writing piece should be a letter, written in first person, addressed to Grandpa. The letter should start off, "Dear Grandpa..."

T (Topic): The topic for this assignment is for the student, as Ally OR Travis, to take the opportunity to express everything that he or she wants to express to Grandpa. Consider these topic questions:

8. As Ally OR Travis:

- What do I want to tell Grandpa about...
- My accomplishments?
- My struggles and how I overcame them?
- The people who have inspired me?
- What do I want to thank Grandpa for?

Invite students to publish using a digital tool such as a blog or share as a Google document.

**Correlates to Common Core Standards: SL.5-7.1, SL.5-7.4, SL.5-7.6, L.5-7.5, RL.5-7.1, RL.5-7.2, RL.5-7.3, W.5-7.5, W.5-7.4, W.5-7.6, W.5-7.7, W.5-7.8

Post Reading Activities

1. The author, Lynda Mullaly Hunt, wrote, "there is more of me in *Fish in a Tree* than any other book I have worked on. There are several scenes lifted right out of my own life; some of it was tough to get on paper because I'd get choked up" on the following website: <http://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com/2014/07/02/cover-reveal-fish-in-a-tree-by-lynda-mullaly-hunt/>

- Have students research the details of Lynda Mullaly Hunt's inspiration for writing this novel.
- Compare and contrast *Fish in a Tree* with Patricia Polacco's *Thank You, Mr. Falker* and how this story is also sparked by the author's life as shown here at Patricia Polacco's website: http://www.patriciapolacco.com/books/falker/falker_index.html

2. In addition to learning differences, invite students to learn about a range of differences, including disabilities and how students can be sensitive to others.

- Gather a text set of sources that deal with the topic of disabilities, including nonfiction and fiction picture books in addition to videos, podcasts, and poetry.
- Have students evaluate how the information is presented in each source then integrate the information from each source. Students report their findings to small groups.
- Have students conduct the following webquest and learn ways to show sensitivity through the Teaching Tolerance website: <http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/understanding-disabilities-middle-grades>

**Correlates to Common Core Standards: W.5-7.7, RL.5-7.3, SL.5-7.1, RI.5-7.9



Discussion Questions for *One for the Murphys*



Chapters 1-5

1. The first chapter does not say exactly what has happened to Carley, but the author provides the reader with several hints. What can you infer about Carley and her current situation from the first chapter? Use specific details to support your inferences.
2. On page 4, Carley thinks, "And I hope that I do not like her." Why do you think she would have that wish about her foster mother?
3. In chapter 5, Carley says, "Funny how something can be defined by the one thing that makes it different from everything else. Like 'foster kid.'" Or a giraffe with its long neck like Michael Eric points out. If you had to define yourself by one thing that makes you different from everyone else, what would you say?
4. Carley hasn't cried in over a year. What do you think about that?

Predictions:

- 1) How do you think the Murphy boys will act toward Carley?

Chapters 6-10

1. In chapter 6, why is Daniel so upset? What does Daniel say to Carley that makes her run? Why do you think she runs?
2. The flashback in chapter 7 brings us back to the night that everything changed for Carley. At the end of the flashback, we get a startling revelation. What is it? How did you react to it?
3. How does Carley's shopping trip with Mrs. Murphy differ from shopping with her mom?
4. How is Carley's behavior at the restaurant unexpected? Why do you think she behaves that way? How did you feel about it as you read it?
5. Why does Carley say that Mrs. Murphy scares her more than anyone else in chapter 10?
6. Why is "A Genie, Fresh Rolls, and a Penguin" a good title for chapter 10? Be sure to use specific details to support your answer.

Chapters 11-15

1. What happens with the police officer? What does Mrs. Murphy do? How does it impact Carley's relationship with her?
2. Carley feels uncomfortable with Mr. Murphy. What helps her start to break the ice with him?
3. Why do you think Carley says that she is "happy and disappointed at the same time" that the Murphys don't know it's her birthday?
4. Complete Mr. Ruben's assignment: Choose a person in history who has changed the world for good. Conduct a brief research project using two to three different sources to support your claim.

Teachers: This could be done independently or in partners as Mr. Ruben did. Also, additional speaking and listening standards may be integrated depending on presentation requirements, particularly in regard to incorporating technology.

Chapters 16-20

1. Have you ever had to work with someone you didn't like? How did you handle it? Write five pieces of advice for Carley to make her project with Toni go smoothly.
2. How does Carley handle the situation when Michael Eric has a seizure and goes to the hospital? What do you think this shows about Carley's character?
3. What surprises Carley when she is getting the Easter baskets ready for Mrs. Murphy? Why do you think she's surprised?
4. Where does Carley go when she skips school? What does she learn about Mrs. Murphy there and how does she react?



Chapters 21-25

1. Halfway through chapter 21, Mrs. Murphy says, "I think you would know that better than anyone else." What does she mean?
2. "This is the first time anyone has cared enough to ground me." What does this mean?
3. Toni doesn't want to take Carley to her house. Why not? How are Toni and Carley more similar than they realize?
4. Both Toni and Carley admit to feeling like they don't fit in. Have you ever felt that way? Do you think everyone feels that way at some point?
5. How does Carley realize that the Murphys aren't perfect? Why do you think that is an important lesson for her to learn?
6. Why do you think Toni wants the note from Mrs. Murphy included in the lunch she buys from Carley? Why do you think this makes Carley hesitate to sell it?

Chapters 26-30

1. What happens when Toni finds out that Carley is a foster kid? How do you think you would have reacted if you were Toni?
2. After Mrs. MacAvoy's visit, Carley tells Mrs. Murphy that she hates it that she doesn't hate that she's good to her. Explain.
3. Chapter 30 is the beginning of a turning point for Carley. How has Carley changed from the beginning of the book to this point. Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Chapters 31-35

1. What is Carley's definition of courage? Do you agree with her? Disagree? Why?
2. Describe a time in your life when you did something courageous according to Carley's definition of the word.
3. Is what Carley does to Jimmy Partin justifiable? Why or why not?

Chapters 36-40

1. How do you think you would feel about visiting your mom if you were Carley?
2. *The Giving Tree* is Mrs. Murphy's favorite book. Carley thinks it is dumb. Find and read the book. What do you think the message is?
3. What was your favorite children's book? Describe the story.
4. What does Carley ask Mrs. Murphy and how do both characters react to the situation?

Chapters 41-45

1. Carley says, "The part that keeps me safe would rather stay mad at her," when Mrs. Murphy wants to talk to Carley after "the Mom incident." What do you think she means by that?
2. What does Mrs. Murphy say the message is in *The Giving Tree*? How does it compare to Carley's interpretation of the book? What about your interpretation?
3. In *The Giving Tree*, do you think the Tree is strong or weak? Why?
4. The title of chapter 43 is "Pals Spelled Backwards." Why is this an appropriate title for this chapter? Support your answer with details from the text.
5. Why did the conversation with Mr. Murphy turn out to be significant to Carley?
6. What happens on Carley's second visit to her mom?



Chapters 46-50

1. What does Mrs. Murphy reveal about herself to Carley? Why do you think she tells her?
2. Who has been a hero in your life? Why?
3. Explain the meaning of the title of the book.
4. What is the one thing that Carley is afraid to ask for from Mrs. Murphy, but finally gets? Why has she been afraid to ask?
5. What is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to you? Why?
6. What presents does Carley receive before she goes? Why is each important to her and her time with the Murphys?
7. How does Carley change from the beginning of the book to the end? Use specific examples to support your response.
8. Why do you think the author chose to have Carley go back to her mom at the end? Would you have made the same choice? Why or why not?

State Awards for *One for the Murphys*

2014-2015 Alaska Battle of the Books Master List

2013-2014 Colorado Blue Spruce Young Adult Book Award
Winner

2013-2014 Colorado Children's Book Award Master List

2012-2013 Connecticut State Award

2012-2013 Florida Reading Association Children's Book Award

2013-2014 Florida Sunshine State Young Readers Master List

2014 Chicago Public School Battle of the Books Contender

2015 Illinois Rebecca Caudill Young Readers' Book Award
Master List

2014-2015 Indiana Young Hoosier Book Awards

2013-2014 Iowa Teen Book Award Master List

2013-2014 Kentucky Bluegrass Award Master List

2014-2015 Louisiana Young Readers' Choice Master List

2013-2014 Maine Student Book Award Master List

2014-2015 Maryland Black-Eyed Susan Book Award

2014-2015 Missouri MASL Readers Awards Master List

2013-2014 New Hampshire Great Stone Face Book Award
Master List

2015 Oklahoma Children's Sequoyah Master List

2014-2015 Oregon Battle of the Books Master List

2013-2014 Pennsylvania Keystone to Reading Book Award

2014-2015 Pennsylvania Young Readers Choice Awards
Master List

2013-2014 South Dakota Young Adult Reading Program List
Master List

2013-2014 Tennessee Volunteer State Book Award

2013-2014 Vermont Dorothy Canfield Fisher Master List

2014-2015 Virginia Readers' Choice Master List



A Q&A with Lynda Mullaly Hunt



Q. What was your path to writing?

Because I struggled in school when I was young, I did not tend to write for fun. However, there were some creative writing classes I had in high school and college that I really enjoyed. Still, I didn't view myself as "a writer." After I was hired as a third-grade teacher in Connecticut, it was my responsibility to teach students to write multiple paragraphs on a topic in preparation for the CT Fourth Grade Mastery Test. In teaching revision, I found that the kids had difficulty looking at their own work objectively. So, I began to write terrible stories. Boring, illogical, off-topic, miserably-written stories, and I would copy them off, give one to each student with a red pen, and tell them that they could be the teacher and grade me. Turns out they dug very deep to do that. It wasn't long before I saw a positive impact on their writing. After all, I could call them on things that they had previously called me on. I think it amused and motivated us all. As the year progressed, I'd write stories that were better (because they were improving) and by the end of the year, I was really trying. My students still caught mistakes or made great suggestions for improvement. I think it modeled for them that constructive criticism is not something to be feared. It is a way to improve and who doesn't want that? I got to really loving writing those stories and would actually use them as a reward for myself when all my other work was done. So, ironically, I first discovered my love of writing stories by writing the worst ones that I could.

Q: What were the challenges and opportunities in becoming a writer?

I think my greatest challenge has also been my greatest opportunity. To write a character like Carley Connors from *One for the Murphys* or Ally Nickerson from *Fish in a Tree*, I have had to be honest about some of my own struggles—things that have saddened me and made me feel apart from others. And sharing that kind of honesty can be scary sometimes. But the opportunities have been boundless because I have learned that sharing those experiences—and being honest about them—have helped many, many readers. The notes I've received and the conversations I've had with kids in schools across the country, have made those feelings of vulnerability well worth all of it.

Q. What question do you hear most from students when you visit classrooms?

The question that I hear most often from students is, "How come Carley didn't stay with the Murphys?" I knew Carley was leaving very early on in writing the book. And, even though I hardly knew her and the Murphys at that time, I was so upset that she had to leave that I did not write for about 2 1/2 weeks. When I finally went back to writing, I wrote the chapter where Carley stays with them. But I knew that I could never keep it. It wasn't authentic writing. It just didn't feel real. Authenticity is something I always strive for. When writing is not authentic, you lose the reader. Like so many other things in life, loving a book is about making connections. If readers don't buy what's happening, it is very hard for them to connect.

Q. What do you hope readers get from your stories?

One of the most surprising and moving parts of being an author are both the letters I get from readers and conversations I've had with them while traveling to schools. My books are about really decent kids who find themselves in unthinkable circumstances but have the bravery and grit to walk themselves out of it. I lean toward writing about the hopeful, resilient side of difficult situations. My hope is that readers will learn to approach others with compassion. But what I think is even more important to me is that I hope that readers who have not been blessed in their circumstances—who have had a difficult time of it—will realize that they are not alone. I hope they will know that they can create any life they want for themselves no matter how their lives have started out. They just need to decide—and then they need to act. For the most important things in this world are about action. Not just thinking about what you want, but acting in such a way to get it.

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