



DREAMLAND

by Sarah Dessen

A Reader's Companion

By Patty Campbell

Well-known Columnist and Lecturer on Young Adult Literature

Introduction

"When he hit me, I didn't see it coming, It was just a quick blur, a flash out of the corner of my eye, and then the side of my face just exploded, burning, as his hands slammed against me."

Strange, sleepy Rogerson, with his long brown dreads and brilliant green eyes, had seemed to Caitlin to be an open door. With him she could be anybody, not just the second-rate shadow of her two-years-older sister Cass. But now she is drowning in the vacuum Cass left behind when she turned her back on her family's expectations. Caitlin wanders in a dreamland of drugs and a nightmare of sudden fists, trapped in her search for herself.

As violence becomes more and more prevalent in our world, one out of every five teenage girls in America will be beaten by a dating partner, and one third to one half of married women will be victims of abuse. Yet shame, fear, and assumed guilt keeps many in conspiracy of silence about this widespread but invisible anguish. Why do girls allow themselves to get into such relationships—and what keeps them there?

In this riveting novel, Sarah Dessen searches for understanding and answers through the mind of a young girl who suddenly finds herself in a trap of constant menace, a trap that is baited with love and need. More and more she must frantically manage her every action to avoid being hit by the hands that had seemed so gentle. All around Caitlin are women who care—best friends, mother, sister, mentor—but she can confide in none of them, especially not Cass, her brilliant older sister, whose own flight from home had seemed to point the way for Caitlin.

Dessen has here created a subtle and compelling work of literature that goes far beyond the problem novel in a story rich with symbolism, dark scenes of paralyzing dread, quirky and memorable characters, and gleams of humor. With the consummate skill and psychological depth that brought her praise for **Keeping the Moon**, she explores the search for self-identity, the warmth of feminine friendships, and the destructive ways our society sets up young women for love gone wrong.

About Sarah Dessen

Sarah Dessen grew up in Chapel Hill, where she teaches fiction writing at the University of North Carolina and recently married her high school sweetheart. **Dreamland** is her fourth novel for young people.

Further Reading and Recommended Sites

Books by Sarah Dessen:

Dreamland

HC: 0-670-89122-3, \$15.99 (\$22.99 CAN)

Keeping the Moon

HC: 0-670-88549-5, \$15.99 (\$22.99 CAN)

PB: 0-14-131007, \$5.99 (\$8.99 CAN)

Someone Like You

HC: 0-670-87778-6, \$16.99 (\$23.99 CAN)

PB: 0-14-130269-0, \$4.99 (\$6.99 CAN)

That Summer

PB: 0-14-038688-2, \$5.99 (\$8.99 CAN)

Related Reading:

I Never Asked You to Understand Me

by Barthe DeClements

Puffin Books, 0-14-130059-0, \$ 4.99 (\$ 6.99 CAN)

In a school for "dropouts and druggies," Didi finds friends who help her put her life back together after his mother's death.

Zero at the Bone

by Michael Cadnum

Viking Children's Books, 0-670-86725-X, \$ 15.99 (\$ 22.99 CAN)

Puffin Books, 0-14-038628-9, \$ 4.99 (\$ 6.99 CAN)

After Cray's older sister Anita doesn't come home that night—or ever—he and his family are left searching for reasons for her disappearance.

When She Was Good

by Norma Fox Mazer

Scholastic Paperbacks

Em's huge, dangerous big sister Pamela is dead, but her voice goes on telling Em that she's stupid and bad and deserves to be hit.

Breaking Free from Partner Abuse

by Mary Marecek

Morning Glory Press

A simply written little book that uses quotes from abused women, poetry, and helpful advice, to drive home the message that "people aren't for hitting." Includes 16 page mini-lesson on abuse.

Resources to Help Stop Partner Violence:

If you or someone you know is having trouble with partner violence, here are some organizations that you can turn to.

National Domestic Violence Hotline

Tel: 1-800-799-SAFE

Advice, comfort, and referral for teens in violent relationships, available 24 hours a day.

"Love Doesn't Have to Hurt Teens"

www.apa.org/pi/pii/teen

A teen-friendly website, sponsored by the American Psychological Association, that offers counsel to girls who think they may be headed for an abusive relationship.

National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

Tel: 1-800-537-2238

www.pcadv.org

A referral organization that works to develop national and local programs and distributes materials, like their guide for parents, "Helping Teens Stop Violence."

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Tel: 1-303-839-1852

www.ncadv.org

A gathering of organizations and groups working to stop partner abuse. Distributors of the "Rough Love" video and teaching guide.

An Interview With Sarah Dessen

How did you get started writing young adult fiction?

To be honest, I fell into it. But it is a voice that really works for me, partially because I live in my home town, and I'm very close to all of my friends from high school. A lot of my memories are very vivid because I'm still in the same place. It's easy to reach back when you drive past your high school at least once a week.

Tell me how you came to write about dating violence.

I've had several friends—not myself personally, because I've been dating the same person since high school—who have been in bad relationships like this and I didn't know until years later. Teenage girls are evolving so much and it's so easy—the first time when you fall in love especially—to think maybe this is just the way it's supposed to be, or "Nobody will ever love me again." You don't have the strength that you would have later, to walk away. In writing this book there was such a sense of having to be very, very careful with this topic and very responsible with it.

Because you may have readers who are in this situation looking to you for answers.

Exactly, although this is not a problem novel. I also felt I had to be responsible about the role of marijuana in the story. I worried that when Corinna and Caitlin are sitting on the couch together for endless afternoons looking at television and smoking pot that it was going to seem frivolous, like I was making it seem attractive. But Caitlin uses it to dull her senses, and Rogerson is the one who starts her on it, and it's what enables her to endure his abuse. So I definitely needed it there, and I'm prepared for controversy.

Did your editor feel the same way?

I was so glad I was with Deborah Brodie for this book, because she allowed me to be true to my voice; she was respectful in not wanting to tinker with things too much, and that was great. And she has amazing insight—I could not have done better!

Discussion Questions

1. In the first chapter, Sarah Dessen not only puts us immediately in the midst of the action and introduces us to all the major characters in her story, but she drops hints about ideas and events that will be important in the novel. For instance, Caitlin stumbles over Cass's gift as she leaves her room, "whacking my face on a hall light switch." Later, her parents are too distraught over Cass's departure to notice Caitlin's injury—a pattern that foreshadows the violence to come. What other clues are embedded in the chapter that point to symbols and themes that will be explored later?
2. The idea of "Dreamland" as a place of refuge is central to the story, as the title suggests. What childhood events establish this picture in Caitlin's mind? Why is it significant that Cass has given Caitlin a dream journal and what does she imply in her cryptic message to her sister: "I'll see you there"? Trace how the meaning of the word later changes for Caitlin as she retreats into a drugged sleepiness and thinks, "This Dreamland was preferable, walking through this life half-sleeping, everything at arm's length or farther away." Who else in the novel is in Dreamland? Find a passage at the end of the novel that suggests that Dreamland could become a more hopeful idea.
3. Explaining Cass's flight, Boo says, "It's so easy to get caught up in what people expect of you. Sometimes, you can just lose yourself." In what way does this also describe Caitlin's situation? Both sisters are trying to find an identity by stepping outside of other people's expectations. In what ways are their attempts at taking control alike? How do they differ? Do you think women often try to find their own selves by their choice of a man?
4. What has been the effect on Caitlin of following in the footsteps of her older and more talented sister all her life? How does the scar on her eyebrow that Cass inflicted sum up those feelings? On the other hand, what different meaning does the scar hold for Cass? What scenes dramatize this? Why is Caitlin particularly anxious to hide Rogerson's abuse from her? In the end Cass, with unconscious irony, writes in a letter to her sister, "You were always able to make your

choices based on you and what you wanted, nothing else." How and why can she be so wrong?

5. In a striking scene from Caitlin's childhood, Boo uses the little girl's play with a Barbie doll to drive home a feminist lesson. "She can be anything—and so can you," she tells Caitlin—whose own mother has never noticed that fact. What small evidence can you find that this message has not been entirely wasted on the teenage Caitlin, even as she goes through her cheerleading routines and surrenders her life to Rogerson?
6. When Caitlin first chooses to go with Rogerson, even though they know nothing about each other, she thinks, "I could have been anybody, and it made everything possible." What is it about Rogerson that makes him so perfectly suited to Caitlin's need? Before he turns violent, we—and Caitlin—learn only seemingly unrelated facts about Rogerson's past, his family, his likes and dislikes, his behavior quirks and odd abilities. What are the missing pieces in this enigmatic personality, and can you guess at the rest of the picture? What do you think is the particular quality in Caitlin that makes her so attractive to him?
7. The first time Rogerson hits Caitlin, it comes out of nowhere as a complete shock—for us as well as her. Yet, on another level, we're not really surprised. We knew some things about him that should have been warning signals. What were they? Obviously, Caitlin should leave him immediately at this point. Why is this impossible for her, and why does it become increasingly impossible as his violence escalates? Sketch out a scene as to what might have happened if she had been able to walk away from him after the first attack. Would it really have ended there? Or not?
8. The affectionate portrayals of New Agers Boo and Stewart, with their tempeh salads and wise comments, lighten this powerfully dark novel. Do you think they have remained fast friends with the O'Korens only—as Caitlin supposes—because they live next door? Rina, too, who has issues with men, brings some comic relief to the story, and she and Caitlin are another unlikely friendship. What do you think holds

them together? And why is Caitlin unable to confide in her about the abuse?

9. Corinna, another woman who has run away from her parents' world, is also a mismatched friend for Caitlin, who thinks that they have "a lot in common." Even though their backgrounds and interests are so different, in what ways is this true? When Corinna makes a safe haven for Caitlin, how is it both comforting and destructive for both of them? When Corinna finally finds the courage to leave Dave, what do her silver bracelets come to symbolize to Caitlin, and how does the wearing of them affect her decisions?
10. One of the most puzzling paradoxes about Rogerson is his gentleness as a lover, as contrasted with his violence. Find evidence of his patience toward Caitlin in sexual matters and his insensitivity to her needs in all other ways. What in his background could explain this and why is it such a powerful tool in gaining her trust? In a related paradox, what two kinds of "hits" does he give her and how do they work together?
11. Caitlin is tempted several times to tell her mother what is going on with Rogerson, but she cannot begin to break through her parent's complete obliviousness that something is wrong. A poignant example is the moment when her father carefully spreads ashes on the slippery sidewalk because Caitlin has blamed a fall on the ice for the abrasions on her face. Find other examples of their loving intentions coupled with blindness to the reality of the situation. In a way, are these metaphors for most parent/child interactions in adolescence?
12. Sarah Dessen builds an almost unbearably escalating sense of dread into the climatic scene of the novel. We can almost hear the throbbing drums in the background as Caitlin, who has been bullied by Rina into going off to the lake, frantically tries to telephone a dangerously furious Rogerson. Imagine you are shooting this scene as a movie. How would you underscore the rising terror and tension with film techniques like jump cuts, close ups, long shots, distorted focus, special effects, computer graphics? What music would you choose?

Where would you end the scene?

13. Much of the richness of the language of this novel comes from the many symbols that amplify the meaning of the story, and we have discussed several of these already, like the scar and the silver bracelets. Others to explore are the black BMW, the staring rows of dolls, the pyramid, Caitlin's photographs. An extended metaphor that brings the book home to a satisfying conclusion is drawn from T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." A literary interpretation of this passage is clearly laid out by a bright student in Caitlin's English class. How do the elements of this metaphor—the mermaid's song, the voices calling, water and drowning at the surface—come to represent salvation to Caitlin in her turmoil? In this context, react to the last sentence, in which Caitlin feels "the water break across my face as I burst through it into the air to finally breathe on my own."

Patty Campbell is a longtime critic, librarian, editor, writer, and teacher in the field of young adult literature. She was the winner of the 1989 Grolier Award for distinction in the service of young adults and reading.

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