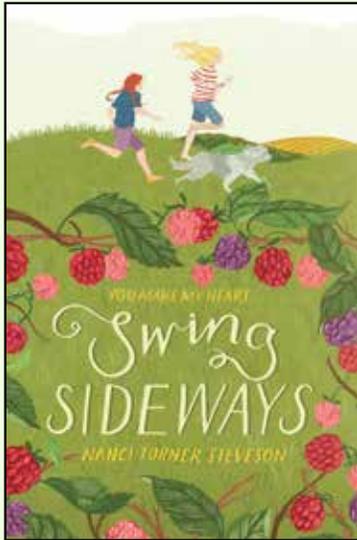


Swing SIDeways

BY NANGI TURNER STEVESON

Discussion
Guide



About the Book

When Annie's and California's paths cross in the country, they become instant summer friends. Annie, ripe for an adventure, agrees to help California find the ponies that her mom loved to ride as a girl on her grandfather's farm. California hopes that this will mend what is broken between her mom and her grandfather. Annie hopes keeping her adventure secret from her mother will provide the freedom from supervision that she craves. But Annie's secret isn't the only one of the summer, and when events start spiraling out of control, friendship and bravery are put to the test. Will both girls come to understand how true friendship and love can make the heart *swing sideways*?

Discussion Questions

1. Explain the "Freedom Plan" that Annie's parents agree to for the summer at their country home. Why is this important for Annie and her mom's relationship? What does Dr. Clementi hope will improve for Annie and her mom with this summer of freedom? Why are the rules going to be hard for both Annie and her mom?
2. What role does setting play in the novel? Do you think Annie and California would have become friends in a different setting? What details and descriptive language does the author use to bring the setting to life?
3. Why does Annabel change her name to Annie? Why does Mr. McMurtry call California Catherine instead?
4. What does Annie's mom mean when she says it makes her heart "swing sideways" when she and Annie play Pachelbel's Canon in D on the violin and flute together?
5. California's first impression of Annie is that she reminds her of "one of those pointy show dogs who needed to be sprung from a cage for a roll in the mud." Explain how this comparison fits Annie's situation. How does each girl's appearance change by the end of the story?
6. Why does California accuse Annie of not appreciating having her whole family together? What tragic event happens in California's family to tear Piper and Mr. McMurtry apart? What do you think of California's plan to bring them back together?
7. Do you agree with Annie's decision to keep her friendship with California a secret from her mom? How does this put her dad "in the middle," the place he is trying to escape? How does her mom feel when she discovers the truth?
8. After blaming her mom for making her sick—not being able to breathe or swallow any food—Annie realizes that "bad things really do happen in good families, and all it can take is the wrong thing said, or not said, at the wrong time." What does she mean? Is her dad right in insisting that she apologize to her mom?
9. Why does California lie to Annie about her grandfather being the person who has cancer? Why is she so determined to fix what was broken in Piper and her grandfather's relationship? Why does Annie agree to the plan to find the ponies, even though at first she doesn't believe it possible?
10. At one point in the story Annie describes her friendship with California as "a real one," but later on says she feels guilt and shame when she realizes she hasn't been a "real friend." Why does she feel their friendship is all about her? When and why does this change?
11. Annie "knocked away one challenge after another" to nurse Field back to health. What do you think this says about her? Why do you think Field gravitates toward California?

Discussion questions continued on next page. . .





Discussion Questions

12. Why does Mr. McMurtry continue to take such good care of the corn even after Piper left home? What do you think the corn represented to him? Why does he get upset when the girls want to cut back the jasmine?
13. How might Annie's decision to cut off her fifteen-inch braids that she called her "lifeline to my identity" be considered symbolic? Why doesn't she want her mom to accompany her to the salon? What new identity might Annie have after this summer?
14. Why does Annie's mom invite California to dinner? What do California and Mrs. Stockton have in common? Why does Annie's mom agree to a sleepover at Mr. McMurtry's house?
15. When Piper says that "regret is a terrible thing," what does she mean? Do you think Piper will stay at the farm? Why or why not? What kind of relationship will she have with her father in the future?
16. Explain how the farm is "magical" for both Annie and California. What sacrifices do Piper and Mrs. Stockton make so their daughters can "bloom"?
17. California thinks Annie is brave and courageous, and Annie feels powerful around California. Explain why they each feel this way. How do you think Annie will view friendship in the future?
18. What does Annie mean about her mom when she says, "For the first time since I was little, she understood how to comfort me"? What have they learned about each other that will improve their relationship in the future?

Extension Activities

What's in a name? During her summer in the country, Annabel asks to be called Annie as part of her plan to experience "country life" like the girls she's read about in her books. If you could change your name to be that of a character from one of your favorite stories, who would you choose? Write a short piece revealing your new name and explaining the reasons you chose it. (For instance, you might select one of Annie's favorite characters, Scout from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, because her name gives you the courage to face your fears.) Describe why this name makes you feel "new and improved" like Annabel feels about being called Annie.

City girl vs. country girl. Compare Annie's life as a city girl in Manhattan with California's life in Oregon living in a permaculture community. Using a Venn diagram, list all the ways in which Annie's and California's lives back home are similar or different. Consider their homes, schooling, relationships, friends, extracurricular activities, and interests, as well as how they are being parented/raised. Write a sentence to explain each point, using evidence from the novel. Combine these sentences into an essay comparing and contrasting the two girls. Use transitional words to connect ideas ("similarly," "on the other hand," "in contrast," "likewise," etc.).

A hint before it happens. Annie considers California "an all-around farm girl" and confesses, "She was everything I wanted to be." But in her desire to have a summer adventure in the country, Annie misses many of the warning signs that everything was not all right with California. The author uses these warning signs to *foreshadow* or hint at events that will occur later in the story. Make a list of clues that Annie misses about California's big secret and add to that list the clues that Annie eventually does notice. Work with a partner and refer to the text.

Try to see it my way. Annie is the narrator of the story, so we get her unique perspective on how the events of the story unfold. Discuss in small groups why you think the author chose to tell the story from Annie's point of view. How do you think the story would change if it were told from California's point of view? Would an alternating point of view that included both Annie's and California's voices work? How is Annie's point of view similar or different from the author's point of view? Why do you think the author wrote this book? What is her most important message?

Addresses the following ELA Common Core Reading Literature, Speaking and Listening, and Writing Standards: W. 4.1 – W. 6.1; W. 4.2 – 6.2; RL. 4.3 – 6.3; RL. 4.5 – 6.5; RL. 4.6 – 6.6; SL. 4.1 – 6.1.

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