

Still Life with Tornado

A.S. KING

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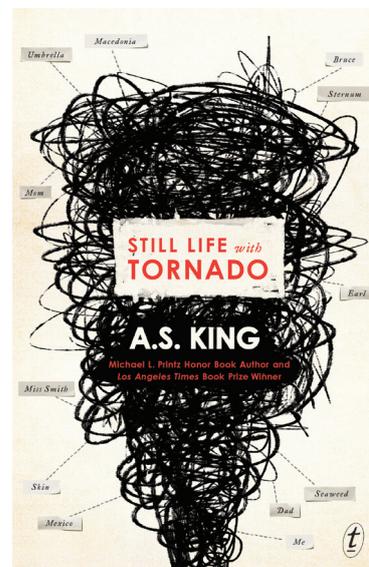
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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.

SYNOPSIS

Sixteen-year-old Sarah can no longer draw. Not a pear, not her own hand. It's a problem, because as long as she can remember, she has 'made the art'. She might be having an existential crisis—why else is she suddenly running into past and future versions of herself as she skips school to wander the urban ruins of Philadelphia?

Or maybe she's finally waking up to the tornado that is her family, the tornado that six years ago sent her once-beloved older brother flying across the country for a reason she can't quite recall.

After decades of staying together 'for the kids' and building a family on a foundation of lies and domestic violence, Sarah's parents have reached the end. As Sarah herself often observes, nothing about her pain is remotely original—and yet it still hurts.

Heartbreaking yet hopeful, this is a vivid portrait of survival and resurgence that will linger with readers long after the last page.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.S. King is the award-winning author of eight acclaimed YA novels. Her novel *Please Ignore Vera Dietz* earned a 2011 Michael L. Printz Honor and *Ask The Passengers* won the 2013 Los Angeles Times Book Prize. The New York Times called her 'one of the best YA writers working today.' King lives with her family in Pennsylvania, where she returned after living on a farm and teaching adult literacy in Ireland for more than a decade.

BEFORE READING

1. Take students on an excursion to a local art gallery or museum. Ask that students photograph themselves next to two or three pieces of artwork that they feel a connection to. Students will print these photos off to stick into their workbooks. Ask that students write a written reflection explaining why they were drawn to this artwork and the emotions it evokes for them.
2. Facilitate a classroom discussion posing the initial question to students, 'What is art?' From this discussion, ask the secondary question 'How and why is art important in society?' Record these responses as a mind-map on the whiteboard or alternatively use the app Padlet.
3. Using the title *Still Life with Tornado* ask students to make inferences about the plot, themes and character. This will require students to consider the connotations and definition of the words but also how they contradict each other.

WHILE READING

1. In chapter 1, Sarah informs the reader, 'Nothing ever really happens. Or, more accurately, nothing new ever really happens.' (p. 1) Is this an accurate



statement? Are all lives just a repeat of what has come before?

2. Sarah's art teacher Miss Smith tells her that 'there is no such thing as an original idea.' (p. 1) What reasons exist to support this statement? Why can an idea never be original?
3. 'Maybe this is some sort of existential crisis.' (p. 7) Early in the novel, Sarah considers her school refusal as a sign of an existential crisis. Search online for a definition of an existential crisis. Do you agree that Sarah is having an existential crisis or is Sarah experiencing a different type of trauma?
4. Referring to the earlier chapters of the novel, what evidence is there of family tension? Record this evidence in your workbook.
5. 'Life is a joust. Recently, I've become unhorsed.' (p. 32) Referring to clues from the text, what has caused Sarah to be 'unhorsed'?
6. Read pages 120–121. What conclusions is Sarah making about the nature of art? Use evidence to support your response.
7. Read page 133–134 where Bruce and Sarah are observing the night sky. What do their observations of the stars reveal about general human observations of the world? Do all people see the world in the same way?
8. Helen instantly recognises ten-year-old Sarah but her husband, Chet, does not, even when she plays her rendition of 'Eleanor Rigby'. Why does Helen recognise her ten-year-old daughter and Chet does not?
9. Read pages 152–156. Describe the relationship between Helen and Chet. Using evidence from the text, why is this an unhealthy relationship?
10. 'Dad was—and I knew it that day for sure—the pervasive seaweed in our family's ocean.' (p. 163) How does the imagery of the Mexican ocean reflect the state of Sarah's family?

AFTER READING:

CHARACTER:

1. Sarah's retelling of the vacation to Mexico is unclear at times. Using the chapters about the Mexico vacation as a basis, write Sarah's diary entries for each day she spends on holiday.
2. 'You can always come and stay with me, no matter where I am.' (p. 23) Describe the relationship between Sarah and her brother Bruce.
3. Create a comparative four-circle Venn diagram, comparing the four Sarahs to each other. You will need to focus on how they are different and similar. Your responses should utilise evidence from the text.

4. 'He learned the language of art but could only draw stick figures.' (p. 40) What does this quote reveal about the personality of Chet?
5. Helen is an ER nurse and Bruce works with at-risk teenagers. What is the irony that both Bruce and Helen have careers where they help others in need?

STRUCTURE:

1. 'I am Lichtenstein's mixed-up sleeping not-sleeping girl.' (p. 136) In many ways, Sarah is Lichtenstein's 'Sleeping Girl'. How does Sarah 'wake up' from this sleep over the course of the novel?
2. 'Until I met ten-year-old Sarah, that's what I had. A still life.' (p. 90) How does the symbolism of the tornado develop and change through the novel? Why is this important and what does it reveal about the characters?
3. There are not many consistent settings in the novel. Sarah travels daily by bus to an abandoned school, the museum and to follow Alleged Earl. Why does King employ so many different settings in the novel? What purpose does this serve the narrative structure as well as the themes and ideas?

THEMES

Family

1. 'A home is more than a roof over your head.' (p. 195) Using the text as a basis for your ideas, what does King propose a home needs to consist of to be a happy one?
2. On the family vacation to Mexico, Bruce remarks, 'Aren't we doing enough pretending as it is?' (p. 27) How does each member of the family 'pretend' or play their part in the family? What are the implications of this?
3. 'I realized that every single day that goes by with me playing my part in the deal and Chet playing his part in the deal is a step toward Sarah taking shit she doesn't deserve.' (p. 110) The unhealthy marriage of Helen and Chet has a significant impact on both Bruce and Sarah. What kind of impact can domestic violence have on children and their future relationships? Discuss with reference to the text and by conducting online research.

Art:

1. 'I like making things because when I was born, everything I was born into was already made for me. Art let me surround myself with something different. Something new. Something real. Something that was mine.' (p. 231) What other benefits may art have on our lives? Refer to the text and outside research to inform your ideas.
2. Ten-year-old Sarah is excited to someday display her art in a proper gallery. Sixteen-year-old Sarah watches Alleged Earl create art out on the street with admiration. Does all art need to be displayed in a gallery to deserve the title?



3. 'This is when I realize how much I lie. Real artists don't lie this much?' (p. 36) What does this quote reveal about art and the nature of truth?

Trauma:

1. 'The absence of violence is not love.' (p. 15) Later in the novel, Chet stops physically abusing his wife and son. Instead a different kind of violence emerges. What kind of violence is this and why is it also unacceptable?
2. 'No one seems to care that my umbrella is open.' (p. 18) Early in the novel, Sarah decides she will change her name to umbrella. The motif of the umbrella is revisited throughout the novel. What does Sarah's fascination with the symbolism of the umbrella reveal about her as a character? What does it suggest about how she processes trauma?
3. 'How much nasty shit has happened because people don't want to get involved?' (p. 127) What does King suggest one must do to stop the cycle of violence or abuse?

RESPONDING:

4. In the novel, Sarah has three other different aged Sarahs visit her; ten-year-old Sarah, twenty-three-year-old Sarah and forty-year-old Sarah. Imagine that the same was to occur to Bruce. What would ten-year-old, twenty-three-year-old and forty-year-old Bruce say to nineteen-year-old Bruce in Mexico? Write a creative piece detailing these interactions between the Bruces.
5. 'I try to let the sleeping girl into me, too. I look at her furrowed brow while she sleeps and I feel pain inside of her sleep. I feel like something is unfinished in her life. I feel she is unhappy.' (p. 30) Print copies of Roy Lichtenstein's 'Sleeping Girl'. Ask students to describe the colors, texture and overall message of the artwork. How does this artwork connect with the character of Sarah? Following this, ask students to create their own artwork that they feel encapsulates the character of Sarah.
6. 'And yet, on the inside I know there is something wrong enough that someone should be taking it seriously. Maybe it starts with me. Maybe I have to take it seriously first.' (p. 42) What responsibility do we have to ourselves when we need help? Identify signs in the novel that illustrate that Sarah needs to seek help.
7. 'Maybe this has something to do with the fact she sees real mental illness all the time and she knows it's no different than a broken arm.' (p. 159) Is this a popular perception of mental health? What are the connections between mental health and domestic violence? Research your response and use evidence from the text.
8. There are many different allusions employed to enhance the themes of the novel. From 'Eleanor Rigby' to Lichtenstein's 'Sleeping Girl', these references to works of art imply similar ideas to that

of the novel. Document these allusions and consider the ideas being conveyed. These allusions can be evidence for analytical responses.

9. 'You have no idea how much I want you to be careful. You have no idea how much I want to save you from what happened to me.' (p. 280) What advice would Helen provide in avoiding a relationship of domestic violence? What signs does one need to look out for?

TEXT RESPONSE ESSAY PROMPTS:

1. A.S. King's *Still Life with Tornado* is more than a story about a young artist having an existential crisis. It is a story about how people remain stuck unless they take action to help themselves. Discuss.
2. To what extent is art an escape from the trauma of abuse and violence? Is it enough to treat or cure pain? (A.S. King, *Still Life with Tornado*).
3. How are the characters in the novel guilty of lying to themselves? How does the truth set them free? (A.S. King, *Still Life with Tornado*).