



# Fighting Words

## KIMBERLY BRUBAKER BRADLEY

ISBN 9781922330628

RRP AU\$19.99

Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 14+

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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 an audience, purpose and context. They encompass a range of forms with a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they promote the integration of ICT and life skills.*

### SYNOPSIS

**'Parts of this story are scary, but trust me: no one needs to be afraid. Hope and love win out.'**  
*Kimberly Brubaker Bradley*

Della can't work out why her adored older sister Suki screams in her sleep. Suki has always been Della's protector, especially after their mother went to prison and her boyfriend took the sisters in. But who has been protecting Suki?

Della is in trouble at school for having a big mouth, but after she stands up to the class bully other girls rally to her cause. When Suki tries to kill herself, Della decides it's time to tell their secrets and speak out about the terrible things that happened to Suki. Bound by love and trauma, these two sisters must find their own voices before they can find their way back to each other.

Based on the author's personal experience, this gripping and essential story explodes the stigma around child sexual abuse. Written from the heart, with tenderness, compassion and humour, *Fighting Words* is about finding the words to talk about the most difficult things in young adults' lives.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Brubaker Bradley is a Newbery Honor winner and a #1 *New York Times* bestselling author. Her novels *The War that Saved My Life* and *The War I Finally Won* are popular with middle-grade readers.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why are names considered to be first impressions? Is a person's name or appearance a reasonable basis for a first impression? Why might a name like Delicious be a difficult one to carry?
2. What does it mean to be invisible? Why does Della believe Suki's superpower is the ability to be invisible?
3. Throughout the novel, adults are behaving in ways that leave kids to act more like adults than the actual adults. What turning points determine our individual pathways to adulthood? What makes someone an adult?
4. There are many different types of family exemplified in the book (Suki and Della taking care of each other, Francine's relationship with them, or Trevor and his relationship with his mother). How does family play a role in shaping our values and beliefs? How do our values and beliefs shape who we are as individuals and influence our behaviour?
5. Why is Della's story such a hard story to tell? How does Della remain authentic and true to herself throughout the telling of her story?
6. Suki makes sacrifices for Della throughout the novel. If any, what are the boundaries between



love and sacrifice, and where should one draw a line between them?

7. In kindergarten, Della told her friend Junebug, 'My mama cooks meth.' What was Junebug's mother's reaction? On page 89, Suki confides in Della that she had told her friend Stacy about Clifton's abuse when she was in fifth grade. How had Stacy reacted? How might different reactions have changed the course of Della's and Suki's lives? Why do you believe Junebug's mother and Grace reacted the way they did?
8. In chapter 38, why won't Suki 'absolutely swear' to never try to hurt herself again? Why is Suki's promise 'to always do her best' not good enough for Della?
9. Della changes throughout *Fighting Words*—she transitions and grows with each conflict she faces, becoming less dependent on Suki, thinking critically and making decisions about both her present situation and her future. Suki also changes, relinquishing her role as an adult and succumbing to the reality of the abuse she had endured over the course of at least seven years. How can conflict lead to change? What problem-solving strategies can individuals use to manage conflict and change?
10. Consider Francine's, Nevaeh's, Teena's, and Maybelline's transformative roles in both Della's and Suki's lives. How are Della and Suki transformed through their relationships with others? Think about the people in your life who might take on transformative roles.
11. Reflect on all of the adults Della interacts with throughout the novel—some not seeing or listening to her, others taking the time to see her and listen to her. What influence did these adults have on Della and the person she became by the end of the novel?
12. Clifton wields power over Suki, forcing her to remain silent about his abuse. Ms. Davonte holds a position of power in the classroom, and Trevor uses his power as a bully over the girls in his class. To what extent does power or the lack of power affect individuals in *Fighting Words*? Where have you seen power conflicts arise in your own life, in your school community, and in the community at large?
13. Della takes several different approaches in the way she dealt with Trevor's bullying. What was the most effective method of dealing with Trevor? When should an individual take a stand against what he/she/they believe to be an injustice? What are the most effective ways to do this? Is there one right way to take a stand? Explain.
14. Throughout *Fighting Words*, Della makes many difficult decisions while facing complicated consequences. Consider Della's decision to use profanity in order to get out of the family tree assignment, Della's decision to punch Trevor vs. her decision to disrupt class and confront him, and ultimately Della's decision to testify in person in order for Clifton to serve a longer sentence. What is the relationship between Della's decisions and the consequences that follow?
15. The power of words is demonstrated throughout the novel. Why do you think the author chose the title *Fighting Words*?
16. Dr. Fremont and Della discuss consent at the end of one of their sessions. Della tells Trevor at recess that he doesn't have permission to touch her as a result. In what ways does consent apply to your relationships in and out of school?