



**Teacher's Guide: *Sapphire the Great and the Meaning of Life***  
by **Beverley Brenna**  
Illustrated by **Tara Anderson**  
Pajama Press, 2019  
Teachers' Guide created by **Beverley Brenna**

**Summary:** *Sapphire the Great and the Meaning of Life* is a middle-grade novel told in two voices: nine-year-old Jeannie and her unique and at times existentialist pet hamster.

Jeannie hears again and again about her bad behavior, but it's something she can't seem to control. Caring for a new hamster gets her thinking about actions and how they're always a response to something—and how people around her should just FOLLOW THE RULES. But when this doesn't happen, and THE RULES get broken, Jeannie discovers that special friends can make you feel better, even when your world comes crashing down. When your dad leaves for another man. When your mom appears to be falling apart. When all your brother wants to do is play video games. When your friend from school doesn't like you anymore because you have a transgender woman in your kitchen making supper. And when you wish you could fix EVERYTHING but you can't fix ANYTHING... a hamster can help. A special friend named Sapphire the Great who has been waiting, all along, to discover what greatness is all about.

*Sapphire the Great and the Meaning of Life* is a story about larger-than-life characters who, in the end, answer bigger questions for each other about acceptance and diversity. For ages 8–12.

## Activity Web (categories adapted from Charlotte Huck)

### *Art Activities*

- Experiment with various media to create Sapphire “The Great” Owens.
- Examine the illustrations for the novel—how do they represent the text? Extend the text? What media/style/tone is used? Explore an aspect of these illustrations in your own artwork.
- Create a poster that Sapphire might make to depict one of the novel’s big ideas about getting along.
- Design a new pair of boots that you think Jeannie would admire.
- Make a model of a skating costume you’d like to see in the Olympics. Could a woman or a man wear it? Why/why not?
- Create a “welcome” poster for Jeannie’s school that would support diversity.
- Compare the illustrations of Sapphire in the novel to this photo of the real Sapphire, a hamster friend of the author’s:



### *Considering Alternatives*

- What if Jeannie had purchased a different animal? How might the story have been different?
- What other activities might the author have selected to characterize Jeannie and her dad? Instead of hockey and skating and fishing, how else might they enjoy spending their free time?
- What other names could have been suggested as an alternative for the hamster’s original name of Harvey Owens?
- What might have happened if Anna Conda had accompanied Jeannie when she went into the school to look for Sapphire?
- How might the story have been different if written from Alistair’s perspective instead of from Jeannie and Sapphire’s points of view?

### *Creative Writing*

- Write a poem about freedom from Sapphire’s point of view.
- Write a new song for Sapphire and Jeannie to sing together.
- Write a letter that Jeannie’s father might have written to his children when he was away.
- Write a sequence of journal entries from Jeannie’s point of view.
- Create a backstory for Tomas—what is his life story until now?
- Create your own animal care poster.
- Write a dramatic scene from the novel in the format of a short play.
- Write a letter to Jeannie that gives her your best advice about any topic of your choosing related to the story.
- Anna Conda gave a skating lesson in the novel. Write down this lesson as you think it would have been taught, or write down the steps you’d use to teach another activity you are good at.
- On Anna Conda’s Big Cooking Day, she was planning to make cabbage rolls and prune perogies. What would you make if you were preparing for a Big Cooking Day? Make a list and compare with a classmate.
- Write the email Mallory Vanelli might write to her mom to tell her about learning to skate.
- Think about the statement “You are who you are.” Think about characteristics that make you who you are, and make a “Who I Am” list poem that includes these ideas. As a model, you might choose to use George Ella Lyon’s poem “Where I’m From,” available online.

### *Drama*

- Create an interview between Sapphire and a TV station following the publication of Sapphire’s autobiography.
- Invent 3 conversations that Jeannie’s parents might have about her when they think she isn’t able to hear them (at the book’s beginning/middle/end).
- Develop a dialogue among 3 or 4 students in the classroom after the hamster has made her appearance.
- Present a dialogue between Sapphire and Sapphire’s mother about “Being Nocturnal.”
- Show the conversation Jeannie and Mr. Kloppenheim might have about Jeannie wearing her jacket in school.
- Tableau a dramatic scene from the book (e.g. the underwear scene, the change room scene, Mom and Anna just after the car accident, Sapphire in the classroom or on the ice).
- Hot-seat Sapphire the Great in a creative question period.
- Present a soliloquy where Sapphire attempts to get customers interested in fresh wood chips.

- Develop a pet-care commercial.
- Prepare a panel discussion of experts advising parents how to raise healthy, confident children.
- Create a conversation where a child tries to convince a parent to allow a particular new pet.
- Explore a “consciousness alley” where one side of the alley is formed by people calling out advice from one perspective while the other side of the alley is formed by people calling out advice from another perspective. Take turns walking down the alley to hear the suggestions. Then switch roles. The following scenarios can be applied:
  - Students recommending that Jeannie’s mother take the promotion versus students recommending she doesn’t and giving reasons why
  - Students advising Sapphire to go into the school yard and be free versus students advising Sapphire to stay in the school
  - Students calling for Jeannie to pick a guppy as a pet versus students suggesting she pick a hamster

### *Interdisciplinary Research Ideas*

- Health & Wellness: Identify ways your school could support people who are gender diverse.
- Health & Wellness: Develop a set of rules to apply in one of the following places: your classroom; your home; the mall; the library; the gym; another place of your choosing.
- Health & Wellness: When Jeannie missed her dad, she resorted to eating as a way to help herself feel better. What are other, more healthy strategies people can use to deal with grief, loss and anxiety?
- Health & Wellness: Consider what components of video games promote gaming addictions, and write a short essay explaining these aspects of game production.
- Science: Research hamster care and create a scientific pamphlet.
- Science: Prepare the poster Jeannie’s group might have made on some topic you’re interested in, related to rocks and minerals.
- Science: What other kinds of food puzzles are recommended for use with people’s pets? Develop a science project that demonstrates the effects of such a food puzzle on an animal you know.
- Science: create an animal behavior chart like the Biting Behavior chart Jeannie makes about Sapphire. Use the chart to explore the behavior of an animal you know.
- Social Studies: If you could add something to the classroom scene from the perspective of a different language/culture, what would you add?
- Social Studies: Create a montage of different family structures represented by kids in the classroom or people we know.
- Art History and Math: Research the history of paper dolls. Poll classmates’ relatives to see whether anyone has played with them.
- Math: Create and share a survey about pets, displaying the results in a bar graph.

### *Literary Awareness*

- This story is written in first-person present tense. Try re-writing a short section in third-person present or in past-tense and compare. Why do you think the author chose the tense she did?
- Consider the length of the book—do you think it’s a good length for telling this story? Why/why not?
- Consider the length of chapters in this book: do the chapter lengths work for this story? Why/why not?
- What effect do the illustrations have on each chapter? Are there other scenes that you think would make good illustrations? Why?
- What is alliteration? Anna describes the name “Harvey Hamster” as good alliteration. Create a funny sentence where most of the first letters of each word are the same.
- Sapphire tends not to use contractions (i.e. she says “is not” instead of “isn’t” and “he is” instead of “he’s”); find a section and re-write it using contractions, and state what difference this makes to Sapphire’s characterization.

### *Personal Response*

- What characters in this story remind you of yourself or someone you know? In what ways?
- Write a journal entry about your name. Tell how you got your name, or something about your name that is interesting, or something you like about your name, or something you don’t like about your name.
- Make a list of other names you’d wish to be called instead of your own, and explain why.
- Have you ever made a friend you thought was too bossy? Have you ever realized you were being too bossy to someone else? Write about this or any other aspect of friendship in your journal. How should someone act in order to keep friends long-term?
- What is your personal definition of freedom?

### *Related Literature*

- Compare this story to other middle-grade books that deal with bullying, diversity and family dynamics including: *A Boy Named Queen* by Sara Cassidy, *The Tiger Rising* by Kate DiCamillo, *Raymie Nightingale* by Kate DiCamillo, and *Flora and Ulysses* by Kate DiCamillo.
- Compare the animal character of Sapphire to the squirrel in *Flora and Ulysses* by Kate DiCamillo, Abel from *Abel’s Island* by William Steig, and *Walter: The Story of a Rat* by Barbara Wersba.
- Two books for young people that discuss anxiety are: *When My Worries Get Too Big! A Relaxation Book for Children Who Live with Anxiety* by Kari Dun Buron and *Anxiety: Deal with It Before It Ties You Up In Knots* by Joey Mandel. Have a look at these titles and

suggest how they might be helpful to Alistair, who demonstrated some anxiety during the course of this novel.

- Compare the characterization of Jeannie to the characters in these picture books: *Ruby Sings the Blues* by Niki Daly; *The Little Little Girl with the Big Big Voice* by Kristen Balouch; and *Loud Lula* by Katy Duffield. Also consider the role of Alex's loud voice in the non-fiction book *Did You Invent the Phone Alone, Alexander Graham Bell?* by Melvin & Gilda Berger.

#### *Values Clarification*

- Jeannie tells Mallory that she has a list of things she likes about Anna Conda. What do you think Jeannie would include on this list?
- What is your responsibility if you hear a friend talking about disliking someone on the basis of that person's looks?
- Was the teacher right or wrong in telling Jeannie she couldn't keep the hamster at school? Why?
- Jeannie sometimes dwells on her challenges. What are her challenging qualities, and what are her positive qualities and talents? What are your challenging and positive qualities/talents? Compare.

#### *Other*

- What music do you think Jeannie would like? Find or write a song that you think represents her.
- Create interview questions, compose a letter to the author, and connect by email through her author's website.