

Story Summary

It's not every day you encounter a hamster experiencing an existential crisis, but Sapphire has spent her short pet-store life convinced that she's waiting for... something. At first she thinks it's to be FREE, but it may be possible that life has a greater purpose in store—a purpose Sapphire will discover thanks to a nine-year-old girl whose family is changing in ways she doesn't quite understand. Jeannie's dad has moved out, her mom is always tired and snappish, and her older brother just wants to play video games in his room all day. Jeannie doesn't understand what's going on, but she knows one thing: she really, REALLY wants a hamster. Her mom promised she could buy one with her Christmas money, but it's been WEEKS since the holidays and Jeannie's beginning to worry she'll never get her pet. But maybe if she does, her dad will come to visit. Maybe a hamster will make everything better.

Sapphire the Great and the Meaning of Life was written in consultation with **OutSaskatoon**, an organization that supports LGBTQ2S+ people of all ages.

Beverley Brenna is an award-winning author whose honors include an international Dolly Gray Award, a Printz Honor Book Award, and a shortlisting for the 2013 Governor General's Award. Bev's many years as a classroom and special education teacher offer her a clear picture of school landscapes, children, and childhood. She is now a professor of Curriculum Studies at the College of Education, University of Saskatchewan.

A folk artist and award-winning illustrator who trained at the Ontario College of Art and Design, **Tara Anderson** is known for her lively and humorous illustrations of animals. Her books include *That Stripy Cat*, *Rhino Rumpus*, and the award-winning *Nat the Cat Can Sleep Like That*. Tara shares a farmhouse in Tweed, Ontario, with her husband, her young daughter, and several cats.

Juvenile Fiction Ages 7–11 | ISBN: 978-1-77278-069-7 (HC) | Pages: 160

Keywords:

Family, Emotions, Gender Identity, New Experience

BISAC Codes

JUV002180 JUVENILE FICTION / Animals / Mice, Hamsters, Guinea Pigs, etc.

JUV013020 JUVENILE FICTION / Family / Marriage & Divorce

JUV060000 JUVENILE FICTION / LGBT

JUV039060 JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Friendship

Reading Level

Fountas & Pinnell : S | Lexile measure : 470L



BOOK CLUBS

This guide has been developed for use in classroom book clubs/literature circles. Book clubs support and develop the love of reading as well as help students build comprehension and support the development of collaborative learning and critical thinking.

In book clubs students:

- meet in small groups (4–8) to discuss a book they are reading
- take turns assuming a leadership role within the group
- meet regularly and set the pace for their reading
- take ownership for their learning by:
 - selecting the book they will read (usually from a predetermined list provided by the teacher)
 - determine the pace of the reading
 - prepare for and run their discussions.

Prior to beginning with book clubs, teachers:

- take time to develop and nurture whole class discussions about books while modeling the skills and behaviors needed to collaborate and work together as a book club
- provide guidance, modeling, and support
- become familiar with all texts prior to making them available to students

During book club discussions, teachers:

- develop a schedule for book clubs ensuring they provide time for reading and discussion
- provide mini-lessons for any needs that may arise
- monitor through observation and conferring as well as supporting student self-assessment

Key elements:

- Groups meet on a regular basis, with time provided in class to read and discuss their book
- Students use a “reader’s notebook” to write notes, comments, insights, and questions while they read
- Students bring their reader’s notebook to each meeting to support their discussion
- Discussion topics may emerge from the students as they read; however, the teacher provides discussion topics and provocations to help students engage in rich discussions (suggestions are provided in this guide)
- Group meetings are collaborative, with each group developing a set of norms for their group
- The teacher serves as facilitator
- Assessment is grounded in teacher observation, student conversations, and student self-assessment
- Book clubs promote a love of reading

Thinking about Assessment...

This Discussion Guide offers a range of prompts, tasks, and provocations to support Book Club discussions. While using this guide in the classroom, teachers have a number of opportunities to use observation, conversation, and product to assess student thinking and learning. The tasks and prompts offered in this guide are designed to support discussion, sharing, and student thinking while providing an opportunity for students to demonstrate comprehension, extension of thinking, and critical literacy. Assessment can include: self-assessment and peer assessment, conversations with students through teacher/student conferences; group discussions; and products created by the students.

For the teacher and student to have a clear, common understanding of the expectations and criteria to achieve success while reading the novels, educators develop learning goals based on curriculum expectations and share them with the students in language they can understand. Then, together the educator and students co-create criteria to make the path to success visible and clear.

These success criteria are posted in the classroom, are visible to all students, and may be revised and edited based on the learning and understanding of the students.

As the Book Club meetings are collaborative and begin with the groups developing a set of norms for their group, it is suggested that all groups open each meeting with a reflection of the previous discussion. These reflections can highlight what went well during the discussions; what needs to improve in these discussions; and considerations for the current discussion.

Discussion Guide:

This discussion guide will offer a variety of tasks, discussion prompts, and questions to provoke thinking and deepen comprehension before, during, and after reading of the novel. These are suggestions only and it is certainly not necessary to complete the entire list of suggested activities/questions. Educators are encouraged to make choices based on the strengths, needs, and interests of the students.

Highlighted Curriculum Expectations

Ontario Ministry of Education Language Arts Curriculum K–8

Oral Communication

- 2.4 Demonstrating Understanding
- 1.5 Making Inferences / Interpreting Texts
- 1.6 Extending Understanding

Reading: Understanding Form and Style

- 2.3 Text Features
- 2.4 Elements of Style

Reading for Meaning

- 1.4 Demonstrating Understanding
- 1.5 Making Inferences/Interpreting Texts
- 1.6 Extending Understanding
- 1.7 Analyzing Texts
- 1.8 Responding and Evaluating Texts



Before Reading

1. Conduct some research to learn all you can about hamsters and their care. Create a poster with important information about hamsters and their care. Share with your group.
2. Make a list of all the things you would need if you wanted a pet hamster. Find all these items and their costs by exploring pet shop brochures or online shopping sites.
3. The hamster in this story reminds us that he is supposed to be “nocturnal.” What does this mean? What other animals are “nocturnal”?
4. The teacher will need to lead the following discussion as a way of preparing the students for the characters they will encounter and the family challenges they will read about in this text. Please note that these prompts have been adapted from the 2015 Health and Physical Education curriculum in Ontario. This document is no longer used in Ontario classrooms. However, most boards have their own guidelines for discussing issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation. Please adapt the following questions and discussion prompts to align with your school board policies and guidelines. Consider some picture books to read aloud to the class related to gender identity and sexual orientation to help you enhance these discussions.

- In our classroom, we have discussed healthy relationships (e.g. accepting differences, being inclusive, communicating openly, listening, showing mutual respect and caring, being honest). We have also discussed how we can overcome challenges to help make our relationships with family, friends, and neighbors healthy. What can you do if you are having problems getting along with someone?
- We all come from different families. Some students live with two parents. Some live with one parent. Some have two mothers or two fathers. Some live with grandparents or with caregivers. How can we show respect for our family differences?

- There are both visible differences and invisible differences between us. For example, we may have different skin, hair, and eye colors; different facial features, body sizes, and shapes; physical aids or different physical abilities. These are visible differences. We may also have some invisible differences, for example, learning abilities, skills, and talents; personal or cultural values and beliefs; gender identity, sexual orientation, family background, personal preferences, allergies, and sensitivities. Discuss some examples of things that make each person unique. Discuss the ways in which we can be role models and show respect for our differences.

During Reading

Chapters 1–4

1. What are your first impressions of Jeannie and her mom? What characteristics do each of them display in these early chapters? Record your thinking in point form in your reader’s notebook. Share your thoughts with the entire group.
2. At some points in the novel, the author uses all capital letters for some phrases or words. For example, on the first page, FOR GOODNESS’ SAKE is written in all caps. Why do you think the author does this? What effect does it have on you as a reader? Discuss with your group.
3. Extending Understanding: Jeannie really wants a hamster. Tell your group about a time when you really wanted something from your parents or caregivers.
4. Extending Understanding: In your reading journal, write about a time you misbehaved while you were begging your parent(s) for something you really wanted.
5. The book begins three weeks after Christmas and two weeks after Jeannie’s father Harvey has left the house. Everyone is dealing with the separation in different ways. How do Jeannie, Alistair, and their mom deal with this change in their family? Share your ideas with your group.

6. How do you know Jeannie misses her dad? Give evidence from the text to support your ideas. Record your thinking in your reader's notebook.
7. At the end of Chapter 2, Sapphire says he "does not know what he is waiting for." He also says, "I hope something happens soon." What do you think Sapphire is waiting for? Give evidence from the text to support your answer. Discuss with your group.
8. We are learning a great deal about Sapphire. What are all the things you have learned about her character and about hamsters after reading these first few chapters? Work with a partner to make a list of Sapphire's character traits and her behaviors. Share with the larger group.

Chapters 4–13

1. In Chapter 8, we learn that Sapphire does not miss her family. What reasons does Sapphire give for her feelings? Discuss with a partner.
2. When Jeannie and her brother Alistair first meet Anna, Alistair is suspicious of Anna. Why do you think Alistair feels this way? Give evidence from the text to support your answer. Share your ideas with the group.
3. At the end of Chapter 10, Sapphire returns to her cage and feels that her cage has become smaller. Why do you think Sapphire feels this way? Discuss with a partner.
4. When talking to her dad in Chapter 11, Jeannie ends up slamming the phone on the counter and crying. She holds Sapphire to help her calm down and feel better. Make a connection to a time when you felt angry and sad like Jeannie. How did you calm down and feel better? Record your thinking in your reader's notebook. Share with a partner.
5. In Chapter 13, Jeannie makes a chart about Sapphire's biting behavior. Jeannie realizes that Sapphire bites when she is scared or surprised. You will have noticed in this novel that Jeannie often yells. Make a chart about her yelling behavior. When does she yell? What causes her to yell? What do you think she is feeling when she yells?

6. Throughout this novel, we see Jeannie, her mom, and her brother hurt each other's feelings, but there are many ways in which they take care of each other. What are all the ways in which you see members of Jeannie's family taking care of each other? How do you and your family take care of each other? Share your thinking with your group.

Chapter 13–27

1. In Chapter 15, Jeannie decides to take Sapphire to school. Why do you think she does this? Discuss with a partner and then with the larger group.
2. In Chapter 19, Jeannie claims that "everybody's breaking the rules." Who are all the people Jeannie thinks are breaking the rules? Why is this so upsetting for Jeannie? Discuss with your group.
3. In Chapter 27, Jeannie is thinking about Anna and her gender. Jeannie's mom says, "People are who they are." What do you think Jeannie's mom means when she says this? Discuss with your group.
4. At the end of this chapter, Sapphire finally feels like her cage is actually bigger. Why do you think Sapphire feels this way? Give evidence from the text and use your own ideas to support your thinking.

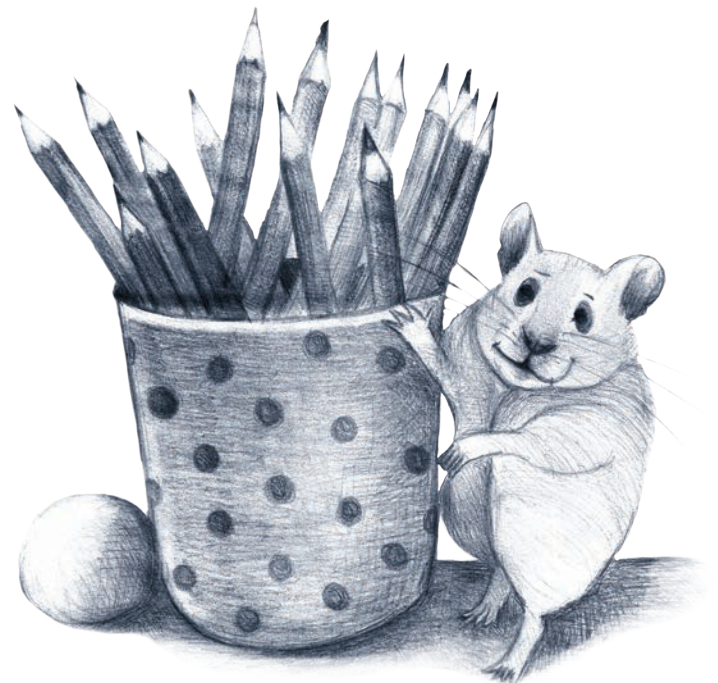
Chapter 27–40

1. On page 90, Mallory calls Anna a "man-woman." As we learned in our class discussions, Anna is actually a trans woman. Why do you think Mallory leaves when Anna arrives and says, "I just don't like that man-woman"? What do you think of Mallory's behavior and attitude when she first meets Anna? Discuss with your group.
2. Do you think it was respectful of Jeannie to ask Anna about her pre-transitional name? Why or why not? Discuss with your group?
3. How has Sapphire been taking care of everyone? Explain your thinking using evidence from the text. Share with your group.

4. Jeannie first thinks that Sapphire is a male hamster and names him Harvey Owens. Later she learns Sapphire is a female. Does Sapphire's gender make any difference to Jeannie? Explain your thinking to your partner.
5. In the novel, each chapter is told from either Jeannie's point of view or Sapphire's point of view. How did this help you understand the novel? Why do you think the author decided to write the story in this way? Discuss with your group.
6. Anna teaches Jeannie, "You are who you are." How does this comment help Jeannie understand Anna? How does this comment help her understand her father? Discuss with your group.
7. Jeannie's father's new partner says, "The word *normal* does not apply to people. It only applies to the weather." How does this help Jeannie? Discuss with your group.
6. In your reader's notebook, write about a time when you and your family had to adjust to changes in your life and in your family. How was your experience similar to or different than Jeannie's?
7. At the end of the story, Jeannie begins to realize that her family now includes her father, his partner, and his partner's son. How do you think Jeannie will adjust to the new makeup of her family? What challenges might she face? What has she learned that will help her adjust to these changes? Discuss with your group.
8. We learn a lot about positive language related to gender, inclusivity, and self-identity. What have you learned? What questions do you still have about positive language and respectful behavior related to gender, inclusivity, and self-identify? Ask your teacher to help you answer these questions.
9. Why is Sapphire so happy at the end of the book? Do you feel she has found her purpose in life? What is her purpose?

After Reading

1. How do you think Jeannie's life has changed over the course of this novel? Discuss with a partner and then with your whole group.
2. How has Sapphire helped Jeannie cope with all the changes in her life and in her family?
3. Many people around Jeannie try to help and support her. How did each person help or support Jeannie? Record your thinking in your reader's notebook and then share with your group.
4. What are the big ideas in this novel? List them in your reader's notebook and then share with your group.
5. Take one of the big ideas, such as belonging, family, identity, acceptance, or any others shared in the group, and write about the author's message related to this big idea. Record your thinking in your reader's notebook.



This guide was created with support from Ontario Creates



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