

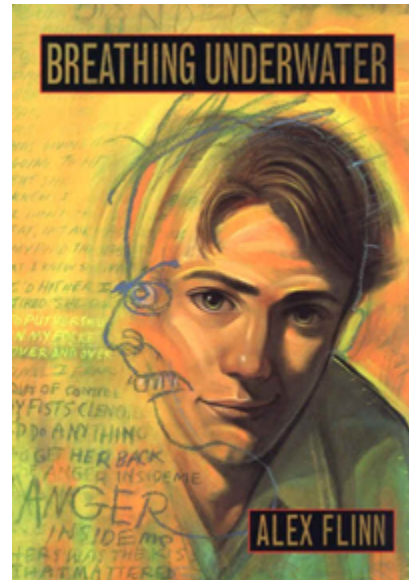
Booktalks and Learning Guide by Joni Bodart

BREATHING UNDERWATER

Flinn, Alex. HarperCollins, 2001. \$15.95. 263p. ISBN: 0-060-29198-2. Realistic fiction. Reading level: YHS. Interest level: YHS, OHS. Sex education; English; Ethics; Creative writing.

SUBJECT AREAS

Dating and social life; violence; abuse, physical; therapy; self-knowledge; bullying; family relationships; anger; racism; abuse, mental; prejudice; peer pressure; writing; friendship; love; abuse, sexual; justice; legal system; fear; school; sports; rites of passage; problem parents; secrets; lying and deceitfulness; substance abuse.



CHARACTERS

Nick Andreas: At sixteen, he's ordered into therapy for abusing his girlfriend; he used to have the reputation of being one of the coolest guys in school.

Caitlin McCourt: Nick's girlfriend, formerly plump, still harbors low self-esteem.

Deborah Lehman: the judge who hears the case between Caitlin and Nick.

Mr. Andreas: Nick's only parent, his abusive father, a wealthy self-made man who constantly tells Nick he's a loser.

Mrs. McCourt: Caitlin's mother.

Tom Carter: He's Nick's best friend, but he doesn't know about what Nick's father does to him, or why he abused Caitlin.

Mario Ortega: He teaches Nick's family violence class.

Kelly Steele, Leo Sotolongo, Tyrone/Tiny Johnston, A.J./Psycho, Ray DeLeon: members of Nick's family violence class.

Mr. and Mrs. Carter: Tom's parents who treat Nick like one of the family because he's there so much, but who are not accepting of anyone outside their social circle.

Liana Castro: A girl Tom dates, despite his parents' disapproval.

Saint O'Connor: Star quarterback, Tom's new best friend and Caitlin's new boyfriend.

Miss Higgins: Nick's honors English teacher, who sees more of Nick than he knows he's revealed.

Derek Wayne: He's in choir with Caitlin and is smart and geeky.

BOOKTALK

The Nick everyone saw was one of the really cool kids at school. Rich, popular, smart, handsome, he played on the football team and drove a classic '67 red Mustang convertible. He had a charmed life--everyone wanted to be Nick.

The Nick no one saw was an angry, resentful loser, who frequently missed school when his father's abuse got too obvious. His father may have given Nick his car, but he also told his son, over and over, that he was a failure, a loser, never good enough at anything. Nick hasn't seen his mother since he was five, and he and his father live alone with a series of housekeepers. Nick avoids his father as much as possible, and worries about what will set him off.

Then just after school starts, he sees Caitlin, and thinks "dream girl." His friend Tom helps him

meet her, and they start dating. Nick is in love for the first time, but the only examples he has of love are the memories of his parents. Which Nick will he show Caitlin, the one everyone knows, or the one that no one does?

MAJOR THEMES AND IDEAS

- Hitting people, even once, no matter what the reason, is wrong.
- Sometimes it's a good thing when life kicks you in the butt so you'll take a good look at the messes you've made.
- Exploring the past brings out feelings that cause us to become insecure, controlling, or violent.
- What happens to you at home is the cornerstone of your other relationships.
- Control freaks are frequently also violent.
- People interpret your behavior differently from the way you do, and may see patterns you are denying or blind to.
- Abusive behavior is both physical and mental.
- It's important to acknowledge your emotions, and find positive ways of dealing with them.
- You're not a loser because someone calls you that, over and over. You become a loser when you tell that to yourself, over and over. So, figure out how to turn off both those voices, and be a winner.
- You can't respect yourself if you're letting someone beat you up, whether they use their words, or their fists, or both.

BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Discuss the meaning of the title, and the scenes in the book that helped you find that meaning.
2. Explain why you think Miss Higgins didn't call social services about Nick being abused, when there were two years of evidence she and a previous teacher had recorded.
3. There are several turning points in this book when Nick gained new insight about himself. Discuss them and the insights he gained.
4. Speculate on what Nick will be like in the future, including his friendship with Tom, his relationship with his father, and his relationship with women.
5. Examine the scenes in the Family Violence Class, and show how Mario helped its members gain new insight about themselves and their actions.
6. Describe the most important thought or idea that you take away from this book and explain why you chose it.
7. At one point, Nick describes Caitlin as strong. Give examples of her strength and of her love for Nick.
8. Explain why you think Caitlin told Tom about Nick and his father.
9. Explain why recalling and remembering pain helps cure it, and why the judge wanted Nick to keep a journal.
10. In a way, abusers are not hitting or hurting the person they abuse, but someone else. Who is it, and why?

BOOKTALK IDEAS

1. Have Caitlin describe Nick, first his love, then his abuse, and her confusion about what to do.
2. Focus your talk on Nick's initial meeting with Caitlin, contrasting that with a date when he was angry or controlling, asking at the end, which Nick was real.
3. Center your talk on the courtroom scene, being sure to include Nick's fear of his father, closing with a few words about his first journal entry.
4. Include the poem Nick wrote on March 29 as part of your talk, using it to show how he isolated himself, even from his best friend.

RISKS

- Portrait of a long-term abusive father.

- Shows graphic dating violence.
- Language is realistic but vulgar.
- Depicts harassment and stalking behavior.

AWARDS

Top-10 Best Books for Young Adults, Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers

REVIEWS

"The messages in this unsparing novel of teenage love turned dangerous are powerful, on target, and almost too painful to read--exactly why this highly recommended book should be required reading for all teenagers. It is a road map to warning signs, consequences, and the very real hope of redemption if the cycle of abuse is. . . caught and treated in time." -- Voice of Youth Advocates, 6/01, Beth E. Anderson.

"Flinn tackles the difficult task of making us understand, if not sympathize with, the motivation of a violent young man. . . . This extraordinarily moving novel is highly relevant reading for all young men in our violence-prone society." -- Amazon, 2001, Patty Campbell.

"An open and honest portrayal of an all-too-common problem." -- School Library Journal, 2001, Joel Shoemaker.

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