

Reader Guide
for
Jump the Cracks
by
Stacy DeKeyser



Fifteen-year-old Victoria is accused of kidnapping when she finds an abandoned child on a train and then hides him from his abusive father. Soon she's on a cross-country journey with the child, as each "right" decision to help the boy gets her deeper into trouble -- and farther away from home. Victoria has vowed to protect the little boy no matter what. But can she keep that promise?

Pre-reading:

Have you ever seen evidence of abuse somewhere? What did you want to do? What did you do?

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is Victoria heading into the city? Why is she so angry with her parents? Are her feelings justified?
2. Describe Victoria's trip into the city. What does she see? What are her options? What would you do?
3. Do you think most people ignore instances of public child abuse? Why or why not? What should be done to help the children?
4. List the sequence of events that leaves Victoria holding a baby on the way to Newark. Would you be afraid of Jake?
5. How scared would you be in this situation? What does Victoria have working for her? What details are stacked up against her to care for this child?
6. Describe Victoria's dad's reaction to her situation. Is this typical for him? For most parents? Are most parents this bad at listening?
7. How would returning immediately to New York be a trap for both Victoria and Wills? Would you have the courage to just keep going or not?
8. How could Wills fall through the cracks? Do many kids fall through them? Why? Are Victoria's decisions connected to her parents divorce? How?
9. Victoria's family trip to the Grand Canyon was that one perfect moment. Have you had one with your own family? Do you think Wills has?
10. Where does Victoria decide they should go? Where do they end up? What do they do to pass the time? Do you think she is taking good care of her charge? Why or why not?
11. "Wills and I needed exactly the same things. Love Security. One place to call home. Someone to help us feel safe in an unsafe world." (p.100) Do you agree? What do you need?
12. How does Victoria try to meet the physical, social and emotional needs of Wills? Do you think she would be capable to do this long-term or not? Why? Would you want to be responsible for a toddler full time?

13. Who is Miss Theresa or Tee? How is she different from all the other adults so far? Does she threaten Victoria's plans? How? Do you blame her?
14. Victoria insists that she won't break her promise to Wills. Miss Theresa assures her that adults have learned "not to make promises we can't keep." (p. 124) Who is right here? Is it better to make no promises than to break them?
15. What conclusions does Victoria make about Wills's mother? In the end, what happens? How do you think Victoria was changed by the experience?
16. What do you think happens after the story ends? Do you think Miss Theresa will win custody of Wills, or Sandra Jean? What do you think would happen in real life? Who do you think Wills ought to live with, and why?

Projects:

Language Arts:

Write a scene between Sandra Jean and Victoria after the novel has closed. What do you think they would say to one another? Stay true to the characters and the events from the story.

Music:

Create a playlist that would go with the events of the story. Explain why you chose the songs that you did.

Art:

Create two pieces of art: One through the eyes of Victoria the other through the eyes of Wills or Sandra Jean. You can use any media that you like but you must explain your choices in a brief artist's statement on the back.

Math:

Figure out how far \$800 would go with a toddler. You must budget for the following: lodging, meals, diapers, a weeks worth of clothing, and a Laundromat to clean them. Then calculate how far even \$10,000 would get you. But this time you must have an apartment, furniture, and utilities.

Health/Wellness:

Create a poster, website, or PowerPoint presentation (like a public service announcement) about child abuse. Research facts and figures from a reputable source to use in your presentation.

Author interview

What inspired this story?

After a few years of trying (and failing) to sell my *very long* picture book manuscripts, I wondered if I might be a novelist after all. But I didn't know what to write about.

During that time, I took the train into New York for a weekend, and that's where I saw the real-life Wills. Except for the details, I witnessed on the train what Victoria did, and it upset me. I couldn't stop thinking about that little boy and wondering what would become of him. Then I realized that was what I should write about. So I did.

What advice do you have for young people who want to be writers?

Pay attention to your surroundings. How do people act? Dress? What small habits do they have that make them individuals? You can write, "I saw a man riding a bike." Or you can write, "I saw a man riding a bike that was too small for him." The details make the sentence much more intriguing. Eavesdrop on conversations to develop an ear for dialog.

Write a lot. Anything you want. The more you write, the better your writing will get.

Don't worry about being published yet. You have lots of time for that.

What can your fans look forward to next?

My next novel is about a girl who hears voices. She's worried she might be going crazy, but the thing is, she *likes* the voices. It's also about family secrets, a cute boy with dimples, and a crisis of faith.

About the author

Growing up in Wisconsin, Stacy DeKeyser spent her summers at the library, reading and dreaming about faraway places. Since then, she has traveled to twenty-seven states and six foreign countries. Now she lives in Connecticut and frequently takes the train to New York City. This is her first novel. Visit her online at www.stacydekeyser.com.

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