

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Go Ask Alice

by

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Book Information

Anonymous, Go Ask Alice
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This is the real story of drug addiction, drug slavery, and drug death, as told by an actual teenage victim in her own intimate words.

Topics: Diseases/Disorders, Drug Abuse/Addiction; Family Life, Death; Family Life, Growing Up; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

Main Characters

"Alice" a fifteen-year-old high school girl who undergoes tremendous personal upheaval as a result of experimentation and immersion in drugs

Chris Alice's girlfriend from home, who accompanies her to San Francisco and shares in the many horrors and small achievements the two experience there

Joel a sincere young college boy who provides steady reassurance and understanding for Alice and helps her through some of the most difficult times in her life

Mother and Dad Alice's long-suffering parents, who support Alice's attempts to stay straight and repeatedly forgive her many forays into the world of drugs

Tim and Alex Alice's younger brother and sister

Vocabulary

acid a slang term for LSD (see below)

amphetamine a stimulatory drug, sometimes referred to as "speed"

flashback a sudden return of the physical feelings of a drug experience without ingestion of the drug itself

heroin a derivative of morphine; a powerful, addictive narcotic drug

LSD lysergic acid diethylamide; a psychedelic drug that produces hallucinations resembling those occurring in a psychotic state

smack a slang term for heroin

Synopsis

The story of "Alice," a fifteen-year-old high school girl, is told entirely through the candid and expressive entries in her diary. As the story opens, Alice is stewing over the typical kinds of problems that plague high-school girls--boys, fitting in and being popular. Immediately we sense Alice's feelings of inadequacy. Her entries show an obsession with dieting and vulnerability to the judgments of everyone around her.

Alice receives the news that the family will move to another city with surprising enthusiasm. The move will give her the chance to reinvent herself, and she promptly loses ten pounds in an attempt to "be an entirely different person...." Life as the new girl in school is difficult and isolating, and Alice is overjoyed to return to visit her grandparents for the summer in her old hometown. It is here that she is invited to a party and given LSD without her knowledge. Her description of the "trip" is intense. She sees colors and sounds and becomes one with inanimate objects. After this experience, her curiosity is piqued. She loses her virginity during another acid trip, and is propelled into a paroxysm of guilt and worry, wondering whether she is pregnant. Then, her grandfather's sudden heart attack makes her brood about death, and her state of mind begins to crumble. To relieve the stress and anxiety, she begins taking sleeping pills at night and tranquilizers during the day. To her immense relief, she finds she is not pregnant, but then drifts into a relationship with Chris, a shop girl and drug user. Chris and Alice then become intensely involved with two older boys who use them for selling drugs.

After Chris and Alice discover the truth about the two boys, they decide they must swear off drugs and run away to San Francisco. They find work with an older woman who introduces them to heroin and eventually abuses them sexually and physically.

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After they open their own shop in Berkeley, Alice longs for home and returns to her family. But Alice is unable to resist pressures from her old drug friends and starts "chipping" again. The police raid Chris's home, and the two girls are placed on probation. Thereafter, Alice's family places major restrictions on her movements. One night, she simply takes off hitchhiking and enters a frightening and disorienting period of transience, illness, poverty, and prostitution. Her entries from this period are undated, rambling and sprinkled with profanity and drug jargon. When she finally decides to call her parents, she makes a decision to someday become a social worker and help kids who are living through the same hell she has experienced.

When Alice arrives back at the family home, she is welcomed back unequivocally. She resolves to stay off drugs and even begins a new diary as a symbol of the brand-new life she hopes to begin. Trouble awaits at school, however, as her old crowd resents her efforts to study hard and stay straight. The situation escalates to the point where Alice and her family are threatened, and pressures mount to an unbearable level when both grandparents die within a few months of each other. Then, one day, as Alice is baby-sitting for a neighbor, she eats candy laced with LSD, presumably placed by one of her angry classmates. The drugs cause a hysterical reaction in Alice, and she ends up in a mental institution. Gradually, the facts of the incident are examined, and Alice is allowed to leave the hospital. This time, her resolution seems unshakable. Her desire for a career in social work, together with the support of a solid new friend, Joel, seem to pave the way for permanent healing. In her last entry, she discusses how she no longer needs a diary, now that she can discuss her problems with real people. In a surprising and disturbing twist, the epilogue reveals that shortly after those words were set down, Alice died of a drug overdose.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

After Alice returns home from San Francisco and tries to stay straight, she makes the comment, "It's amazing how much sex I've had and I feel like I haven't had any." What did she mean?

All of Alice's sexual experiences to date had been in the context of some kind of drug experience, when her awareness and inhibitions were dimmed. Now, thinking about boys as a straight person, she realizes that those experiences were largely unremarkable and without meaning, and she longs for a boy simply to "put his arm around me in a movie."

Literary Analysis

Alice's story was told from the first-person point of view in perhaps the most revealing of literary styles, the diary. What are some of the ways in which the diary format reveals Alice's state of mind more strikingly than might be the case if the story was told by a third-person narrator?

With Alice's diary entries, the reader is privy to thoughts and feelings revealed to no one else in Alice's life, and the degree of intimacy we feel with Alice is significant. The diary format reveals Alice's state of mind in subtler ways as well. During those times when Alice is in the throes of drugs and homelessness, we notice a distinct change in her vocabulary and use of profanity. Her entries become irregular, undated and, sometimes, incoherent. Finally, her intention to give up the diary at the end of the book seems the ultimate symbol of a better future for her.

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Inferential Comprehension

As we read Alice's diary entries, we note surprising differences in her outlook on life when she is straight and when she is using drugs. Describe one of the attitudes that seem to change completely when Alice enters one of her periods of drug use.

Among the many things that change for Alice when she is using drugs is her attitude toward her family. During straight periods, she repeatedly describes them as a good and supportive family, and many entries tell of the gratitude she feels toward them. During her drug periods, Alice describes her family as oppressive, overbearing and distrustful.

Constructing Meaning

Alice's diaries are deeply personal, highly emotional, and often unsettling. Describe which part of the diaries made you most tense, sad, or uncomfortable.

Answers will vary with the students. All high school students can likely feel the pain of Alice's battles with her former drug friends as she struggles to remain straight. Taunts of "Mary Pure" and "Nancy Nice" eventually give way to more sinister threats against members of Alice's family. When the trauma of her grandparents' deaths are added to the strain, the tension in the story becomes almost unbearable. Earlier portions of the book may also produce a feeling of discomfort in readers. Alice's hazy memories of Oregon and the implied period of prostitution capture the sympathy of most readers. Finally, the epilogue provides the most stunning and troubling of all the revelations in the book, and no easy answers or resolutions are offered.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features The title of this book is taken from a popular song called "White Rabbit," performed by the 1960s psychedelic band, Jefferson Airplane, and featured on an album called "Surrealistic Pillow." The song makes an allusion to Alice in Wonderland, as "one pill makes you larger and the other makes you small...." In order to better understand the

editors' choice for the title of this book, obtain a copy of "White Rabbit" and listen to the lyrics as a class. During class discussion, ask students to interpret the lyrics and explain why *Go Ask Alice* was an appropriate choice for the title of this book.

Understanding the Author's Craft Alice's story is so compelling partly because of the deeply personal nature of the diary technique. Alice turned to her diary with her deepest troubles and thoughts and revealed activities that she was ashamed to admit, even to herself. As an exercise in understanding the diary technique as used in a work of literature and the value of setting down daily thoughts on paper, ask students to keep their own "journal" for two weeks. The journal entries should be as personal as possible, and students should be assured that the entries themselves will not be read by anyone, even the teacher. At the end of the two weeks, ask students to re-read their journals and write a short paper on what keeping the journal meant for them. Was it a chore or a pleasure? What feelings were evoked by re-reading the entries? Is there anyone with whom they would be willing to share the journal? Will they continue the journal after the assignment is finished?

Extending Meaning The conclusion of this story is a shocking one, especially given the optimistic tone of Alice's final diary entries. As each reader finishes the book, he or she doubtless speculates on what really happened to cause Alice's overdose. Conduct a class discussion on this topic, and ask students to share their opinions on whether Alice descended into drug use again or was perhaps ambushed again by a vindictive classmate. Ask students to support their speculations with evidence from the book.

Describing Actions or Events Alice's description of her first trip on LSD is remarkably descriptive and illuminating. She seems able, in hindsight, to put down in words what she was unable to articulate at the time. It may serve an instructional purpose to ask students to describe in written form a physical sensation that is actually difficult to put into words. Such sensations may include

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the feeling of riding a roller coaster, a dream of flying, or the feeling of physical illness. Attempting to set these physical manifestations into words will give the students insight into an author's craft and an appreciation of Alice's gifts as a writer.