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SENSITIVE

Allayne L. Webster



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

When her family moves from Broken Hill to the small South Australian town of Kingston SE, Samantha changes her name to SJ and plans to reinvent herself. But her chronic eczema and allergies are almost impossible to hide, no matter how many doctors she sees or tests she undergoes. For SJ, the pain and suffering of her illnesses only intensify her wish to be 'normal'. She eventually realises, however, that everyone has obstacles to overcome.

Sensitive is a tender, compelling and insightful story that shares SJ's journey of acceptance, resilience and courage.

THEMES

- Family
- Friendship
- Acceptance
- Identity
- Belonging
- Courage
- Eczema
- Allergies

WRITING STYLE

Sensitive is told through the first-person narration of SJ, a thirteen-year-old girl suffering from chronic atopic eczema and severe life-threatening allergies. Through SJ's journey, readers are able to experience the enormous obstacles that people with such illnesses endure in their daily lives. Allayne L. Webster's use of description evokes in readers a true sense of empathy and understanding of SJ's struggles, particularly in her need to feel 'normal'.

STUDY NOTES

- The opening line of *Sensitive* – 'I've decided to stop being me' (p. 1) – introduces the complication immediately. Discuss the importance of drawing readers into the text so quickly.
- The tension between SJ and her mother is very clearly depicted. As you read, track their relationship and the way it changes throughout the novel.
- SJ talks at length about 'Old Me' and 'New Me'. At the novel's conclusion, she introduces 'New NEW Me'. Using a graphic organiser, show how these three versions of SJ are different from one another. Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.

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- What is your opinion of the family's decision to move to Kingston SE? Does it provide the positive change that was hoped?
- SJ is on the cusp of puberty. How does this contribute to the complexities of her journey? What hopes does SJ hold for turning thirteen?
- How does the author share with readers what it is like to be SJ? How do the descriptions of her experiences – both physical and emotional – evoke empathy?
- SJ often comments that 'Mum worries a lot about the way I look' (p. 4). Discuss this statement from the mother's perspective. Is she worried about SJ's looks, or is there more behind her concern?
- How are SJ's mother and father different in the roles they play in the management of SJ's illnesses? Create a comparison that shows your understanding of these characters and their roles.
- SJ comments that when her parents met, they felt a physical attraction. How does this contradict Dad's philosophy that 'looks don't matter and brains count' (p. 5)?
- What clues do we get that SJ shares a special relationship with her Grandma? How does Grandma help her to come to terms with her illnesses? What is the significance of her visit later in the novel?
- SJ feels an instant connection with Livvy. Discuss their friendship and how it helps both girls to navigate the obstacles they face.
- Why does SJ's mother keep losing her temper with people who enquire about SJ's skin? Is it about protecting SJ, or is she defending herself? Discuss, using evidence from the text to support your ideas. Does this shift as the novel progresses?
- Why does SJ say that it's actually her mother 'who makes me feel different' (p. 11)?
- Using the description of Kingston on pp. 15–16, draw a map of the town, labelling the landmarks and shops (including where to buy the best food) on the map.
- What role do Mahli and Heidi play in *Sensitive*? SJ describes them as having the 'double whammy: beauty *and* money' (p. 22). Why has the author included them in her text?
- What does SJ mean when she says that 'being normal is all I want to be' (p. 20)? In what ways does *Sensitive* successfully address the concept of 'normal'?
- Why does SJ like her new school's motto 'deeds, not words' (p. 21)? How does it reflect 'New Me'? What is your school's motto? How does it apply to you personally?
- SJ says that 'bikini's interchangeable words include: *Villain. Monster. Satan.*' (p. 23) and netball skirts as being 'on the list of evil words' (p. 24). Why does SJ dread events such as the Blue Light Disco and netball

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games? How does this help readers to better understand the difficulties in managing chronic atopic eczema?

- How does the character of Sam fit into the narrative structure of *Sensitive*? Why has he been included? Why does SJ feel that she doesn't 'have space' for Sam (p. 112)?
- Mahli shares her mother's sentiment that 'special kids ... should rack off to a special school'. Why does SJ find 'her words are tiny arrows stinging me all over' (p. 29)?
- Why does SJ dislike being told to sit on a chair, not the carpet, at school?
- Why does SJ get angry with her parents, saying 'all they see is my skin! It's all they ever talk about' (p. 39). Have you ever felt that your parents only see certain things about you? Share with a friend. How do books help readers to identify with protagonists and their struggles? How is this relatability helpful to readers? How is this reflected in SJ's comment that 'Reading is my go-to. It's where I can escape and be someone else ... I can lose myself and not have to think' (p. 40)?
- Why doesn't SJ's dad like magazines? Discuss.
- Discuss the scene starting on p. 49 in which Dr Travis and Dr Charlesworth examine SJ. How has Allayne L. Webster used language features to make this scene so poignant?
- SJ says, 'I *hate* mirrors. I hate photos even more' (p. 54). How does this help to connect readers with her sense of hopelessness?
- How does the sub-plot of Livvy's mum dovetail into *Sensitive*? Why has it been included?
- What role do characters such as Rory play in stories like *Sensitive*?
- What do you learn about the word 'willpower' by reading *Sensitive*?
- How does the episode of the flower allergy propel the story forward?
- Why does SJ get annoyed that doctors never talk directly to her?
- Discuss the inclusion of the temporary use of oral cortisone. How does this emphasise the frustrations that sufferers of such skin diseases must feel? How does feeling 'normal' for this short period of time actually make SJ feel worse in the long run?
- Discuss SJ's comment that 'being well is a gift' (p. 97).
- At the Blue Light Disco, SJ says that 'for once, I'm going to know how it feels to be beautiful – just like normal girls' (p. 98). Why then, does she run out from the disco when dancing with Sam?
- What does it tell us about SJ's dad that after being told she has to come off the cortisone, he 'drives around the block a few times so I can cry some more' (p. 102)?
- Discuss Grandma's sentiment that 'what other people think of you is none of your business' (p. 108).
- Why does SJ say 'I have *never* felt like my body is my own' (p. 112)?

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- In what ways was taking the cortisone ‘the calm before the storm’ (p. 115)?
- Why does SJ’s mother think she has the responsibility to ‘fix’ her daughter (p. 118)? What is the difference between fixing and managing her condition?
- How does SJ feel about summer? How do we know?
- SJ hates herself and feels ‘*ugly, ugly, ugly*’ (p. 87). In the role of SJ, write a reflection to share why you feel this way.
- Why does SJ feel ‘wrapped in bubble wrap and only brought out for special occasions’ (p. 130)?
- When at the Women’s and Children’s Hospital in Adelaide, SJ meets two characters who help her enormously, Billie and Arnie. Discuss the role of these characters in SJ’s journey.
- How does writing help SJ to process her feelings? Read the author’s note, in which Allayne L. Webster discusses the impact of Judy Blume’s *Deenie* on her life. How does *Sensitive* explore the power of writing and reading in helping navigate life’s obstacles?
- How is the theme of acceptance successfully explored in *Sensitive*?
- How does Livvy help SJ by saying ‘it’s time you try loving yourself’ (p. 207)? How can you apply this advice to your own life?
- What does Grandma mean when she talks about the ‘worry-weight’ SJ carries with her (p. 212)? What strategies can you use to abandon your own ‘worry-weight’?
- Write a reflection in response to the following statement: ‘What is normal? Why do we even use that word? ... We are who we are’ (p. 218).
- Discuss SJ’s revelation that writing has given her a ‘voice ... All I have to do is tell the truth’ (p. 221).
- What does Allayne L. Webster have to say about the health and beauty industry, as well as the media, through her novel?
- Compare *Sensitive* with the picture book *Elephant Man* by Mariangela Di Fiore, illustrated by Hilde Hodnefeld, translated by Rosie Hedger.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Sensitive is based on my childhood (and adult) experiences with chronic atopic eczema and multiple life-threatening allergies. The story, characters and interactions are fictional, but what I portray medically really happened. I’ve almost died twice from my condition – once from septicaemia, and once from my system collapsing after a ten-year course of autoimmune suppressant drugs. On both occasions I had lengthy stays in intensive care in hospital, plus drug therapy that resulted in side effects like huge weight gain and hair loss.

It would be inspirational to write a story where a character like Samantha accepts her condition and is in control of her negative thoughts and emotions.

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But it would also be a lie. I'd rather tell the truth. My truth. As a child, I hated my illness. I hated that it made me feel different and that on occasions it was impossible to hide. I felt ashamed. I still do – especially when it appears on my face.

My multiple life-threatening allergies mean that the simple act of going out to dinner is a nightmare. I'm continuously placing my life in the hands of waitstaff and chefs, or family and friends, hoping they take my condition seriously. The condition is tough to navigate as an adult, let alone as a child. That's why I've written this novel – to be a friend to the children who need it most, and a voice for their parents and teachers. Sharing stories helps us to build empathy and understanding. I hope this novel achieves just that. If you suffer from my illness, or any ongoing illness, my heart goes out to you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allayne L. Webster is an internationally published children's and young adult author. She also plays guitar, writes music and sings; sometimes she illustrates. Allayne is the proud recipient of three arts grants, has been shortlisted for various literary awards, and has had two Notable Books in the CBCA Awards. Allayne served for ten years as a board member of the Salisbury Writers' Festival and is currently on the board of the Adelaide Festival of Children's Books. She is also a South Australian Premier's Reading Challenge Ambassador and loves to visit schools to talk to students about reading and writing. www.allaynewebster.com