

## Rules of Survival Teacher's Guide

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A Teacher's Guide for  
*The Rules of Survival* by Nancy Werlin

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Reading & interest levels: middle and high school  
Curriculum areas: English, Psychology, Sociology,  
Family planning or studies.

Guide by Dr. Joni Richards Bodart & Nancy Werlin

### Note to Teachers

*The Rules of Survival* by Nancy Werlin

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A 2006 National Book Award finalist, Young People's Literature

*A School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year

A Junior Library Guild Selection

Starred reviews in *Kirkus Reviews*, *Booklist*, and *School Library Journal*

"Perfect 10" review from *Voya*

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*The Rules of Survival* is the story of a teenage boy who is trying desperately to save his younger sisters, and himself, from the very real dangers of life with a very disturbing and dangerous woman: their mother. It's a riveting read guaranteed to generate intense discussion among students, not only about the book, but also about real life.

The book's many strengths make the novel a compelling choice for teaching and discussion. These include the following:

- Strong, resilient children who protect each other

- Realistic and easy-to-follow language; short chapters make the book more accessible to reluctant readers
- Plot and format draw reader into story quickly; there is an unusual and involving writing style that uses direct address ("you"), as narrator recounts past events to an unseen listener
- Complex, three-dimensional characters that readers can identify with, who have realistically positive and negative qualities
- Adults are shown working together to rescue children from a dangerous and potentially deadly situation
- Provides opportunities for discussion of difficult topics, such as abuse or evil and how to survive it, what constitutes a family, and how sometimes children must be protected from their own families

The book's risks, which could make the book an edgy choice in some teaching situations, include the facts that the novel portrays a violent and manipulative mother who endangers her children physically and psychologically, a distant and uninvolved father, and some adults who choose to ignore that children are in a dangerous situation.

### **From the Book Jacket**

Dear Emmy,

I have decided to write it all down for you, even though I do have my doubts. I wonder if you really need to know exactly what happened to us—me, you, Callie—at the hands of our unpredictable, vicious mother. How we lived back then, when I was fifteen and you only seven, all of full of fear. All then full of hope when we met Murdoch, the man who seemed to be showing us an easier future. What Murdoch did, and what he couldn't do. What you and I did. Part of me hopes that you'll go along happily your whole life and never want to know the details.

But I need to make sense of it. I need to try to turn the experience into something valuable for you, and for myself—not just something to be pushed away and forgotten.

Emmy, the events we lived through taught me to be sure of nothing about other people. They taught me to understand that there are people in this world who mean you harm.

And they taught me one other thing. That the survivor gets to tell the story.

Matthew

**A thought-provoking exploration of self-reliance and the nature of evil, and a heart-wrenching portrait of a family in crisis, this is Nancy Werlin's most compulsively readable novel yet.**

### **About the Author**

**Nancy Werlin** was born in Massachusetts, where she still lives. In writing for teenagers, she always strives to combine the emotional intensity of a coming-of-age story with the page-turning tension of a suspense thriller. Nancy's books have won numerous awards and accolades, including a National Book Award finalist citation and the Edgar award for best young adult mystery. Visit her web site at [www.nancywerlin.com](http://www.nancywerlin.com).

### **Subject Areas**

Family relationships; violence; child abuse; abuse, physical; abuse, emotional; mental illness; problem parents; secrets; intimidation; friendship; fear; anger; divorce and separation; love; dysfunctional families; lying and deceit; manipulation; self knowledge; survival.

### **Major Characters**

**Matthew Walsh**—He's grown up trying to protect himself and his two younger sisters from their violent and unstable mother.

**Callie Walsh**—Two years younger than Matthew, she also understands the danger of their situation, and their need to be out of it.

**Emmy Walsh**—The youngest of the Walsh children, she is the one who puts them all most in danger.

**Nikki Walsh**—Beautiful, manipulative, selfish, and dangerous, the mother of Matthew, Callie, and Emmy regards her children not as individuals, but as her property.

**Ben Walsh**—Matthew and Callie's father, who fears Nikki and refuses to help the children escape from her.

**Roberta O'Grady/Aunt Bobbie**—Nikki's sister, who's been tormented by Nikki her whole life, fears her sister, and ignores the whole situation between Nikki and her children.

**Murdoch McIlvane**—A quiet, kind man who likes the children and does what he can for them while dating Nikki, but thinks he cannot help them further.

## Book Discussion Questions

- There are many ways to survive in a dangerous situation. What are some of the ways Matthew, Callie and Emmy survive?
- Explain why Emmy prayed for Murdoch. Do you think she realized the effect that it would have on her mother? How might their lives have been different if she had just gone to bed that night?
- Matthew describes Nikki as evil. In what ways do you think she exhibited this quality?
- How did Matt and Callie's protecting Emmy endanger her instead? Speculate on how you think Emmy thought about their mother, both before and after they were separated from her.
- Discuss the scene when Matthew and Callie saw Murdoch for the first time, and what characteristics he showed them in their brief interaction with them, and how that meeting changed their lives.
- Compare Matthew's first view of Murdoch with the way he sees him at the end of the story. What are some of the key events that changed Matthew's perception of Murdoch?
- Why is it that the people you love the most are able to inflict the most pain on you?
- Discuss how the Walsh children's lives were different from and similar to the life of the POW in the movie they watched with Murdoch. In what ways were they prisoners?
- Describe how Matthew and Callie felt when no one would help them. How did those refusals affect them mentally and emotionally?
- Speculate on what might have happened if Ben, Bobbie and Murdoch had intervened sooner. Would Nikki have been able to stop them and retain control of her children, as Ben feared?
- Nikki knew her children very well, and knew exactly what buttons to push to manipulate them. Give several examples of her ability to do this.
- What were some of the reasons behind Nikki's eccentric and dangerous behavior? What did she gain by acting that way?
- In what ways was Ben a good father? In what ways did he let his children down?
- A number of adults in the book seemed to be afraid of Nikki. What did she do to each of them to make them fear her? What about her frightened them? What about her frightened you?
- There are several turning points in the book where the children's lives get significantly better or worse. Describe several of them and discuss what caused them and what the results were.
- Why was it so important for the children to pretend the summer with Murdoch had never happened? What might Nikki have done if they hadn't?

- Why did Nikki take Emmy away on the day she forced Matthew and Callie to go to church without her? Who was she punishing? Why and how?
- Discuss what Murdoch's quote means: "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Give examples of each of these kinds of people. Can you find examples in the book of these kinds of people?
- Why did Aunt Bobbie and Ben suddenly decide to start protecting the children? What caused them to start acting differently?
- Why did Nikki enjoy tormenting Bobbie, both as a child and an adult? What did she gain? How did it affect her children, Bobbie, and Nikki herself?
- On page 126, Matthew describes the scene when Murdoch commits himself to helping the children. Why did he make that decision at that point? Speculate on what might have happened to him earlier in his life that caused him to come to that decision at that moment?
- Matthew says he never really learned to trust Aunt Bobbie. Why not? What prevented that bond from forming? What would have had to happen for Matthew to come to trust her completely?
- Every time Matthew realizes nothing has changed in his family, he gets more and more depressed and hopeless. Discuss how future disappointments might have changed the man he would someday become.
- Compare Matt, Murdoch, and Bobbie's lives after Nikki got out of jail to living in enemy territory or an active war zone. How would those situations be physically and emotionally similar to what they had to endure?
- Matthew said he changed in the boatyard when he came face to face with Nikki. What caused that change, and why did he say that it was irreversible?
- Discuss Matthew's queen bee/mosquito theory. How did the change occur? Are there "queen bees" in your life that you might be able to change to "mosquitoes"?
- How would Matthew's life have changed if he had killed or seriously injured Nikki? How would his sisters' lives have changed?
- Speculate on what will happen to the Walshes, Murdoch, and Aunt Bobbie in the future, in five years, in ten years? What kind of people will Matthew, Callie and Emmy grow up to be? How will their childhood experiences affect them as adults? Will Nikki come back? If she does, what effect will that have on her family and their friends?

## **Major Themes**

### **Survival**

- There are people in the world who mean you harm, and sometimes they are also the ones who say they love you.
- It's wrong for anyone to hurt a kid, no matter who they are, and even if they're family.
- The human instinct for self preservation is strong. Everyone has the right to survive.
- The survivor gets to tell the story.

### **Fear and Its Effect**

- Fear isn't always a bad thing. It's a primitive instinct that warns you of danger and makes you pay attention to what's going on around you. Fear is a gift, and if you respond to your fear instead of ignoring it, you will be safer.
- Living with fear all day, every day, changes you mentally, physically, psychologically, and makes you into someone different from the person you would have been without it.
- Not giving in to fear, and deciding we can act for change, it is a choice we can each make, no matter our age or situation.
- Too many times, when we look at someone we see every day, we don't notice the changes in them. Instead we see what we want to see, what we've always seen, until something opens our eyes and forces us to look more closely and discover what we have been missing.

### **Adults and Kids**

- Children are not always safe with their parents.
- Kids don't need adults to be superheroes. They just need someone who will act for them when they ask for help.
- Many times, adults see what they want to see, rather than what is really happening.

### **Good and Evil**

- All humans have evil desires and impulses, and can decide to reject them, or let them into their heart and soul, and allow that evil to control them completely.
- Evil never gets home free. Somehow, sometime, somewhere, payment must be made.

### **Self-Determination**

- We all choose our actions. Life isn't random.

- When someone is living a crazy life, they get used to it, and don't see the craziness until they get a glimpse of how normal people live and contrast it with their own life.
- Your present and future are affected by your past. However, if you choose to examine and understand your past, it need not control your future.

## **BOOKTALK by Dr. Joni Richards Bodart**

**What's a booktalk? It's a dramatic introduction to a book, a teaser, a come-on, or a commercial that highlights an exciting part of the book. As a teacher, use a booktalk to induce a reader to pick the book up and give it a try.**

*—For more on booktalks and booktalking, see Dr. Bodart's site, [www.thebooktalker.com](http://www.thebooktalker.com).*

“Emmy,

“You're too young now to understand what really happened, or the danger we all lived in. But someday, you might wonder. You might have questions. So I'm going to write down everything that happened, from the time I was four and first understood what my job was in our frightening and unpredictable family, until now, when I'm eighteen, and getting ready to leave you and Callie for the first time.

“It's hard to remember, Emmy, because it means that I have to live through the horror and the fear all over again. But I need to do it, not just for you, but also for me. If I can understand what happened to me, to us, and how our mother changed all our lives, if I can understand where I came from, what shaped me, maybe I can understand who I am now, and who I have a chance of becoming.

“For me, it all started when I saw Murdoch stare down an angry father twice his size who was about to start pounding on his son. I heard him tell the little boy that no one had the right to hurt him, no one, not even his father. I'd never heard anyone say that before. I was thirteen years old, and what I thought I knew was that no one could be trusted. Especially the people who said they loved you.

“I was about to learn that I was right. And that I was wrong.”

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