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STAY WELL SOON

Penny Tangey



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising Teacher Librarian in context with
the Australian Curriculum (English)

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SYNOPSIS

When Stevie's brother becomes sick, she grows frustrated with visiting the hospital all the time. Rather than play in the Kidz Space, she wanders through the stairwells of the hospital, where she meets Lara. Their friendship grows, especially as they both share a love of horses and drawing.

But Lara is dying and Stevie is confronted with conflicting emotions. What's the point of living if everyone around her is just going to die? *Stay Well Soon* is a touching and tender novel about the fine line between life and death.

THEMES

Family and friendship:

- Stevie's world is falling apart now that Rhys is sick.
- Her friendship groups at school are changing: Charlotte and April exclude Stevie.
- Stevie meets a new friend, Morgan, who is obsessed with death.
- True friends stick together through thick and thin.
- Stevie feels her mum is only worried about Rhys.
- Stevie has a close relationship with Dad Ben.

Cancer:

- Rhys and Lara both have cancer.
- The effect of sickness on well siblings is explored in the text.

Death and dying:

- Stevie is confronted with the fact that everyone dies, but that some die before their time.
- Stevie is unsure how to process her fears and feelings. She'd prefer not to talk about Rhys's and Lara's illnesses. She wants everything to be normal again.
- Lara knows she is going to die; she befriends Stevie, helping her to deal with death in her own way.

Horses:

- Stevie loves horses, though discovers that she is in fact afraid of them.

Therapy through drawing:

- Stevie expresses her emotions through her drawings. Her counsellor helps her to process what's happening around her through her drawings.

WRITING STYLE

Stay Well Soon is told in first person, present tense. Stevie's voice is endearing, honest and often naïve. The narrative is realistic and tangible. Penny Tangey's use of dialogue, figurative language and a distinct voice gives the text a literary quality that is both heartfelt and compelling.

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STUDY NOTES

- Discuss the cover of the book. The title, image and blurb all work to draw the reader directly into the narrative. Make predictions about the text based on the cover.
- What do the opening paragraphs of *Stay Well Soon* reveal about Stevie's character? Discuss how the author manages to directly draw the reader into the text.
- It is important that the reader feels a connection with the protagonist and that they genuinely care what happens to them. Discuss your perceptions of Stevie's character. What words would you use to describe her? Use examples from the text to support your thinking.
- We quickly learn that Stevie doesn't have a dad 'at the moment' and that her mother can't afford to send her to camp. We also hear that they don't have orange juice at home because Coke is cheaper. How do these details help us to get a fuller picture of Stevie's life?
- Stevie learns much about herself while the rest of the Grade 5s are at camp. If you had to stay at school for a week while the rest of your classmates went on camp, what might you learn about yourself?
- Stevie's family don't have much money, but they show their love for each other in different ways. Keep a list of the ways in which they show their love.
- How is not having the internet like camping every day (p4)?
- Stevie falls in love with horses after reading a Saddle Club book called *Horse Crazy*. She particularly likes this book because the main character shares her name. Have you ever taken to a book or film because the main character shared your name? Discuss.
- April and Charlotte exclude Stevie from their group. Use this as a starting point for a discussion about friendship and the importance of inclusion.
- Describe Charlotte's character, using examples from the text to support your ideas.
- What does Stevie mean when she says, 'having regrets is hard' (p10)?
- In what way is Stevie a strong character? Create a mind map to share your ideas.
- What clues do we get that Rhys is sick? Which of these clues are explicit (such as Rhys sleeping all the time)? Which are implicit (such as Stevie's mum being withdrawn)?
- Stevie loves to draw, in particular horses. Use books such as *How to Draw Horses* to learn how to draw horses or an animal of your choice.
- What does Lara mean when she says, 'It's a drawing of a horse, not a horse. Representations of reality do not equal reality' (p48)?
- Many of Rhys's friends avoid visiting him, except for David. Why do people avoid talking to sick people? What would you want from your

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friends if you were dying? How does this help shape the kind of friend you want to be?

- Describe the relationship that Stevie has with Dad Ben. How does he help her?
- What does Nana Dad Ben mean when she says, 'it's better to regret doing something than to regret not doing it' (p53)? Write a reflection of a time when you regretted *not* doing something.
- When Lara got to make a wish, she asked to meet with Nelson Mandela (p69). What does this reveal about Lara's character?
- In pairs, Stevie's class have to complete a project on an aspect of Australian history. Complete a similar task. You could also consider hosting your own Grandparents and Friends Day.
- Why does Stevie think that Morgan would have too many questions to ask if she came to her house (p81)? What can the reader infer from this comment?
- Stevie starts taking money from Rhys's money box. Why does she do this? Does she feel guilty about doing this? Why does she later lie about taking his money?
- Why does Stevie say that she doesn't want everyone at school to know about Rhys?
- Morgan uses a special trick with her fingers to remember her 9 times table. Practise this method (p104).
- Discuss Stevie's sign – 'Your vote, your voice' (p120). How can you use this advice when making your own choices at school?
- Why doesn't Stevie's mum want her to be friends with Lara?
- At the *SingStar* Day, Stevie realises it's great to be part of a team. Discuss the attributes of teamwork (p129).
- Stevie says that she had the best day ever at the Grandparents and Friends Day. Write a reflection of your 'best day ever'.
- When the game of Royal Families finally comes to an end, Stevie says, 'I guess nothing lasts forever' (p132). How does this comment relate to the other themes in *Stay Well Soon*?
- Morgan has a great imagination and makes up games that involve many children. Create your own game to play at lunchtime that includes a lot of people.
- What does Stevie mean when she says Tim's house, 'looks fancy from the outside, but inside, it has problems' (p153)?
- Why doesn't Tim visit Lara in hospital?
- Discuss the following extract from *Stay Well Soon* in terms of author's style, language features and choices in this scene. Why is this so effective?
 - *Buttercup's hooves go thud, thud, thud, thud, thud. Lara is going to die. Lara is going to die. Lara is going to die.* (p159)

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- Discuss the scene towards the end of Part Two in which Stevie looks out the window and thinks about being dead. She then thinks about her friends and family being dead. She goes home and does a drawing that is covered in black and purple. How has the author been able to capture such a simple yet difficult concept so effectively?
- What is Stevie really crying about when she sits on the floor crying about the sheet (p224)?
- Morgan goes to Lara's funeral. Why does she go? What does this tell us about Morgan and her friendship with Stevie?
- Throughout the novel, Stevie's drawings help provide an insight into her emotions and thoughts. Take time to discuss these illustrations and how they contribute to the text.
- Keep a journal for a few weeks, including drawings to help express your ups and downs during this time.
- Drawings are often used as a therapy tool when children are facing hardships. Consider inviting a counsellor to speak to the class about this type of self-expression.
- Explore the effect of sickness on well siblings as shown through *Stay Well Soon*.
- Why does the novel have the title *Stay Well Soon*?
- Examine the use of figurative language throughout the text. Examples include:
 - *She looks more like a shaggy brown blanket than a dog.* (p10)
 - *Angel is like a sack of potatoes to carry.* (p10)
 - *I'm like a little piece of food moving through the building's stomach.* (p44)
 - *Going down the stairs is like being in a secret passage. Maybe it will be like the wardrobe in Narnia...* (p45)
 - *They pound underneath me like waves against the shore.* (p146)
- Write a book review of *Stay Well Soon*, suitable for inclusion in a magazine such as *Magpies*.
- Keep a class blog whilst reading *Stay Well Soon*.
- Create a book trailer for *Stay Well Soon*, selecting appropriate music and images to reflect your understanding of the text.
- Create a sociogram that shows the dynamics between the various characters in *Stay Well Soon*.
- Compare *Stay Well Soon* with picture books about death such as *Old Pig* by Margaret Wild, *Lucy's Bay* by Gary Crew or *The Sound of the Sea* by Jacqueline Harvey.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Penny Tangey's first young adult novel *Loving Richard Feynman* was shortlisted in the 2010 CBCA Awards (Book of the Year for Older Readers), the 2010 Western Australian Premier's Awards and longlisted in the 2010 Inky Awards. *Clara in Washington* was published in 2011. Penny grew up in Central Victoria and now lives in Melbourne.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

When I was in primary school I developed a passion for horses after reading *Penny Pollard's Diary* by Robin Klein. The main character was called Penny, and I'm called Penny, so I decided we were the same person. Because Penny Pollard loved horses, I loved horses too. I read books about horses, I drew pictures of horses, I collected horse shoes. Then I spent some time with a horse. And I discovered that I'm actually scared of them.

Since I once mistook myself for a character who loves horses, I was interested in coming full circle and creating my own character who loves horses. Stevie is in grade five and loves horses above everything else. She even remains focused on getting a horse when her brother becomes seriously ill and is hospitalised.

My sister had a series of non-life threatening operations when we were young. I had sympathy for her, but I was also jealous of the attention she received. I wanted to write about the impact on healthy siblings when a child becomes ill. For Stevie, loving horses becomes a way to cope. She thinks about horses to escape her feelings, and imagine a perfectly happy future. Her fantasy is broken when she meets a horse in real life, and she has to face up to what's happening to her and the people she cares about.