

Things You Can't Say

by Jenn Bishop

About the Book:

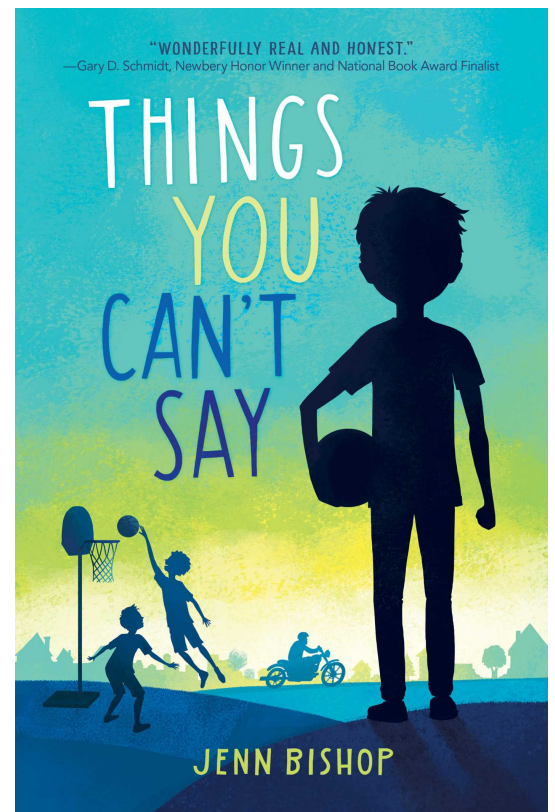
It doesn't make sense.

None of it does.

Not one part of this summer.

It's been three years since Drew's father's death by suicide, and nothing has felt quite right for Drew ever since. At least he has his volunteer job at the local library. But now there's a new girl, Audrey, taking over his turf in the children's room and his best friend, Filipe, has been acting weird around him.

Most upsetting, however, is the mysterious man who is suddenly staying with Drew's family. Is this mystery man trying to take his father's place? And what is his mom not telling him?



Discussion Questions

1. The importance of friendship is one of the main themes in *Things You Can't Say*. Reread chapter one. Discuss how this first meeting between Drew and Audrey sows the seeds of their friendship. Why doesn't Drew tell Audrey the truth about his father's death? How does Audrey's willingness to plainly discuss suicide represent an act of friendship? How does Audrey help Drew realize that he needs to talk to his mother face-to-face?

2. After first meeting Phil, Drew confronts his mother in an effort to learn the man's identity. Mom explains Phil's connection to the family and that he will be staying with them for a few days. She tells him, "I can see how it must have been confusing for you to have him stop by before I told you, and I'm sorry about that. But sometimes things just don't go according to plan." Discuss other things in the story that "don't go according to plan" for Drew. How does he react to these instances? How would you have handled them if you were Drew?

3. After their first interaction, Drew tries his best not to like Phil. At their first meal together, why does Drew sit in the spot that used to be his father's? Why is Drew so resistant to welcoming Phil? How does Phil's presence threaten Drew's role in the family?

4. The nature of memory is another of the story's themes. Drew recalls a picture of his father from his dental website. He thinks, "I hate that picture because it's exactly how I remember him now. I remember that picture more than I remember the actual him. But that picture is all I have left." What does Drew mean by this? What exactly does he hate? What is it about the picture that connects him to his father?

5. Discuss Drew's beach memory. He recalls the plush seagull toy his father gave to him, and thinks, "Most of the things I remember from being a little kid, they're not because I really remember them. They're because we still talk about them. That's what keeps them alive. The story of what happened replaces the memory. Or maybe the story strengthens it. If you don't talk about things, eventually you forget them. Completely." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your answer, giving an example from your own life.

6. After Drew's father's death by suicide, Drew had to help out more around the house. How is he both resentful and proud of the responsibilities he had to assume? Drew's grandmother tells him, "You're the man of the house now, Drew. But you can handle it. You've always been a responsible little boy. You keep your eye on your mother, you hear." Do you think it was fair to ask Drew to "keep everything together"? How do you think this has affected the way Drew reacted to his father's absence?

Discussion Questions (cont)

7. Drew is worried that he will inherit his father's mental illness. Why doesn't he share his worries with his mother? How might the story have changed if he'd confided in her earlier?
8. Drew has many questions regarding his father's death. If his dad was so sick, if he really was depressed, how come Drew couldn't tell? Shouldn't he have been able to see that something was wrong? Do you agree or disagree with Drew's assessment? Explain your answer. Why do you think Drew believes he should have known what his father was battling? What should you do if you suspect someone needs help?
9. Why does Drew come to the conclusion that his dad was a liar? How does this conclusion help Drew cope with his loss and grief? Why does Drew feel betrayed when he discovers that Phil and his dad were best friends?
10. Drew angrily destroys one of his dad's painted ships. Does this act make Drew feel better? Discuss other ways in which Drew displays anger. How do you deal with your anger? What advice would you have for Drew?
11. How is Drew's heart like the ruined ship, in "a million tiny broken pieces"? After the shed incident, Drew's mom comes to his room for a talk. She says, "We need to talk about things like we promised. Not let them fester until they're so big we don't think we can handle them." What does it mean to let something fester? Why can that be dangerous? Discuss other examples from the text in which Drew chooses to bury his feelings, and what happens as a result. How does this conversation relate to the book's title? What kinds of things are difficult to say?
12. Drew and Filipe have begun to grow apart. Why does Drew feel like he can't tell Filipe his feelings about his father's suicide? Why does Drew feel like Filipe is embarrassed at having him around? Discuss which of Drew's perceptions you believe to be true, and Filipe's possible motivations for his actions. When Filipe taunts Drew about Audrey, Drew attacks him. Why do you think Drew would "go all psycho" on Filipe? What does this say about their friendship?
13. In chapter eleven, Drew has a conversation with Phil in the backyard while he's doing his exercise routine. Phil encourages Drew to join him; Drew finally agrees, thinking, "There's something about the way he looks at me, almost like how the kids stare up at me right before I begin a puppet show. And for some reason, this time I can't say no." Why do you think Phil's look has such a strong effect on Drew? Do you think there are any other reasons why Drew decides to try Phil's exercise moves?
14. Afterward, Drew gets upset and runs into the house. What makes him so upset, and what does he mean by describing his heart as "rattling and constricting"? Do you think Phil would have understood if Drew had shared those feelings with him?
15. Drew begins to believe that Phil may be his biological father. What clues does he piece together to convince himself that he is Phil's son? Why does part of Drew want Phil to be his biological father?
16. Drew has many questions about the possibility of being Phil's son. What are the dangers of asking "what if" style questions? Why does Drew keep his thoughts a secret from Audrey and his mother?
17. As Phil heads out to continue his cross-country ride, Drew feels a "pinch" in his gut. What do you think Drew is feeling at this moment? Why might he be feeling this way? Drew thinks, "Audrey has no idea the real reason I want Phil to be my dad. How it wouldn't just change my past, but my future." What do you think Drew means by this thought?
18. Drew pushes away the thought that his mom is concealing Phil's true identity, thinking, "I can't let myself think that thought too seriously for too long. It's too much. Too big. Too scary." By pushing away his thoughts and fears, how might Drew be making his life more painful? How does believing that his mom lied about his biological father help Drew cope with his loss?
19. Drew's mom says, "But hiding a part of yourself, that's different from lying." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your answer.
20. Drew is grieving. How do descriptions of Drew's feelings help you to understand how powerful the loss of a parent can be? Why do you think Drew misses Phil, even though he was only with the family for a few days? Discuss the following passage: "In those days after dad died, all I wanted was some way to hit undo. Exit without saving progress. If Phil is my real dad, maybe I can undo. The hugest kind of undo. Erase all progress. Reboot and start over." Have you ever felt this way? How might you help yourself or others through a challenging time? Explain your answers.
21. After his fight with Filipe, Drew decides to mow the lawn. He has the urge to exercise like Phil, and thinks, "I get why he does it. Why it feels good. Letting loose all the sadness, the frustration, confusion, all the things you can't go back and fix. The fear. The hope. Except I don't want to do it so quietly. I want to shake everything out and scream at the top of my lungs. Maybe then, some stillness will come." What does Drew mean by stillness? Why can it feel good to let go?

Discussion Questions (cont)

22. Drew's dad died when Xan was very young. Drew says, "All he has is that picture in his book. And stories I don't even tell him. Stories I keep locked up inside. Someday he won't even have a single memory of Dad . . . Maybe that's better, though. Not remembering. Because there are good memories and there are bad, and you don't get to choose which ones stick in your brain forever." Do you agree with Drew that it's better not to remember? Explain your answer. Why do you think Drew is keeping the stories of his father "locked up inside"?

23. What emotions is Drew feeling as he destroys his father's belongings? Confused about Drew's reaction to news that Phil is not his biological father, Audrey says, "'But isn't that what you wanted?'" Drew's answer is a yes and no; he wonders how both answers can be wrong, and both can be right. Discuss the conflicting feelings Drew is experiencing. Why did he both want and not want Phil to be his father? How can he move on from this news?

24. What does Drew discover about keeping secrets and holding in feelings? How does learning that his dad was encouraged not to express his feelings help Drew better understand his father? How might you help others feel like they can express their emotions? Do you have someone you can confide in?

25. How does hearing the truth from his mother offer the possibility of forgiveness? How does Phil help Drew begin to heal as they go through his father's childhood possessions? How does their conversation lead to Drew's reconciliation with Filipe?

Extension Activities

1. The Google Machine. Drew and Audrey use Facebook to learn information about Phil. Audrey shares with Drew how she "Google-stalked" kids from her former school. Work with the school media specialist to introduce students to the pros and cons of social media, and how they can stay safe on-line.

2. What Is Weird? Audrey refers to herself as "weird." Start a discussion about what this word means to students. Ask each student to write a short essay, titled What Is Weird? Give students an opportunity to present their essays to the class.

3. Zombie Puppet Apocalypse. Drew reads books to preschool children during story hour, often turning classic literary characters into zombies. Work with the art teacher to create puppets depicting a classic children's story with a twist, such as "The Three Little Pigs Travel to Outer Space." Have students write the scripts in literacy class. Then invite younger students to a class puppet-theater production.

4. Time Capsule of Memory. Drew and Phil go through a box of Drew's dad's childhood belongings. Have students create a list of objects and mementos that reflect who they are at this point in their lives, choosing three of the most important to share with the class. Consider creating a time capsule to open at the end of the school year.

5. Hero Project. Drew reminisces about a fifth-grade school project: "Back in fifth grade, we had this hero project. You had to write an essay about your personal hero, and then afterward there was this day where everyone in the whole grade dressed up like their hero." After reading the text, plan a similar hero day for the class.

6. That Kind of Person. Throughout the story, Drew struggles with the memory of his father and his perception of the type of person who would take his or her own life: "It would have made at least some sense if he'd been different. If he'd been the kind of person who wanted to sleep all day. Or if he'd had a drinking problem, like some adults. Something. But that wasn't true." Invite a mental health professional from your school or community to speak to the class about mental illness to share facts about depression and suicide.

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