***Saint Anything***

**By Sarah Dessen**

 <https://images.gr-assets.com/authors/1372181953p8/2987.jpg>

Sarah Dessen is an American novelist originally from Evanston, Illinois and currently living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She has published 14 novels since 1996. Several of her novels have been on the *New York Time’s* Best Seller List and the American Library Association’s (ALA) “Best Fiction for Young Adults” selections. She has been awarded the Margaret A. Edwards Award for her novels *Keeping the Moon*, *Dreamland*, *This Lullaby*, *The Truth About Forever*, *Just Listen*, *Along for the Ride*, and *What Happened to Goodbye?*. Her novels *That Summer* and *Someone Like You* were also adapted into the 2003 romantic comedy film *How To Deal*.

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/23009402-saint-anything>

Sydney had become comfortable with being invisible and living in the shadow of her handsome, charismatic older brother Peyton. But when Peyton is convicted for a drunk driving incident that leaves an a young teenage boy crippled from the waist down, Sydney finds herself feeling more detached from her family than ever. Only when she meets the Chatham family, with strange yet sincere Layla, Rosie, another golden child who has fallen from grace, Mrs. Chatham who is handling her terminal illness with strength and dignity, and the quiet and earnest Mac, does Sydney begin to find her place and identity.

**Quotes**

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| “It seemed impossible that someone I’d not known at all six months earlier was now often the only person who understood me. But that was the thing: Layla got it. Not just my uneasiness with Ames, but also how I felt about Peyton. Rosie might not have been in jail, but her problems had spilled over to affect all of the Chathams in one way or another. I knew Jenn and Meredith loved me and were always willing to listen. But there was an element of anger and shame involved they could never understand. Now that I’d found someone who could, I realized how much I needed it.” (121) | The beginning of the novel showed that Sydney internalized all of her problems, having come to the understanding that no one wanted to hear her opinion. But, after Peyton is sent to jail, and Sydney changes school, she finally meets a friend that she can talk to about anything. Just having this one person makes Sydney slowly come to the realization that it’s not healthy to hold everything inside of herself and to finally begin relying on others. This quote signals this change in Sydney’s mentality. |
| “‘I think…’ I began, but then suddenly it was too big to say or even exist outside of my own head. It was one thing to let these thoughts haunt the dark spaces of my mind, but another entirely to put them into the light, making them real. She was looking at me so intently, though, and this place was so new, with no semblance of the world before except for the fact that I was in it. ‘I think my parents see Peyton as the victim, in some ways. And I hate that. It makes me sick. It’s just so… It’s wrong.’ ‘You feel guilty.’ ‘Yes,’ I said, the vehemence of this one word surprising me. Like simply concurring made my soul rush out, gone. ‘I do. So much. Every single day.’ ‘Oh, honey.’ She reached out, putting her hand over mine. In the next room, the popcorn was popping, producing the buttery smell I associated with movies and after school, all those lonely afternoons. ‘Why do you feel like you have to shoulder your brother’s responsibility?’ ‘Because someone has to,’ I said. I looked into her eyes, green flecked with brown, just like Layla’s. ‘That’s why.’ Instead of replying, she squeezed my hand. I knew I could pull away and it would still be all right. But when Layla came in a few minutes later with the popcorn, that was how she found us. I’d let so much go, finally. It made sense, I suppose, that right then I would maybe just want to hold on.” (186-187) | Mrs. Chatham becomes a mother figure to Sydney right away because of her own feelings of being deprived of one. In Sydney’s mind, her mother has always put Peyton first, and Sydney didn’t deserve to be heard. As such, Sydney loses faith in most adults. But, in this quote, Sydney expresses her darkest emotions: she’s angry at her family and feels the need to shoulder the guilt of the accident for them. These emotions had caused her anxiety and depression, and this is the moment she finally says everything out loud. Finding someone to comfort her is the first step, but actually saying what is on her mind puts Sydney on the path of healing. |
| ‘It’s not just anything,’ I said. ‘It’s *my* thing. My friends.’ I could tell I’d surprised them. I’d always accepted being second in importance; it was my place in the pecking order. But when it came to this — to Mac — I was ready to fight. Like finally I felt I had a real reason. It would have been better if it had been for me, myself. But I’d still take it. ‘You didn’t even know these people three months ago,’ my mom said. ‘I find it hard to believe they’re suddenly more important than family.’ ‘Mom—’ ‘We’re not talking about this anymore,’ she said, rising from her seat and pushing her chair in. ‘We will go support your brother because he needs us, whether he’s choosing at this moment to admit it or not. After that, we can talk about everything else.’ She walked to the coffeemaker, her back to me as she refilled her mug. My dad watched her go, then gave me a sympathetic look. But once again, he didn’t do anything. Like this was her job, it was decided, and he couldn’t go over her head, as much as I wished he would. Even though this was the way it always went, I felt a flush of anger rise in me, unexpected and unprecedented. Something had changed. Before, she’d grouped me within ‘anything else’. Now ‘everything.’ I’d always been the other, the not Peyton; I’d come to accept it. But finally, I’d met people who saw me differently. Now that I’d been real and first to someone, I never wanted to invisible again.” (280-281) | This quote, just before the final climax of the novel, fully displays the changes Sydney has gone through. She understands now that everyone deserves to be heard, including her. She recognizes the injustice she has endured for the purpose of keeping peace in her family and is making the choice to finally put herself and her priorites first. Her new friends and boyfriend, Mac, teach her about self-worth, and Sydney is making the choice to never put herself down for the sake of someone else again. |

**In A Classroom**

*Saint Anything* could easily find itself into a high school classroom, particularly because of its themes surrounding, friends, family, isolation, and fitting in. These themes put *Saint Anything* in the category of “Books about Real-Life Experiences” in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning.* Because it falls under this category, it could open a dialogue for teenagers to share what kinds of real pressures and anxieties they have as they transition into high school or college. This novel could also be used to help students face their own insecurities as well as adopt empathy to notice changes in their friends, as Sydney’s self-destructive Peyton also plays a major role in the novel.

**Why Should Teens Read This**

* As Sydney comes to understand throughout the novel, teenagers should know that they deserve to be seen and heard.
* Many of the anxieties the main characters feel, such as peer pressure, pressure from parents, desperation for friends, are real issues that teenagers face, and it is comforting to see it in a setting that they can relate to and find ways to combat such influences.
* Despite there being a main character/narrator, there are multiple other characters who face difficult struggles.Yet, this novel presents the fact that although it seems like some problems are greater/less than others, they all deserve to be addressed.

**Text Complexity**

Age Range: 11-17

Lexile Level: 690L

ATOS Book Level: 4.7 (Sixth Grade and Above)

In terms of length and complexity, *Saint Anything* is an easy, quick read. However, the themes visited, such as drug/alcohol abuse, loss/grief, peer pressure, and finding one’s place among friends and family, are a bit too heavy to be fully understood by students below the high school level. As such, high school students will most likely find more in common with the subject matters and characters from *Saint Anything*.