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Book Talk

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***A Breath Too Late***



**About the Author: Rocky Callen**

Callen is a daughter of immigrant Ecuadorian parents. Because of this she has been an advocate for undocumented immigrants in her community since the age of 13. At just 14 years old she began to write and produce student radio stories at NPR. Prior to becoming an author, she was a behavioral therapist for 10 years. At Vermont College of Fine Arts she received her MFA (Masters in Fine Arts). Callen joined the Bleed Ink Foundation, a resource center for writers. Furthermore she joined the HoldOn2Hope project, a project that is able to have creatives unite in suicide prevention and mental awarness. *A Breath Too Late* is Callen’s only book so far and is actually her debut novel.

 **Summary**

 *A Breath Too Late* follows a 17 year old girl named Ellie Walker. Ellie has a difficult life, with an abusive father preventing her and her mother from achieving their dreams. They feel like they are trapped in a cage wanting to break free from their abuse. Her father prohibits them from doing anything that he thinks will lead them to running away from him. The only person that is really able to relieve her from the pain is her best friend/love interest, a boy named August. Unfortunately Ellie passes away from suicide and she is stuck in between the past and present. Yet she is still able to spectate the people in her life, where she learns more about them and herself.

 However she realizes that there are gaps in her memories, making her story incomplete. With her we go back and find those memories leading up to the day of her suicide. Ellie is determined to figure out why she is still stuck in the inbetween.

**Quotes**

“Life,

 You are too quiet, The kind of quiet that isn’t quiet at all. It is the smothering silence that bleeds into everything; the kind of absence that mocks, prods, and stares you down until you are withered to your bones…Momma clutches the bear to her chest. She knows what’s coming, but she doesn’t stop crying” (2-5).

 This quote comes from the second chapter of the book. In this quote, Ellie has actually not yet realized that she is dead. With this quote it also shows a glimpse of the dynamic between her parents and also how she usually responds to it. Her father is hitting her mother because she is crying, but Ellie is not yet sure as to why she is crying. Ellie also did not like that her mother went into her room and was holding her room. Through the book we learn that Ellie actually resents her mom for staying with her abusive father. She feels like it's her fault that they are still “trapped” and life would be easier if he wasn’t in their life. One thing that I like about this book is how each chapter is dedicated to a person or a thing. It resembles a journal and Ellie writes to whatever is being addressed, almost like each chapter is a letter.

“I sat back. I didn’t want to blow out the flower. I didn’t want to squeeze my eyes shut and heave out a long breath only to open my eyes to see a cluster of seeds still stuck there, mocking me for dreaming too big…I had still been alive. You painted me in the stars as if I could be beautiful enough to be among them” (71-73).

 The beginning of the quote starts with a flashback memory of August and Ellie when they were kids. Ellie always likes to say that August was the color in her gray life, also because of the fact that he is an artist and likes to paint. Prior to this Ellie is telling him a made up story because he is sad that his parents are not letting him go to Art Camp. His stories always make him feel better. After the story, August tells Ellie that they will get out of there and they blow on a wishing flower to seal the wish. However Ellie knows in the back of her mind that she does not want to have her hopes up. She knows how her father is and that he will never let her go. It shows how she truly believes that she will never be able to “escape.” The quote then forwards to the present and she is watching him in his room. August has been sad since Ellie’s death and has not left his room. She notices this painting he has made of Ellie and she realizes how much August actually cares about her. Furthermore she recognizes that he sees her as beautiful when she does not think that she is.

“Momma,

As you get into your car, you stare at our house. ‘This day was supposed to be for us, Ellie,’ you say…And a breath too late, I realized…I loved you” (245-249).

 Ellie’s mother was finally able to leave her terrible husband. He goes to jail and she is able to live anywhere that she wants. She is free. Her mother takes Ellie’s ashes to the mountains to release them. The mountains are a special place for Ellie and her mother. They would go there when she was a kid and it gave them a moment to breathe. Ellie’s mother also decides to cremate her instead because she did not want her to continue to be “trapped.” Releasing her ashes gives Ellie a chance at being free. In the last chapter Ellie writes to Life. After spectating and going back to her memories she realizes that she regrets taking her life. She realizes that she actually did love her life and she sees that people care about her a lot more than she thought.

**Teaching**

**Why Students Should Read *A Breath Too Late***

The book is honestly really sad, but also endearing to read at the same time. Being able to see Ellie’s happiest memories with the ones she loved was so sweet to read. The book also covers the issues of abuse and the importance of mental health. Ellie unfortunately lost her fight with depression, but at the end of the book she also realizes that she regrets leaving her life. I think this could be good for students to read that are perhaps suicidal and have considered taking their life. They see that Ellie has actually done it and ends up regretting the decision she made, even though she was so adamant about it initially. Throughout the book as I read Ellie’s memories, it made me so sad when I would realize that she is dead. Therefore I think that readers will be able to really connect with Ellie. In the beginning the author talks about suicide and in the end she talks about how she has related to Ellie. Therefore I think that it is really great to see that Ellie’s character stems from the author’s personal experience.

**How to Teach *A Breath Too Late* in The Classroom**

This book would be a good idea to teach during suicide prevention week or mental health awarness month. I would also probably pair the book with either the book *All The Bright Places* and *13 Reasons Why*. These books also cover suicide and the affect of it. I would start with talking about the importance of mental health and what students could do if they are feeling like they are in a low place. I would have students have a free write of their own where they can talk about their own experience with mental health. They do not have to share if they do not feel comfortable, but I also want to be able to give students a space where they can talk if needed. I think it is important to talk about mental health and to normalize the conversation.

**How it relates to Chapter 4-8 in *Adolescents and the Search for Meaning***

Chapter 4: Books about Real-Life Experiences

*A Breath Too Late* fits into chapter four because Ellie and her mother are dealing with the abuse from the father. Ellie’s mother was actually able to run away from the husband when Ellie was a child. Unfortunately the father finds them and at first it seems that he has changed his abusive tendencies. Over time his true self began to reveal itself and he would lay his hands on the mother and Ellie when she got older. He also made sure that they had no sort of freedom and even convinced Ellie’s mom to quit her job. This is Ellie's biggest reason for being depressed, since she has no hope that she will ever be free.

Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss

 Although we are not able to go into the heads of Regina (Ellie’s mother) and August, through Ellie’s spectation we can see how her death affects them. They both become depressed and are struggling with their grief. Without Ellie they have to deal with issues that she was able to be there for. At the end of the book they were able to be there for each other and help one another.

Chapter 8: Books on Allegory, Fantasy, Myth, and Parable

I believe the book could fit into this chapter because of how afterlife is prevalent in the book. Despite the fact that Ellie is not a ghost, she is more of a spectator, no one can hear or see her or feel her. We are still able to see her dead in the world that she is supposed to no longer be in.

**Age Level**

*A Breath Too Late* is best for grades 10-12. (See Below).

**Text Complexity**

**Quantitative**

**Lexile**: 14-18, 272

**AR**: ATOS book level-4.8; interest level-grades 9-12; AR points-9

**New Dale-Chall**: Grades 5-6

**Readabilit**y: 5-8 (ages 10-13)

**Flesch-Kincaid:** 6th Grade

**Coleman-Liau:** 5th Grade

**SMOG:** 6th Grade

**Linsear Write Formula:** 5th Grade

**Flesch Reading Ease:** 87.1 (easy to read)

**Qualitative**

1. Structure
	1. First-Person Point of View: The book takes place all in Ellie’s point of view
	2. Non-Linear Chronology
		1. The book goes back to Ellie’s memories, resembling flashbacks
2. Language Convention and Clarity
	1. Vocabulary is not difficult to grasp
	2. Similes and metaphors are utilized
	3. Some curse words (2-3)
3. Knowledge Demands
	1. General knowledge of mental health and suicide
	2. What the afterlife is
		1. Ellie is dead but is still able to be present in the world, needs to figure out why
	3. What an abusive relationship is
		1. Mother is in an abusive relationship with father
4. Levels of Meaning
	1. Three levels of meaning
		1. Mental health and suicide
		2. Abusive relationships
		3. Love story between Ellie and August

**References**

**Photo of Rock Callen:** https://www.whatsbeyondforks.com/2020/04/book-review-breath-too-late-by-rocky-callen.html