



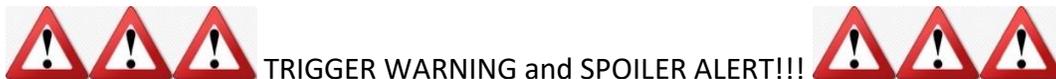
Discussion Questions

for *Swallowed by a Secret* by Risa Nyman

This resource developed by the author in conjunction with Pamela Brunskill of AuthorsandEducators.com.

About This Book--For Teachers and Librarians

Swallowed by a Secret is a middle grade contemporary novel about twelve-year-old Rocky, a boy in Massachusetts struggling with the mystery of his father's death. After moving mid-year, Rocky is haunted by the voice of his father, who tells him he must return to his old town to find the answers. Supported by a new friend, Olive, Rocky embarks on a journey of risks to discover the truth about the father he thought he knew. The book is perfect for mystery units and/or units embarking on themes of change/moving, death, grief, shame, and friendships, to name a few.



TRIGGER WARNING and SPOILER ALERT!!!

Please note the sensitive nature of *Swallowed by a Secret*. Rocky's father had a mental illness that Rocky's parents hid from him. Then, when Rocky's father died by suicide, Rocky's mother continued to withhold information about the mental illness, and Rocky quickly realized the story his mother told him about how his father died was not true. This massive secret had ricocheting effects for Rocky involving losing trust in his mother and an intense desire to go back to his hometown to figure out how his dad really died.

For students who have been impacted by suicide and deaths in their families, be aware that this book might trigger them. Should you offer this book to students, be mindful of their socio-emotional reactions. You may consider contacting a guidance counselor or social worker to support the students' reading, if appropriate.

Discussion Questions

The following questions are inspired by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis's *Strategies that Work*, and they allow for practice with the following reading strategies: Making Connections, Questioning, Visualizing, Inferring, Determining Importance, Synthesizing.

Use and adapt them to fit the needs of your classroom.



Discussion Questions for *Swallowed by a Secret* by Risa Nyman

Chapters 1-7 pages 1-36 (note: all page numbers refer to the 2020 paperback edition)

- Why would changing schools mid-year be more difficult than starting a new school on the first day of the school year?
- What are your first impressions of Olive?
- Rocky is spooked when he hears the voice of his dead father who claims he is not a ghost. What do you think the voice is?
- Why does Rocky's dad's voice advise him to return to Whitman to learn the truth but can't tell Rocky the truth about what really happened?
- What is Olive's family secret? Why did she share it with Rocky?
- When Rocky tells his mom that playing offense on the soccer team may be too strenuous for his heart because of the story that his dad's heart just stopped, is Rocky really worried about his heart or is he trying to make his mom realize he doesn't believe her story?

Chapters 8-13 pages 37-64

- What qualities does Olive have that make her an excellent assistant detective to help Rocky find out the truth about how his dad really died?
- What are your first impressions of Max?
- Why do you think Rocky's mom is so against letting Rocky go to Shawn's birthday party in Whitman?
- One of Risa Nyman's author's crafts is her use of similes. For example, in chapter 11, she writes, "By the time I get to Grandpa's, my disappointment is growing faster than a wayward beanstalk on steroids." How many other similes or metaphors can you find? What other author's crafts do you notice? What is their effect?
- What do you think it would feel like to meet up with old friends like Rocky had to do at the soccer game? Would you feel nervous, awkward, happy or like an outsider? Why?
- Was Rocky justified to eavesdrop on his mother and her friend? Explain your reasoning.





- Why do you think Rocky’s mom tells her friend it is too risky for them to move back to Whitman, no matter how much Rocky wants that?
- In chapter 12, Rocky’s mom says, “Rochelle won a major Own Voices Award for her book.” What is an Own Voices award?
- Why do you think Rocky’s father isn’t willing or able to help him with the answers to the test?

Chapters 14 – 19 pages 65-97

- Do you ever make up nicknames for your friends? Have you ever been called a nickname you don’t like? If so, what did you do about it? Do you think Rocky likes the nicknames Olive gives him?
- Describe the relationship between Rocky and his Uncle Bob.
- Why does Max ask to go to the dance with Rocky as his payment to keep quiet about Rocky “talking to himself?” How does their relationship change because of this arrangement?
- How do we learn about Rocky’s dad? What do we know about him?
- Do you think Rocky would have agreed to try to drive the car to get medical help for his uncle if his father hadn’t given him secret driving lessons?
- How accurate were your first impressions of Olive and Max so far? What about any of your other predictions? What are your thoughts now of what the voice is?
- What do you know about hospitals? Is Rocky’s reaction to being in the hospital valid?

Chapters 20-25 pages 99-126

- What theme do you think Risa Nyman might be developing about secrets or lies? What evidence from the book can you provide for why you think this?
- Why do you think Uncle Bob promised Rocky that his upcoming business trip was a real one?
- Is snooping ever justified?





- Do you think Rocky's dad's voice gives good or bad advice by urging Rocky to go to Whitman on his own? Do you think if his father was alive, he would recommend something that might be dangerous? Why or why not?
- When Rocky hears Max's family secret, he says, "Another family hiding something. This is an epidemic." Do you think Rocky is right?
- How have Max, Olive, and Rocky changed so far?
- Are telling secrets and gossip sometimes the same? Do you think it is okay to tell only one person a secret if they promise not to tell anyone? Why or why not?

Chapters 26-30 pages 127-155

- Is Olive being disloyal with her angry reaction to Rocky's plan to bike to Whitman? How would you react? Were you surprised by her reaction?
- Why was Rocky so shocked by what he found out at Kenmore Hospital? Were you surprised to learn what kind of a hospital it was?
- Why did Rocky decide to break into his old house?
- What is your impression of Rocky's old neighbor, Mr. Novick? Were you upset that he blurted out the truth to Rocky about how his father died? If you have ever said something inadvertently that you shouldn't have, what were the repercussions?

Chapters 31-35 pages 157-186

- How would you describe Rocky and his mom when they first see each other after Rocky has learned the truth about how his father died?
- Rocky's mom mentions that sometimes there is stigma attached to mental illness that doesn't happen with physical illnesses. Do you think that's true? Why or why not?





- Was Rocky's mom wrong to want to wait until he was older to tell him the secret about his dad? Why do you think parents sometimes try so hard to protect their children?
- Did you like Rocky's speech at the memorial service for his father? Was he right to share the truth about how his father died with everyone there, or should he have kept it private?
- Describe how Olive and Rocky's relationship changes from their first meeting to the end of the book.

General questions for discussion after reading *Swallowed by a Secret* (SPOILER ALERTS IN QUESTIONS—DISTRIBUTE TO STUDENTS AFTER THEY FINISH THE BOOK)

- Inner speech is when someone hears the voice of a loved one (dead or alive) inside their head. It is natural and not a sign of mental illness. Have you experienced inner speech by hearing the voice of someone you know inside your head? What was your reaction? Did you speak back to the voice? Can you find clues throughout the book when this was happening? At what point did you realize what it was?
- What are your impressions about Rocky's dad? Did you pick up on the clues about his mental illness along the way? What touched you the most about Rocky's dad?
- Did you think Rocky was foolish or brave to take the risks he did to learn the truth about how his father died? Explain your reasoning.
- Who is your favorite character, and what are two words that best describe that character?
 - Rocky
 - Olive
 - Max
 - Voice of Rocky's dead father
 - Rocky's mom
 - Grandpa
 - Mr. Novick





- There are a lot of misconceptions about death by suicide. For example, people used to say “committed suicide,” but now that phrase is considered insensitive. Why do you think people sometimes react to suicide as a cause of death differently than they would to a death caused by physical disease? What might a person say to comfort family members of someone who died by suicide?
- Are you a good secret keeper? Do you know a secret you’ve promised never to tell? Did you ever tell a secret you wish you could put back in the secret vault? Why is keeping a secret sometimes a burden?
- What do you think Risa Nyman’s purpose was in writing this book?

For More Information and to Get to Know the Author,
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