

BOOK TALK!

Lessons From a Dead Girl

Author: Jo Knowles

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ENGL 112B
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Jo Knowles

Author

Photo from: <https://www.northerniowan.com/11089/showcase/author-jo-knowles-shares-stories-advice/>

Jo Knowles grew up in New Hampshire around books. Growing up, Knowles would write stories about her parents' restaurant, The Hathway House. Knowles also would write about her family and pets. However, she did not become a reader until she entered high school. Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* is what Knowles credits for her love for reading and writing. Knowles was inspired to write a YA novel for her graduate thesis, because she became passionate about young adult literature. Knowles actually got the chance to meet Robert Cormier and express to him his influence, and he requested to read her book. Now, Knowles is a YA novelist and a professor in the Master of Fine Arts program at Southern New Hampshire University.

To learn more about Jo Knowles, visit her website at: <https://www.joknowles.com>
(ALL INFO IN BIOGRAPHY TAKEN FROM THIS WEBSITE)

SUMMARY

Lessons From a Dead Girl is the story of the rise and fall of the friendship between Laine McCarthy and Leah Greene. The novel is told from Laine as the first person narrator. The book begins with Laine's mother informing her of Leah's death, but Laine already knows and claims it is her fault. The rest of the story is told in the present- tense style of a flashback, depicting certain "lessons" Laine learnt from Leah. Leah was the popular girl who chose Laine to bring into her circle, Laine was the quiet girl that felt it was a privilege and let Leah do whatever she wanted. Leah begins to coerce Laine into a sexual relationship, one Leah is insistent Laine enjoys. Then, one night Laine broke a promise, she left Leah alone with Sam, and Leah was never the same again. This heavily changes their friendship to a toxic one: lying, bullying, and Leah punishing Laine for things she has no idea about. Laine's worship of Leah turns into hatred as Leah changes from "town sweetheart" to "bad apple," and the two end their friendship. Laine is using the narrative to reflect, but she questions: "what good are lessons from a dead girl?" (4).

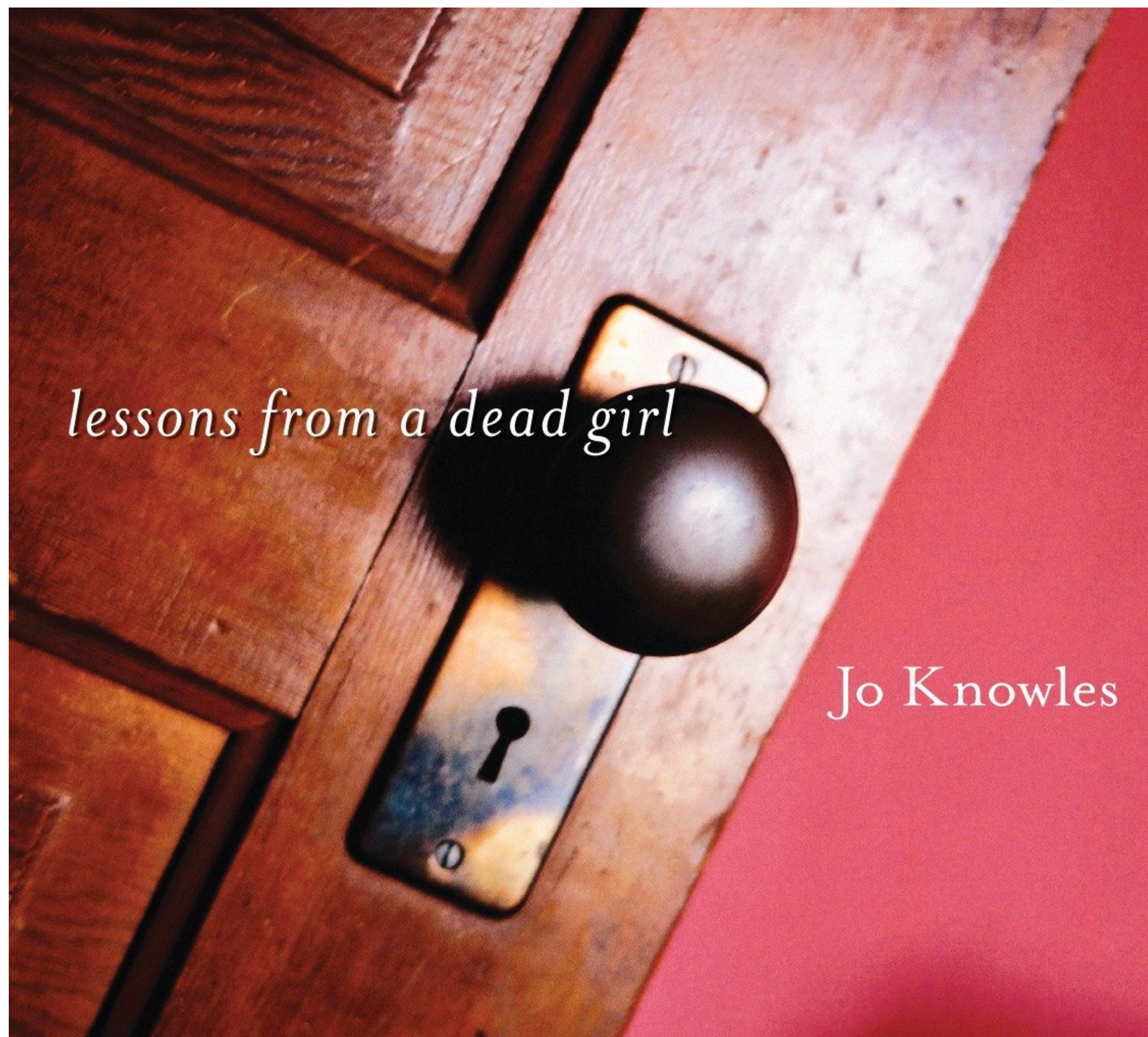


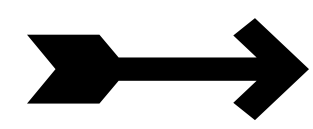
Photo
from: <https://www.amazon.com/Lessons-Dead-Girl-Jo-Knowles/dp/0763644854>

Quotes

(in the black text is the chapter they came from)

Lesson 7: *Everyone has Something to Hide.*

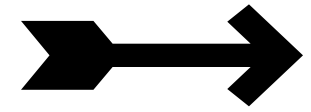
“Paige clutches the towel tightly to her body, then takes a deep breath. Her bottom lip quivers as she slowly lets Leah take the towel from her... Paige’s body is covered with bruises. Most of them are on her upper arms and shoulders. I swear I can make out the shape of the hand that made them. Yellow and deep purple, it’s clear they’re all in different stages of healing. That as soon as one started to disappear, another took its place. Leah quickly tears her robe from my hands and gives it to Paige” (64).



This quote is significant because it highlights child abuse, something children can sometimes be exposed to as a bystander or a victim. This scene eases into Leah and Laine beginning to experience more scary and mature events. By having the first example be unrelated to the duo, it sets an ominous foreshadowing over the rest of the novel. The topic being discussed is sensitive, but the novel approaches it in a child's perspective which provides a realistic example for children to digest and apply to the real world. Although Paige is a minor character, she embodies one of the major themes of the book: how does somebody deal with danger? When young adults read this section, whether it be in class or on their own time, it can open up a healthy conversation on what to do when witnessing something dangerous.

Lesson 11: *Sometimes the Good-byes you Want the Most are the Hardest*

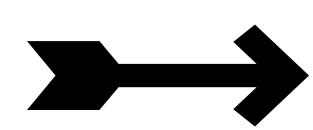
“Who knows. Why is it all the rich, beautiful girls who do crap like that? I mean, she has everything going for her, so what does she do? She sleeps with every guy on the planet and then tries to off herself. She probably just did it for attention” (103).



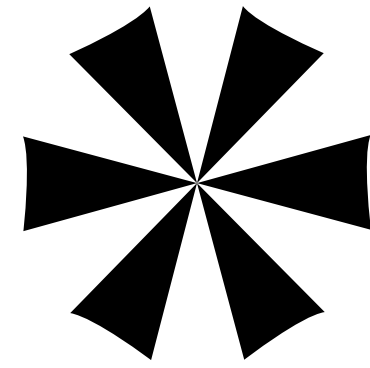
This moment reveals Leah as a misunderstood character. The speaker assumes because Leah is "rich" and "beautiful" her suicide attempt is just a cry for help (103). There is no attempt to try and understand Leah, as her complexity is reduced to her exterior and so her mental health is invalidated. Leah is being portrayed as a nuisance, and through the language (ie: "She sleeps with every guy on the planet"), and it is displayed that Leah is no longer possesses the positive popularity she had in grade school (103). It is a character shift for Leah, as it is evident she is being demonized. This quote illuminates the implied loneliness Leah is feeling that eventually leads to her downward spiral, and ultimately her death.

Lesson 18: *There is More Than One Type of Friendship Test*

“‘I have an idea,’ she says. She stands and walks over to me, blocking the space between me and the door. ‘Why don’t you prove it to me?’ She takes my hand. ‘Kiss me right now and see if you feel anything. Prove to me that you only like guys” (163).



This quote shows not only the struggles Laine experiences regarding her sexuality, but Leah as a manipulator. Laine narrating that Leah is "blocking the space between me and the door" illustrates the discomfort Laine is enduring (163). Laine's feelings of being trapped signify that this is not a conversation she is ready for. This moment is a culmination of the sexual confusion and fear Laine has been dealing with since the two's first kiss. On the other hand, Leah is using Laine's possible queerness as a method of taunting, creating a moment to sexually coerce Laine into something Laine clearly does not want. Forcing Laine to come out by insisting she "prove it" in itself is manipulative, but Leah is also using Laine for her own satisfaction. By preying on Laine's fear of being exposed, Leah is taking advantage of a malicious opportunity.



Text Complexity

- **Dale-Chall Readability Score**
(Raw score 1.4122), (Adjusted Score: (3.6365 + 1.4122)).
Final Score: 5, Grade Level 5-6
 - This book's language is not complex, as the elementary/ early middle school score suggests. However, the mature situations discussed throughout the novel make it inappropriate for elementary or middle school. Additionally, although the language may be readable for younger children, it is likely they will encounter trouble trying to comprehend the themes and plot of the book.
- **Lexile Text Complexity Score**
HL620L
 - This score means the content is geared towards older readers who may need a book that is less complex and has language at a lower reading level. This score is more accurate because the language in *Lessons From a Dead Girl* is quite simple, but the content presented is for a more mature audience.

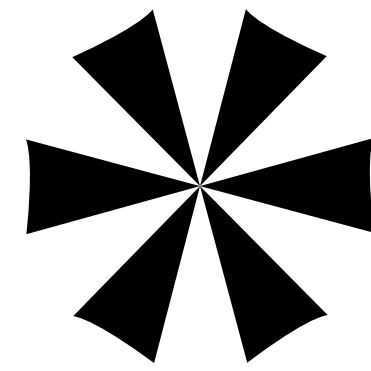
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Teaching Suggestions

This book would do best as a supplement to foster conversation rather than an entire unit. Because of its rather dark and mature themes, it might not be appropriate to teach the novel in its entirety to minors. However, as a teacher I would pick out a few excerpts to read that slightly represent the intense themes (ie: suicide, domestic violence, and sexual assault) and have the class read them individually. This would be a good way to open up the conversation on what to do if a student is ever in this situation. Beyond that, there could be a class discussion on what happens if a student is a witness to a dangerous situation and how to do more than just be a bystander safely.

If *Lessons From a Dead Girl* was taught in a classroom (best for seniors in high school if it was going to be a full unit), a good teaching activity would be having the students write a journal entry about something that influences them, and what traits they see from themselves in Laine when thinking about it. The students can ponder how Laine being the narrator influences the book, as they write in first person narration in their entries. It is important to keep the topic open ended so there is no pressure to write about traumas and potentially cause harm to the students. Laine feels happiness and enjoyment too, so every experience can somehow connect to the book. This would be a valuable class lesson as it teaches the students to focus on character patterns as well as the significance of a first person narrator, but does not force them to only engage with the book through negative feelings.

Another activity that could have this book be used safely in the classroom is having the students make a plot chart. This is a way to make sure students understand the basic structure of a YA novel and that they can successfully identify where the tension in the book is. After that, the students can make a plot chart for another YA novel they have read. This would be a great segway into a comparison assignment that has students look for patterns in the YA novel. This would end with a discussion of students sharing their findings so the class can be exposed to overall trends amongst a variety of different YA novels.



Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping into the Powerful Resource of Story

- **Chapter Four: Books about Real Life Experiences**

- Laine's story is one that many other teens who read it may be exposed to or have experienced in real life. It is a coming of age story following Laine from elementary to high school, making it accessible for various ages of teens to relate to or learn from.

- **Chapter Five: Books about Facing Death and Loss**

- The premise of *Lessons From a Dead Girl* is Laine reflecting on the memories and lessons she got from Leah, who has died as she figures out how to come to terms with it. Although mainly told in flashbacks, the major theme of grieving is lurking under the surface through the language. In addition, the first and last chapter address the death and Laine's feelings about it directly.

Why Should Teens Read *Lessons From a Dead Girl*?

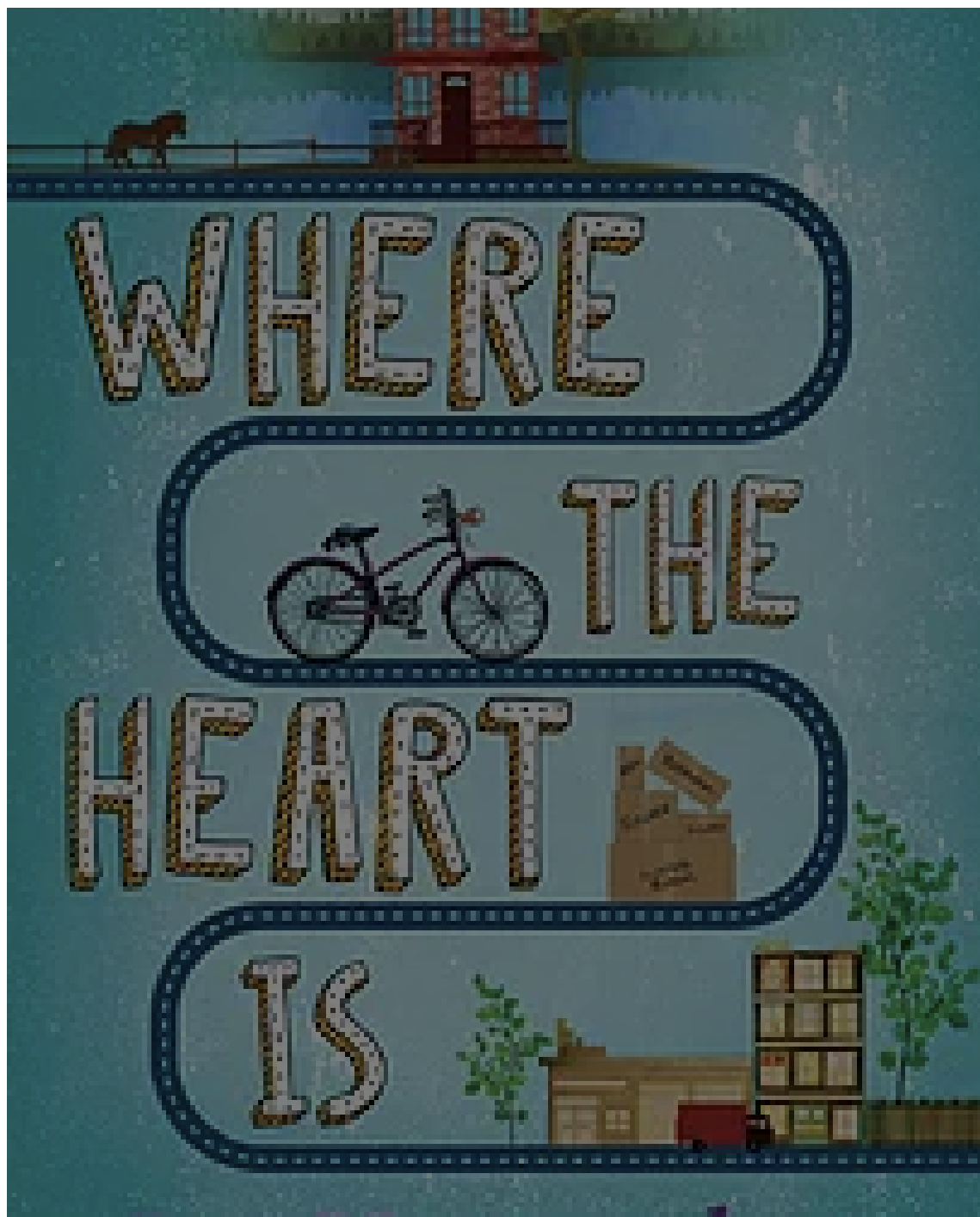
Lessons From a Dead Girl should be read by teens because it authentically describes situations that today's teens may experience such as discovering sexuality and understanding the maturing body. This book can also help teens understand the invisibleness of mental health issues as well as the complexity of relationships. Additionally, the novel covers darker things a teen may be exposed to such as sexual assault and bullying. By being exposed to these things in literature, there is opportunity for teen readers to properly assess their own lives, look to the book to help cope, or understand potential signs of danger around them. The themes in this book can provide ways for teens to engage with their parents or guardians in healthy conversation about the mature subjects touched on. *Lessons From a Dead Girl* arguably is not classroom appropriate, however it is still important for teens to read to have comprehension of situations that may not apply to them, but still occur. This way, teens have a chance to widen their perspective of the world around them.

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Other Books by Jo Knowles

Both summaries below are quoted from the back of the books

Where the Heart is



Both photos from: <https://www.joknowles.com/lessons-from-a-dead-girl>

"If home is where the heart is, what would happen if you lost it?"

Compassion and humor infuse the story of a family caught in financial crisis and a girl struggling to form her own identity.

It's the first day of summer and Rachel's thirteenth birthday. She can't wait to head to the lake with her best friend, Micah. But as summer unfolds, every day seems to get more complicated. Her "fun" new job taking care of the neighbors' farm animals quickly becomes a challenge, whether she's being pecked by chickens or having to dodge a charging pig at feeding time. At home, her parents are more worried about money than usual, and their arguments over bills intensify. Fortunately, Rachel can count on Micah to help her cope with all the stress. But Micah seems to want their relationship to go beyond friendship, and though Rachel almost wishes for that, too, she can't force herself to feel "that way" about him. In fact, she isn't sure she can feel that way about *any* boy — or what that means. With all the heart of her award-winning novel *See You At Harry's*, Jo Knowles brings us the story of a girl who must discover where her heart is and what that means for her future"

See You at Harry's



"Fern feels invisible. Her dad is forever planning how to boost business at the family restaurant. Her mom is constantly going off to meditate. Her sister is busy finding ways not to work, and her brother is totally focused on his new "friend." And then there's Charlie; three years old, a "surprise" baby, and the center of everything. When all their lives are turned upside down, Fern feels more alone than ever, and responsible for the devastating event wrenching her family apart. All will not be well. Or at least, all will never be the same"