

BOOK TALK: *THINGS WE KNOW BY HEART*

JESSI KIRBY



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Jessi Kirby is a former English teacher and librarian living in Orange County, California with her husband and children. Like the main character and her sister in *Things We Know By Heart*, Kirby is an avid runner. She is an avid young adult writer, having written 6 novels between 2011 and 2017, with a newest book, *The Other Side of Lost*, set to be published some time in 2018. Her first novel, *Moonglass*, was an ABA New Voices selection in 2011. As well as the books already mentioned, Kirby has written the following titles: *In Honour* (2012), *Golden* (2013), and *The Secret History of Us* (2017). Whilst writing *Things We Know By Heart*, Kirby gathered information about organ transplants and their recipients, crediting Zeke Kendall, a young transplant patient, with helping her by sharing his story.

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In *Things We Know By Heart*, Quinn Sullivan is a young woman facing a life-altering tragedy: the death of her high school sweetheart, Trent. Over a year after Trent's death, Quinn is still struggling to move forward. She has gotten in touch with all of the patients who have received organs from Trent, except for one. She sent a letter to Colton Thomas, the young man who received Trent's heart, but never received a reply. She manages to track him down through his sister's blog, and decides that, in order to gain some closure, she must see the man who now has the heart of the boy she loved so much. They end up meeting and talking (by accident or by fate?), and Quinn finds herself falling in love with Colton. The only problem is that Colton doesn't know about Quinn's very intimate connection to his heart. Quinn knows that telling Colton the truth is the right thing to do, but doing so could result in losing him.

<http://www.xpressoreads.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ThingsWeKnowByHeart.png>

QUOTE

"I cross the room to my dresser, almost afraid to look at my reflection. I avoided facing myself in the bathroom mirror, but here, alone in my room, I can't. I step in front of my dresser mirror, and my eyes go straight to my still-swollen lip, where the tiny black stitches stand out in sharp contrast against my pale skin. Proof that today happened. That I found Colton Thomas and that, despite all the rules I've come up with for myself, I met him. Spoke to him. Spent time with him. I bring my fingertips to my three stitches and wonder for a second how many it took to close Trent's heart into his chest. The thought chokes me up for too many reasons to sort out."

(pg. 49-50)

"He says something else, but I don't hear him, because one phrase is stuck in my mind. *How many days, how many days...* All of a sudden I feel completely unmoored. I have no idea how many days it's been since Trent died. I don't know when I stopped counting. I don't know when I let go of that thing that grounded me in my grief, that reminded me each and every day...I lost count. Failed him again."

(pg. 181-182)

"I just want to make sure you realize you can't *make* that mistake. You don't get to. The second you start missing your meds, you risk going into rejection — don't you get that? You could *die*... So you never get to make that mistake, Colton — not because you're tired, or they make you feel crappy, or you're...distracted."

(pg. 228-229)

EXPLANATION & COMMENTARY

This is Quinn's reflection on her first interaction with Colton. She was only supposed to see him (as if this would somehow bring her closure), but instead ended up rear-ending his parked car in an attempt to run away from him, leading to a whole afternoon of interactions with him and the nurses at the hospital that took care of him while he was ill. Quinn often attempts to compare her own experiences to Colton's (in an attempt to better understand herself? Or to make herself feel better?), whilst constantly reminding herself of Trent in order to refresh her guilt, particularly at the beginning of the novel. Quinn's handling of her situation is quite unhealthy, as she chooses to wallow in her depression and guilt rather than facing it head on. Although she does move forward (with Colton's help), most of this book is taken up by Quinn's refusal to confront her difficult emotions, choosing instead to distract herself by spending time with Colton, then feeling bad about it afterward. This section of the book sets up this behaviour.

This is where we first see Quinn moving forward and how she deals with that. Her stress when she discovers that she has lost track of the days since Trent's death is portrayed very well by Kirby in this scene. We can see the negative place that Quinn insists on living in, and how feeling a romantic joy with someone else really triggers her guilt. Moving forward is not just difficult for Quinn, it's a major conflict; one that she was perfectly content not to encounter until meeting Colton.

This bit of dialogue occurs during an argument between Colton and his sister, Shelby. Colton has skipped his medications (including the all important immunosuppressant or anti-rejection medications), and Shelby confronts him. She goes on to give Colton some much-needed tough love, but Colton reacts badly to this, and storms out to meet up with Quinn, who has overheard the whole fight. Unfortunately, this is where Kirby fails for me. She's done so well in explaining Quinn's issues concerning Colton, Trent, and her internalized guilt, making Quinn a well-rounded and complex character. Here, Colton is shown for what he is: a sick character made specifically so Quinn can move forward, but who doesn't actually have too much going on outside of Quinn's character development. I find Colton's reaction in this scene to be very unrealistic, not in that he gets angry, but in the things that he says. He wants to be normal, that's fine, but someone who has lived with a chronic illness and who then receives all of the information that transplant patients and their families receive before transplantation, knows that the traditional definition of normal is simply not possible. Colton's attitude in this scene is more like that attitude of someone that is newly diagnosed, not someone who has had to cope with a chronic illness for a long time, as Colton supposedly has.

HOW I WOULD TEACH *THINGS WE KNOW BY HEART*

This book would be very useful in teaching about language style and literary devices. Kirby uses beautiful imagery and frequent metaphors to add depth to Quinn's emotions and transformation.

The plot of *Things We Know By Heart* is very straightforward: it goes in chronological order with some flashbacks, deals with difficult by understandable issues, and explores a story to which teens will be able to relate. As such, this book would be a good base for a first essay. It's straightforward nature would mean that students would be able to focus on the format of their essay without being too distracted by the difficulty of the text.

As this book uses understandable language, and clear and frequent literary devices, this would be a great way to teach prose/novel annotation.

Disclaimer: I did *not* like this book. I wanted a book about my own experience and a book that I agreed with; I thought I'd found that in *Things We Know By Heart* when we did the book pass. Instead, I got a book that did the opposite of what I wanted! But, I think that sharing a book you don't like is just as important as sharing a book that you love. It opens up a discussion on what makes one person love a book and what makes another person hate that same book! It also opens a discussion about finding value in literature that we don't like. Students have to read a lot of literature that they don't enjoy. An English teacher's job is not to get everyone to like every book they read in class; an English teacher's job is to show the value of the literature that is being taught. Reading books that we don't like or that we find difficult challenges us, and helps us to become better readers, writers, and thinkers.

WHY SHOULD TEENS READ THIS BOOK?

This book would be beneficial for teens that love romance. Although the story certainly has issues for someone who is a bit of a realist, a true romantic would find this love story intriguing, particularly with all of the connections between Colton and Trent that Kirby works into the courtship scenes. This book would also be beneficial for someone who is learning to cope with the death of a loved one, as Quinn's evolution from the beginning to the end of the book illustrates a positive move forward (rather than moving *on*) from the death of her high school sweetheart.

I would *definitely not* give this book to someone that is going through a transplant situation (either for themselves or for a family member), as this book glosses over that experience and romanticizes Colton's illness and transplant process.

RELATED WORKS

The Fault in Our Stars (John Green)
Me Before You (Jojo Moyes)
The Great Gatsby (F. Scott Fitzgerald)
Romeo & Juliet (William Shakespeare)
Pride and Prejudice (Jane Austen)
The Year of Magical Thinking (Joan Didion)
The Red Notebook (Antoine Laurain)
Everything is Illuminated (Jonathan Safran Foer)
Never Let Me Go (Kazuo Ishiguro)

TEXT COMPLEXITY

LEXILE SCORE 840L
Age range: 14 – 17

I believe that this is spot on. The language used is straightforward and relatively simple, but the content is more “adult”. There is one actual sex scene in the book, but there are instances of sexual tension, discussion of difficult issues, and crass language that would be inappropriate for children under the age of 14.

DALE-CHALL SCORE 5.6
Age range: grades 5 – 6

As mentioned above, I don’t believe that this is appropriate content for younger students. Although this score suggests that 5th and 6th grade students will be able to understand the language, the content is too advanced, and would most certainly not be interesting for this age range.

EXETER QUALITIES LANGUAGE

Kirby uses beautiful imagery and highly expressive language in this novel to portray Quinn’s innermost thoughts and the evolution of her romantic feelings toward Colton, as well as the struggle that this evolution brings to her feelings for Trent. The obvious (and constant) heart metaphors are a bit much, though.

THEME

The themes discussed in this book certainly prompt complex discussions. They challenge the readers with difficult issues, as well as moral and ethical ambiguities, allowing for emotional and intellectual growth with regards to dealing with topics such as death, love, healing, and health.