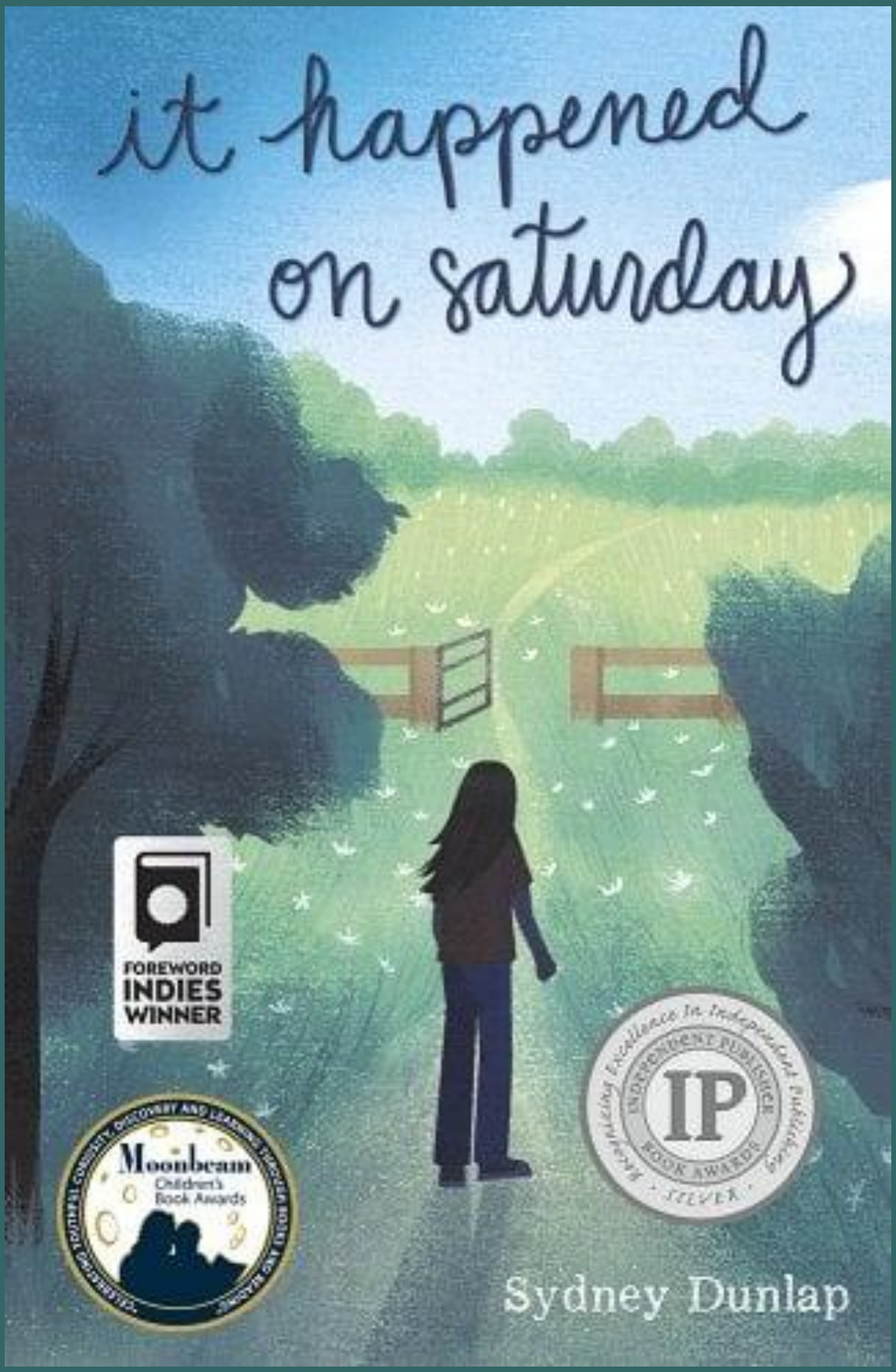

EDUCATOR GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

Thirteen-year-old Julia would much rather work with horses at the rescue barn than worry about things like dating and makeup. But when her BFF meets a boy at camp, Julia's determined not to get left behind. After a makeover from her older sister, she posts a picture of herself online and gets a comment from Tyler—a seemingly nice kid who lives across town. As they DM more and more, Julia's sure that Tyler understands her in a way her family never has. Even better, their relationship earns her tons of attention at school.

Then Julia finds out Tyler's true plan, and her world is turned upside down. She fiercely guards her secret, but could her silence allow her friends to fall into the same trap?

In this timely debut, author Sydney Dunlap tells a story of a middle-school girl who narrowly escapes becoming a victim of human trafficking and must find her way toward hope and healing after this traumatic event.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

It Happened on Saturday is the story of a thirteen-year-old girl named Julia who is dealing with issues that many kids face: changing friendships, family challenges, and social media. She makes a risky choice and narrowly escapes becoming a victim of human trafficking.

I chose to write about this topic after I'd been volunteering for local anti-trafficking organizations and learned that kids ages eleven to fourteen are especially susceptible to being lured into trafficking. As a longtime elementary school teacher, I realized there was very little written on this topic for middle-grade readers, and I wanted to introduce this subject matter when people need it most. Even so, It Happened on Saturday is ultimately a story of hope, healing, and Julia's journey toward finding her voice.

Julia's story is just one of many ways trafficking can occur. It can happen to anyone, no matter their socioeconomic status, race, or gender identification. When I got involved in the anti-trafficking movement, I learned that nobody has the exact numbers because so many cases go unreported. From the data collected, though, it is known that thousands of youth under the age of eighteen are lured or forced into trafficking in the United States each year, counting toward a current worldwide total of about a million young trafficking victims.

Pre-reading Activity

1. What social media/online apps do you use? How often?
2. Has a stranger ever tried to reach out to you online? What did you do?

Discussion Guide

1. The novel begins at the barn the day that everything changes between Julia and Nori. Have you ever had a friend give you news that made you feel like nothing was the same any longer? Did you talk to your friend about how you felt, or keep your feelings to yourself, as Julia did? As you reflect on it, do you wish you'd done anything differently?
2. After Danielle gives Julia the makeover, Julia looks in the mirror and can barely recognize herself. It's like she's looking at a totally different person. Do you think that's a good or bad thing? How does this foreshadow later story events?
3. Even though she knows better than to talk with a stranger online, Julia is drawn to Tyler's comment and can't stop going back to it. Have you ever experienced a feeling like that, where it's as if a magnet were pulling you back to some thing, even though you knew it wasn't the best idea?
4. Julia isn't planning to talk to Tyler, but then she ultimately responds and has a conversation with him. Why do you think she changes her mind?

5. How does Tyler earn Julia's trust, both before and after they meet? Do you notice any "red flags" that Julia missed? What is the significance of the baseball caps? Why do you think Tyler (and Alex) wear them? At what point in the story did you realize that Julia was in serious danger?
6. When Julia and Bella are introduced at lunch, Bella seems to recognize Julia but isn't exactly sure how she knows her. What conclusions can you draw regarding Bella's involvement in the fifth-grade bullying that had such a huge impact on Julia's life?
7. Have you ever had an experience where it felt almost impossible that the rest of the world was going on unchanged around you when your whole life had been shaken to the core?
8. Why does Julia try so hard to avoid her friends once she's back at school? Why might she be resistant to attending the counseling group?
9. At the counseling center, Sheila writes down the suggestions the group comes up with for ways to relax. These suggestions appear on p. 207. Which of those ways can you relate to? What else might you add to the list?
10. Being around the horses gives Julia the feeling of finally being "home." Is there anything that gives you that feeling?
11. "My whole body goes numb. Tyler and Alex are in jail. They're all the way in Texas. It's over. I

stumble up the last two steps and into my room, then collapse on my bed. Danielle bounds over. Mom's behind her, blowing her nose with a tissue. 'Do you understand what this means, Julia?' Danielle's grin is gigantic." (p. 187). What do you think Danielle is getting at here?

12. **Julia and her friends all have very different personalities. Who are you most like? Why?**
13. **"Instead of joining them, I push the sliding glass door open and go into the backyard. At least now I can be outside by myself, since Tyler and Alex are in jail. But what have I done?" (p. 195). What do you think Julia is afraid of here?**
14. **Julia and her father are close, but she still finds it difficult to share her feelings with him. Why do you think that is, and what makes her finally decide to try to tell him what's really going with her?**
15. **How has Julia and Nori's friendship grown by the end of the story?**
16. **What does Julia realize about herself when she's lost in the cornfield?**
17. **How does Julia's final social media post show that she has changed?**
18. **Had you ever heard of trafficking before this? What are some things you can do so that you can stay safe?**
19. **Julia's mom tells her teachers as well as the stable staff what happened because she is concerned for Julia's safety. Julia is furious**

at her mom for sharing the worst event of her life. Who do you think is right in this situation? Or do they both have a valid argument?

20. **If you are ever in a difficult situation like Julia, who are some trusted adults you can turn to for help?**

Extension Activities

1. In small groups, role play being at the mall with friends. One person can pretend to be a stranger trying to strike up a conversation, and the others can role play making a quick exit when the stranger keeps trying to connect with them.
2. Now role play that one of you is talking to someone online who wants to keep the relationship a secret. The other person (or people) can role play friends sharing with them why this isn't a good idea.
3. Look back at the scene in the cafeteria (pp. 234-237)when Julia finally tells her friends the truth about what happened. Act out the scene with each person playing the part of a different character. Now switch, and each play the parts of other people. What did it feel like to be Julia, having to share such a big secret? Or the other girls, who were shocked but ended up supporting her? How did it feel to play the part of Bella? If something like this were to happen in real life, what kind of reaction do you think you'd have? What else could you say and do to best support your friend?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sydney Dunlap is an award-winning author and former elementary school teacher who has worked extensively with youth facing challenging circumstances. She enjoys reading and writing heartfelt, hopeful books that explore tough topics that aren't often addressed in middle grade literature. Her 2023 debut novel, *It Happened on Saturday*, has received several medals and was named a Crystal Kite Honor Book, OLA Masterlist selection, Utah Beehive Award Nominee, and Virginia Reader's Choice selection. Sydney is a lifelong animal lover, and she and her husband share their home with three cats and two dogs, all rescues. You can find her online at www.sydneydunlap.com.