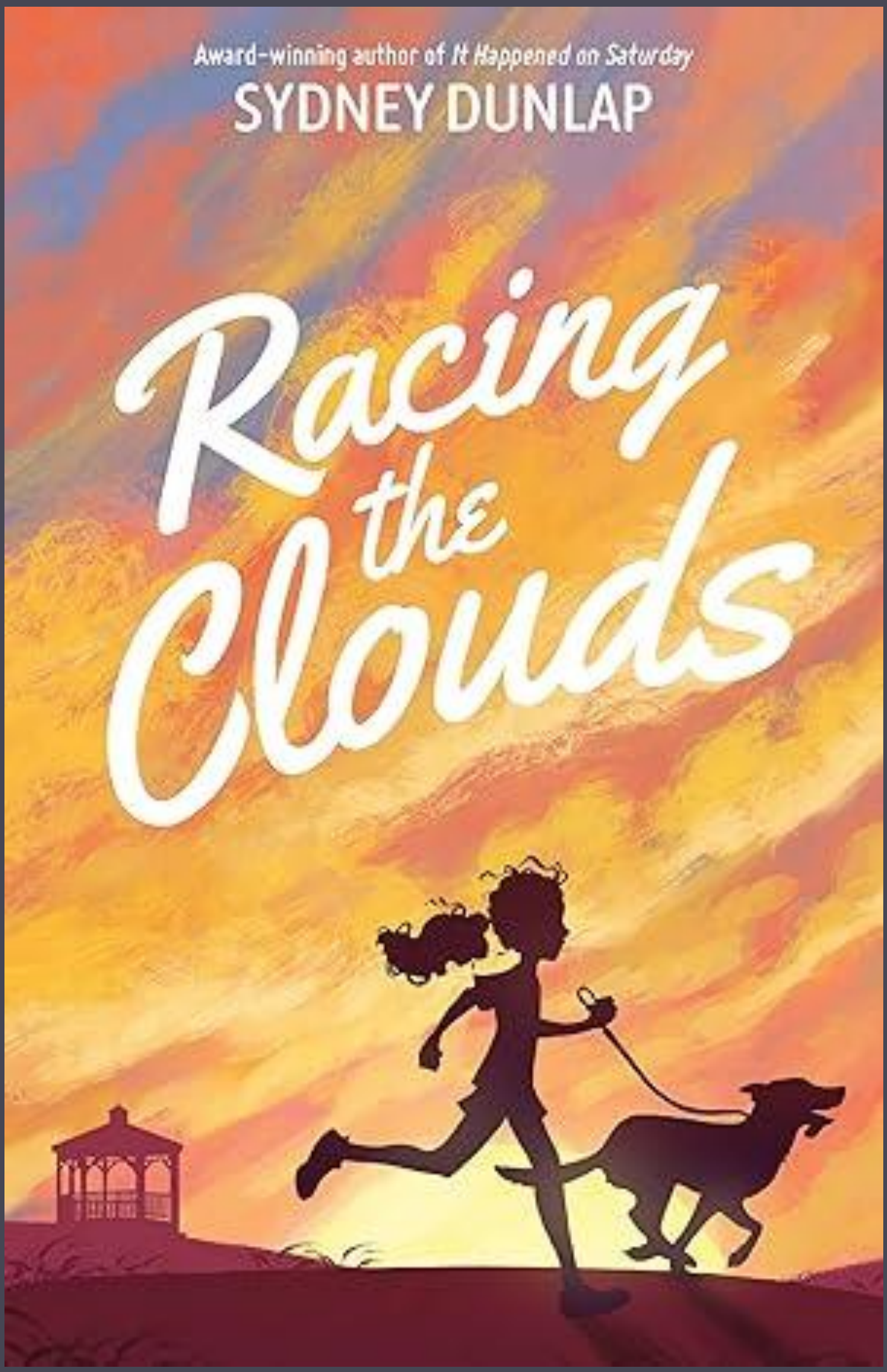

EDUCATOR GUIDE

About the Book

If thirteen-year-old Sage had done one thing differently that day last November, everything would be fine. Only she didn't, so she and her dad had to leave Philadelphia for a new life in middle-of-nowhere Virginia. Her dad has never actually said he blames her for what happened, but how could he not?

Sage is determined to push it all out of her mind, but then, just before summer vacation, she hears from the grandparents she's never met. They want her to visit, and she realizes this could be her chance to mend the rift that's kept everybody apart.

When she meets Grandmother Marion, though, Sage is sure her trip is headed for disaster. Except she wasn't counting on making a new friend or rescuing a sweet stray dog. With them by her side, maybe she can find the courage to face what she's been avoiding all along.

From the award-winning author of *It Happened on Saturday* comes a heartfelt and empowering story that explores the complexity of family relationships, the value of forgiveness, and how to find your way forward in a tough situation with resilience and hope.

Background Information

I like to read and write stories about challenges that are very real and part of a lot of people's lives, but aren't always discussed that much. Many kids have family situations that can be hard to navigate, and addiction is one that can be especially difficult.

This story focuses on addiction in an adult, but kids are also affected by opioid misuse. Thousands of young people die every year due to fentanyl poisoning. Much of the time, the teens thought they were taking something else, but got the pills from someone other than their doctor or pharmacist.

Criminal drug networks are making fake pills and advertising them as real prescription medications to trick people into buying them. These pills often include an odorless, tasteless substance called fentanyl, which is highly addictive.

The criminals want to get people hooked on the pills so they'll keep coming back. But they don't care about anyone's safety. They just want to make sales, so they put in fentanyl without measuring the dose. Many of these pills contain a dose that can kill a person.

These fake pills are widely available and can look like the real thing, so people think they're taking something that can help them. The sellers tell people they're supplying what they asked for, but what users end up with could be something

entirely different. These deadly counterfeit medications are often sold on social media. It is my hope that this story can raise awareness about the dangers of opioid and other drug use and lead to important discussions both at school and at home.

I also know families who have members estranged from one another, and I wanted to explore that too. I thought it would be interesting for Sage to finally get a chance to meet the grandparents she's heard of but doesn't know. It would take a lot of bravery to get on a plane and go spend a week with people you've never even met.

One thing I've thought about a lot as a writer is that we each have strengths and weaknesses and must work to become the best versions of ourselves. With that in mind, I thought it would be interesting for my main character to meet people she's never heard anything good about and find out their side of the story.

Pre-reading Activity

1. Look at the cover without reading the summary and then write at least three predictions about the story.

2. Now read the summary and check to see if your predictions were supported by what you found out. Make any changes you'd like and then add two more.

Discussion Guide

1. The story begins a few months after Sage and her dad have moved from downtown Philadelphia to a rural area of Virginia. Have you ever made a big move like that? Do you prefer cities, rural areas, or suburbs? Why? How does Sage's perception of her new home change from the beginning of the book to the end?

2. We find out early on in the story that Sage has a set of grandparents she has never met. What do you think it would be like to suddenly hear from relatives you didn't know? If you were Sage, would you want to meet them or would you rather stay home? What do you think was Sage's initial reason for wanting to go visit them, and how did that change after she talked with her dad about it? How did Alejandro influence her decision?

3. At the beginning of the story, Sage is very reluctant to talk with Alejandro about what's really going on in her family. Why do you think it's so hard for her? How do her experiences in Ohio and her friendship with Marla allow her to grow, and what evidence is there that she has changed in her thinking by the end of the story?

4. Have you ever had a falling out with a friend or relative? Did you or the other person try to mend the relationship? How? Were you able to find your way back to one another? The book leaves the relationship between Sage and her mom open-ended, with hope and possibilities, but no definite conclusion. What do you think will happen next between them? And between Sage's mom and her grandparents?

5. Throughout the book, Sage goes running to try to clear her head and feel better even though it doesn't always work. Do you have something that you find particularly calming and helpful to do when you're experiencing a lot of stress? Or something you like to do regularly to keep everyday challenges from getting to be too much?

6. Sage enjoys music, but she won't allow herself near the drums due to the association she has between them and her mom's accident. After the personal growth she experiences, do you think Sage will ever decide to play the drums again? What are some clues from the text? Do you play an instru-

ment or have another creative pursuit like art, writing, dance, or cooking? There are many ways to be creative. What are some of your favorites?

7. Along with difficult memories, Sage recalls some very happy times with her mom. How do her feelings toward her mom change through the course of the novel? What does her mom mean when she tells Sage to "look forward, not back," and does Sage ultimately succeed in doing that?

8. A recurring theme in the book is that of trying to outrun or race the clouds. What does it mean to try to race them, and how is that different from running along with them? What do clouds symbolize in the story?

9. How would you feel if a friend came to you with a secret they had never shared before? How might you be able to support them? What do Marla's and Alejandro's reactions to Sage's news about her mom show you about their friendship?

10. Sage's relationships with Grandmother Marion and with Pawpaw are very different from one another, even from when she first arrives in Ohio. What are some examples from the text that show this? How do these relationships change as the story goes on?

11. Sage meets Marla on the plane and thinks she'll never see

her again. She never would have imagined that they'd become close friends. Have you ever met someone in a random situation like that and ended up connecting again? Have you ever had a friendship begin that way?

12. When Sage tells Marla, "I guess I'm waiting for the perfect moment (to talk to my grandparents)," Marla asks if Sage thinks there really is one. What do you think Marla means by that, and do you agree or disagree?

13. Sage wishes to have a family like Alejandro's. Have you ever really wanted something a friend has? How did you deal with it, and how did it affect your friendship?

14. If you were ever in a difficult situation, what adult could you talk to? If they weren't able to help, who might you confide in next?

15. Do you have pets? What kind and how many? Have you ever experienced the way an animal can bring people together? How did Nicky help bring characters with big differences together? Do you think he and Sylvester could ever end up as friends? Why or why not?

16. Sage finally comes to understand that what happened to her mom wasn't her responsibility, and that even when you love someone very much and really want to help, people are

ultimately responsible for their own actions. How does Sage come to this realization? Have you ever blamed yourself for something that really wasn't your fault?

17. Addiction can be a very hard thing to talk about. Why do you think it's so difficult to discuss? What are some ways you can stay safe from drugs? What does it mean when people say, "One Pill Can Kill"?

18. Alejandro manages to teach Sylvester a trick. Have you ever taught an animal a trick? Was it easier or more difficult that than you expected?

19. Sage flies by herself from Virginia to Ohio to visit her grandparents. Have you ever flown in a plane before? Did you find it scary, fun, or a combination of both? Do you prefer a flight or a long drive?

20. What do you think will happen next for Sage and her family? Do you think her dad will start teaching music lessons? Will Sage and her mom begin running together again? Do you think her family will go out to Ohio regularly after this? Will she and Marla stay good friends?

Extension Activities

1. Look at a map of the United States and find the route Sage took from central Virginia to the Cincinnati Airport in Ohio. Now find wherever you live on a map and a place anywhere in the country that you'd like to visit, and figure out the route to get there. Estimate about how much longer or shorter your trip would be than Sage's.

2. Pretend that you could be in charge of any kind of festival you wanted. What would it be, where would it be held, and what are some of the activities you'd have? Design a brochure advertising this event.

3. Pretend to be any of the main characters in the book and write a series of texts, emails, or letters (depending on the character you chose) back and forth with another character in the story. They can pertain specifically to story events, or they can be about a subject you come up with yourself.

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.