

# TOUGH TOPICS

## EDUCATORS' GUIDE

Grades 3–7

Share powerful middle-grade novels that will provide a platform to challenge students academically *and* create a culture of awareness, mutual respect, and compassion in your classroom and beyond. Look inside for activity ideas that can be adopted for lit circles, book clubs, whole-group reading studies, and differentiated reading experiences to foster social and emotional learning.



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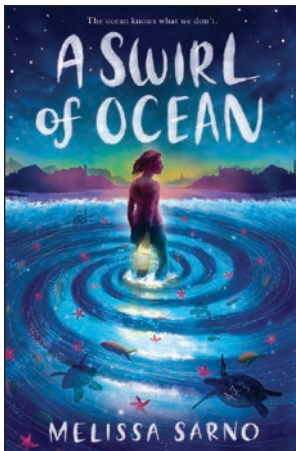
# ABOUT THE BOOKS

The themes, characters, and conflicts in the four featured novels lend themselves to deep inquiry and challenge young readers to examine their relationships with empathy, compassion, and conflict. The leading characters—who experience disability, depression, family struggles, insecurities, and more—take readers along on their journeys of self-discovery. Students will walk through the same social and emotional learning process that these characters do: understanding emotions and learning how to manage them, feeling and showing empathy for others, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions.

# IN THE CLASSROOM

This guide is designed for upper-elementary and middle-grade teachers doing literature circles. The activities focus on culminating projects, but the texts and activities are easily adaptable for book clubs, shared or whole-group reading studies, or post-reading activities. Educators could also repurpose the activities as extensions or enrichment for students who need to differentiate their reading experience. The tasks and exercises align with the major elements of literature including plot, characterization, conflict, symbolism, and theme, as well as the Common Core Standards\*. Each activity also includes student collaboration and offers multiple ways to present responses.

\*These activities correlate to Common Core Standards Common CCSS.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.R.1–3. They may be adapted to fit your individual classroom needs, ages, abilities, and learning styles.



## A Swirl of Ocean Melissa Sarno

F&P: X · Lexile: 690L  
HC: 978-1-5247-2012-4  
GLB: 978-1-5247-2013-1  
EL: 978-1-5247-2014-8  
CD: 978-1-9848-8462-6



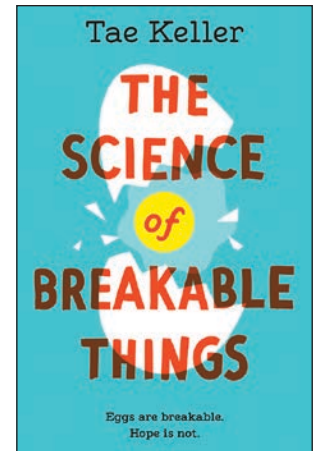
## Just Under the Clouds Melissa Sarno

F&P: W · Lexile: 710L  
PB: 978-1-5247-2011-7  
HC: 978-1-5247-2008-7  
GLB: 978-1-5247-2009-4  
EL: 978-1-5247-2010-0  
CD: 978-0-525-59553-3



## Solving for M Jennifer Swender

F&P: V · Lexile: 730L  
HC: 978-1-101-93290-2  
GLB: 978-1-101-93291-9  
EL: 978-1-101-93292-6



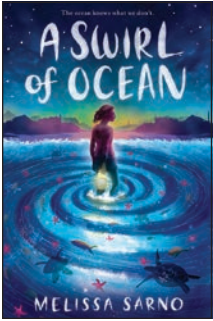
## The Science of Breakable Things Tae Keller

F&P: V · Lexile: 840L  
PB: 978-1-5247-1569-4  
HC: 978-1-5247-1566-3  
GLB: 978-1-5247-1567-0  
EL: 978-1-5247-1568-7  
CD: 978-0-525-52569-1





# A SWIRL OF OCEAN



Twelve-year-old Summer was found on the beach by Lindy when she was two. One might say they saved each other that day. From then on, they were always together. But as Summer verges on adolescence and the life she has with Lindy begins to change, she yearns to know about her past and whether she really belongs with

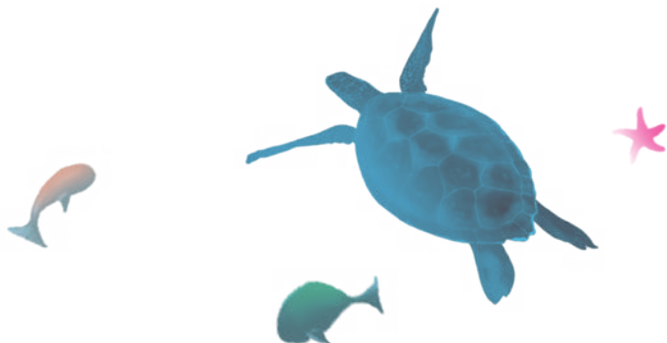
Lindy after all. One night, Summer goes for a swim and gets caught in a rip tide, swallowing mouthfuls of seawater. Later that night, she dreams of a girl her age living in the same town, but not in the same time. Summer's not persuaded that this girl is real, but something about her feels familiar. As Summer learns more about the girl, she sees parallels in her own life.

## CULMINATING ACTIVITY: Write an epilogue! What happens next?

After Summer finally gets some of the answers she had been looking for at the end of the book, the reader is left wondering what happens next. An epilogue is a final section or speech after the main part of a book, play, or musical composition that tells the audience what the characters went on to do and how things turned out. One way that readers can stay connected to and deepen their understanding of a text and its characters is by authoring an epilogue. Students will learn to observe and reflect on character traits within a text and the ways characters change across a text, and then express their inferences about the story.

### Think!

- In their lit circles, students brainstorm what questions they still have after they've finished reading the book. (For example, how did Summer end up with the moon snail necklace? How did she come to be alone on the beach as a baby? Do Summer and Jeremiah still have a strong friendship? How has Jeremiah's relationship with his father progressed?)



### Plan!

- Each student will write an epilogue that takes place one year, five years, or ten years after the end of the book. To prepare, each student:
  - Chooses one of the questions their group still has after finishing the book.
  - Rereads the parts of the book that are relevant to their question.
  - Identifies three ways the relevant character has changed or developed throughout the story.
  - Reads the five core competencies of social and emotional learning ([casel.org/what-is-sel](https://casel.org/what-is-sel)), and analyzes whether the characters demonstrate competency in at least one of these core elements.

### Write!

- Keeping in mind their question and how the characters have developed, students draft their epilogue. How do they imagine things turned out?

### Share!

- After peer and teacher reviews and revisions, students share their epilogue with their lit circles.
- Students can also present their epilogue in an electronic format using a slideshow program.
- Encourage groups to discuss whose epilogue felt the most satisfying and best answered readers' lingering questions! Whose was the most surprising, and why? Whose epilogue stayed most true to the characters' development arcs?

## SCIENCE LINK!

### Terrapin conservation

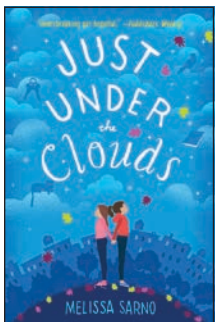
Why was that turtle lady so passionate about turtles and their survival? As a possible follow-up activity, have students look into terrapin conservation or research the habitats and life cycle of terrapins. Students can connect their research to the text to help satisfy some of their remaining questions, as well as questions you'd like them to think about. Have students create a presentation of their findings.

Supplemental resource:

- [wetlandsinstitute.org/conservation](https://wetlandsinstitute.org/conservation)



# JUST UNDER THE CLOUDS



Cora is a middle schooler with a lot on her plate. She is dealing with the loss of her father, the challenges and responsibilities of being a big sister, and the struggles of homelessness. Her mother is trying desperately to hold their small family together, so Cora must look after her sister, Adare, who their mother insists is just . . .

different. As Cora tries to understand what her purpose is, she stumbles upon new friendships that bring feelings of security and a deeper understanding about where she belongs. Will Cora and her family find a forever home? Can Cora hold on to her father's legacy and her new friendships? Will she find security in her unpredictable life?

## CULMINATING ACTIVITY: Plotting the plot!

The plot of *Just Under the Clouds* is very dramatic, especially when Adare goes missing. Sarno is a master at building excitement and anticipation in her stories. Before lit circle groups jump into analyzing the plot of *Just Under the Clouds*, remind students that the plot of most stories is made up of a series of related events, including the exposition, rising action (conflict), climax, falling action, and resolution. For example, when Cora takes a moment for herself to find the tree of heaven and climb it to be close to her father one last time, something is bound to go wrong. Which part of the plot would this be?

## Set them on their way!

- Using a story mountain graphic organizer (sample organizer: [cdn.thinglink.me/api/image/891768417495810048/1240/10](https://cdn.thinglink.me/api/image/891768417495810048/1240/10)), students label the elements of plot and focus on what events and details in the story should be considered rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. To help students really get to the heart of suspense building, encourage them to walk in each character's shoes and empathize with them.
- Students complete the graphic organizer using details from their lit circle's discussion.

## Thoughtful plotting!

- Students will then interview someone in their life—this can be a member of their lit circle, a friend, or a family member.
- Students will ask this person to name a challenge or struggle they have faced and the events that led up to that moment. What guided their behavior and decisions leading up to that challenge? How would the outcome have been different if this person had made different choices along the way?
- Students will then create a poster board of this person's "story mountain," plotting the events leading up to the climax and beyond (a visual plotline of this person's challenging event). This can be done with a collage of images sourced from magazines or the internet, or that the students draw themselves. Key words can be added to show the mood and tone of the experience.
- Display the poster boards, and have students investigate similarities and differences in how real people deal with struggle and conflict compared with the characters in the books they read. (This exhibition sharing works even if lit circles read different books.)

## SCIENCE LINK! Dendrology detective!

A dendrologist studies trees and shrubs. The *Ailanthus altissima*, or tree of heaven, is a major symbol in *Just Under the Clouds*. Research the types of trees native to your area. If possible, have students collect leaves from the trees and create poster boards showing facts about them and how they are adapted to their environment.



# SOLVING FOR M



Mika is an artistic fifth grader who lives with her mom; her dad and his new wife live far away. She is not a fan of math, and when she enters Mr. Vann's unconventional math class, she has no idea of the significant role it will play as challenging life events unfold. When Mika gets some bad news about her mom, unexpected

friends and a newfound bond with her dad's wife help her navigate her uncertain future as she questions everything she thought she understood.

## CULMINATING ACTIVITY: Character analysis!

### Types of Characters in Fiction

A **flat character** has one or two personality traits that don't change. The flat character can play a major or a minor role.

A **round character** has many complex traits; those traits develop and change throughout the story. A round character seems more real than a flat character because real people are complex.

**Stock characters** are stereotypes, such as hot-tempered redheads, stingy businessmen, and absentminded professors. They are often found in genre fiction (romance and mystery novels, for example), and are usually flat characters. They are sometimes used as tools to move a plot forward.

A **static character** never changes. They don't undergo any significant development in character, personality, or perspective throughout a text, and are sometimes used to highlight the extent to which other characters have changed.

A **dynamic character** changes and grows as the story unfolds. Dynamic characters respond to events and experience changes in attitude or outlook. The character might go through a transformation during the course of the storyline, and grow as a result of actions that took place.

**Protagonist** is another word for main character. The plot revolves around the protagonist. There may be more than one main character.

The **antagonist** is the character who represents a challenge or an obstacle to the protagonist.

A **foil** is a character who provides contrast to the main character (protagonist) in order to emphasize the main character's traits. For example, in *Wonder*, Julian is foil to Auggie as he tries to turn the school against Auggie. These characters are often used to highlight the development of another character.

- Students choose two characters to analyze more deeply, and identify which type of character they are (using the character trait information).
- On separate large pieces of craft paper, students trace a life-size body to represent their two chosen characters.
- Citing evidence from the text, students should show which type each character is, using the below suggestions as their guide. Encourage lit circles to focus on what is revealed through the characters' words, actions, and thoughts.

**Brain**—What thoughts are circling in the character's head?

**Eyes**—How does this character see the world?

**Mouth**—Note a memorable quote or something said about them.

**Shoulder**—What does he or she worry about?

**Heart**—What does he or she care most about?

**Right hand**—What does he or she need to hold on to? Who would be considered her or his right-hand man?

**Left hand**—What has he or she left behind?

**Achilles heel**—What or who has helped shape his or her life up to this point?

- Students can present their analysis by displaying these life-size tracings. Encourage students to discuss what characteristics stand out. Are there any characters who different groups thought were different character types? Why?

## Artistic analysis!

We get to know the characters in stories through the things they say, feel, and do; their reactions to important moments reveal a lot about them. Using art to connect with the text of *Solving for M*, students will dive into the characters and get to know who they really are!

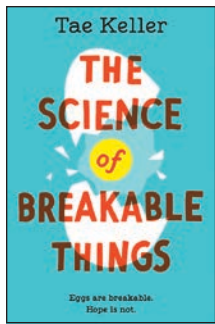
In literature circles,

- Provide students with the below information about the various character types.

## MATH LINK!

The math journal is a symbol used throughout *Solving for M*. Discuss what it symbolizes. Students can create their own math journals by writing a story problem using the events and characters from the text for their lit circle group to solve. Students should make a connection to their own lives, just like Mika did in Mr. Vann's class.

# THE SCIENCE OF BREAKABLE THINGS



Natalie Napoli is in middle school when things spiral out of control. Her mom, a botanist, is suffering from depression; her dad, a therapist, is struggling to maintain the household; and she and Mikayla, her childhood best friend, have grown apart. When she enters Mr. Neely's science class, he encourages her to enter a contest,

during which she finds unlikely friendships, a way to help her mom, and a ray of hope. When things don't turn out how she planned, a new adventure unfolds.

## CULMINATING ACTIVITY: *How Does This Relate to Me or My World?* podcast

Using *The Science of Breakable Things*, students will explore literary techniques and the role of tone, mood, and sound by creating podcasts. Along this journey, students will become experts on the material, come to understand their audience, and make connections between the text and their worlds.

In their lit circles:

- Students listen to three short podcasts of their choice (with teacher approval) and discuss a) how the speaker makes the podcast interesting, b) how the speaker uses specific words to engage listeners, and c) how the speaker uses tone to express emotions and messages.
- Students identify one scene from *The Science of Breakable Things* that spoke to them in some way.
- Students ask themselves and each other: What does this scene have to do with me? How does this scene relate to my world and the world outside of the book? Why did this scene stick out to me? After that discussion, they should talk about how the section they have chosen fits into the larger story. How does the scene make us feel? What techniques did the author use to achieve that feeling? What is the difference between tone and mood, and how do certain words and images create the tone and mood in this scene? This will require close reading of chosen passages.



- Students can use GarageBand, Audacity, or any other sound recorder to retell and comment on the scene, complete with background music and sound effects, to demonstrate their understanding of how their chosen scene connects to *them* and connects with something *outside* of the book, for example, their school, their town or city, their families, or an issue in society. They should comment on at least one of the following: tone, setting, theme, symbolism, mood, imagery, or a literary element or technique they feel passionate about and that relates to their analysis.
- Students can be as creative with their podcast as they want! For example, they could create their podcast as one of the characters, speaking from their perspective, or as an inanimate object from the book such as the eggs. This could be a great way for students to step into someone else's shoes to connect with ideas on a deeper level.
- Students present their podcasts by sharing them in class or in an open house setting with parents and caregivers. Invite the audience to offer feedback on which types of voices, sounds, and music is effective and why. What grabbed and held their attention? What was something new they learned?

Podcast tips for students:

- Keep your podcast short (5–8 minutes).
- Your audience will be other literature circle groups, students, and parents and caregivers.
- Practice is key! Notice how your voice tells its own story. How can you use it to express certain emotions?

Additional Resources:

- [readingrockets.org/article/creating-podcasts-your-students](http://readingrockets.org/article/creating-podcasts-your-students)
- [thepodcasthost.com/niche-case-study/getting-kids-podcasting](http://thepodcasthost.com/niche-case-study/getting-kids-podcasting)

## SCIENCE LINK! Fact meets fiction

Understanding the significance of symbols in stories is an important skill. In *The Science of Breakable Things*, Natalie and her mom share a love for the Cobalt Blue Orchid. Natalie finds the perfect gift for her mother in the Korean Fire flower. What do these flowers symbolize?

- In their literature circles, students choose one or both of these rare and beautiful plants to research. What is the habitat, characteristics, and basic needs of each?



# CULMINATING ACTIVITY FOR ALL TITLES

Post-reading discussions can be a powerful tool. The more opportunities students have to analyze and discuss a story with one another, the more meaningful that story becomes and the more text-to-self and text-to-world connections they can make. Students learn to compare and contrast social and emotional strategies used by characters in books with their own approaches to conflict resolution, relationship building, and decision making. This activity is designed to be used with any or all four titles. All the novels in this guide have strong themes surrounding empathy, acceptance, self-discovery, and perseverance, and they don't shy away from topics such as depression, death, disability, and the value of family and friendships. They are ideal mediums for this type of personal and essential learning.

## CONFLICT RESOLUTION: What an attitude!

Conflict feels cruddy! But is it? Everyone has to deal with conflicts throughout their lives. In this activity, students will discuss and examine the positives and negatives of conflict, and how we all resolve conflict differently.

In their lit circles:

- Students should research attitudes toward conflict and ways conflicts can be resolved, and reflect on their own conflict resolution styles.
- Students choose a character from one of the titles and determine how that character attempts to resolve a particular conflict in the story. What works? What doesn't? Why?
- Discuss the statement: Conflict is bad. Do you agree or disagree? Why? How do you resolve conflict? What about conflict resolution is difficult for you? What is easy? Students should share examples of conflicts they've had and how they handled them.

Additional Resources:

- [cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetailsKids.aspx?p=335&np=287&id=1521](http://cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetailsKids.aspx?p=335&np=287&id=1521)
- [sunshine-parenting.com/2015/05/08/5-steps-to-help-kids-resolve-conflicts](http://sunshine-parenting.com/2015/05/08/5-steps-to-help-kids-resolve-conflicts)

## Act it out!

- Using a conflict they chose for their discussion above, each literature circle will act out their chosen conflict for the other circles. The other groups discuss: Is this the most effective way to resolve this conflict? Why did the character act this way? What other ways might you suggest to resolve the issue? Did the characters find a resolution that pleased everyone? If not, how might they have? What would you have done in this situation?
- All the literature circles come together to discuss: What are some conflicts in your school, city or town, country, and in the world? How have they been handled? Which strategies have been used to try to resolve the conflicts? Have they been effective? Why or why not? How might you handle the conflicts differently? What suggestions do you have?

## PAIR IT!

*Just Under the Clouds*, *A Swirl of Ocean*, *The Science of Breakable Things*, and *Solving for M* can be paired in many ways to explore multiple topics.

### The Science of Breakable Things by Tae Keller

When Natalie is faced with her mother's battle with depression and the effect that has on their relationship, she is inspired by the science of hope.

**Pair it!** Relationships between mothers and daughters are never easy, especially when the unexpected hits. *Solving for M* also explores this dynamic. The possibilities to analyze the role of empathy and compassion are endless.

### Just Under the Clouds by Melissa Sarno

The loss of a parent is challenging, especially when you have nowhere to call home. This is just one piece of the puzzle Cora is trying to put back together.

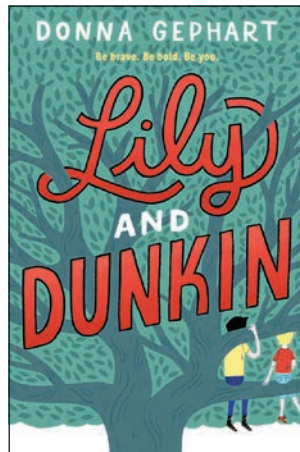
**Pair it!** In *A Swirl of Ocean*, Summer does not know where she came from and is trying to learn about her past as she faces unexpected discoveries and searches for where she truly belongs. These two titles invite deep dives into characterization and discussing the role family and home play in young people's search for identity. The symbolism of nature is also calling out to be explored!



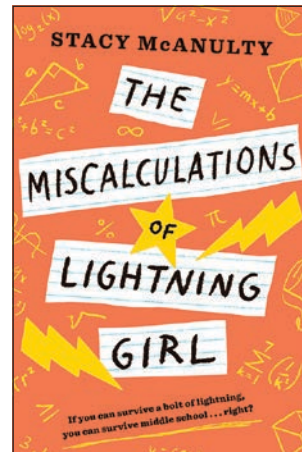
## RELATED TITLES



**Lemons**  
Melissa Savage  
PB: 978-1-5247-0015-7



**Lily and Dunkin**  
Donna Gephart  
PB: 978-0-553-53677-5



**The Miscalculations of Lightning Girl**  
Stacy McAnulty  
PB: 978-1-5247-6760-0



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