

Swallowing Stones

about the book

When 17-year-old Michael fires his rifle into the air and accidentally kills his 15-year-old neighbor Jenna's father, he must find the courage to tell the truth about the accident.



"This novel will appeal to a broad audience, and it is a great vehicle for discussions about guns, violence, and responsibility."

—Starred, VOYA

pre-reading activity

Have the group investigate the gun laws in your city and state. What is the purpose of gun registration? Are there laws regarding the use of guns within the city limits? What are the penalties for breaking gun laws?



questions for group discussion

1. Discuss how the accidental death of Charlie Ward may still be considered manslaughter.
2. Contrast Michael and Joe. Why does Michael maintain his friendship with Joe when everyone else has written him off? Discuss why Michael allows Joe to talk him into burying the rifle. How does Michael feel betrayed by Joe at different points in the novel?
3. Describe Amy Ruggerio's role in the novel. How do people perceive her character? How is she hurt by these perceptions? Why does Joe smash her car? Discuss why Michael is so intrigued by Amy. Talk about Michael's feelings when he learns that Amy had seen him with the rifle. Why has she kept this secret? How does she help Michael face the truth?
4. Both Jenna Ward and Amy Ruggerio harbor guilt for accidents they aren't responsible for. Discuss how this guilt shapes Amy's personality. What does Amy teach Jenna about grief? How does guilt create a bond between Jenna and her mother?
5. Discuss how the death of her father affects the relationship between Jenna and her boyfriend, Jason. Why is she so frightened by him? How does the accidental shooting influence Michael's relationship with his girlfriend, Darcy? Why does he want her to be the one to end the relationship? Jenna wishes that relationships could be worked out like math problems, but knows there are just too many variables. Discuss the variables in the various relationships in the novel.
6. Cite evidence that Mr. MacKenzie might suspect that his son is involved in the shooting accident. Discuss why Mr. MacKenzie needs to believe that Joe is the one who fired the gun. Role-play a scene where Michael confesses the shooting to his father.
7. Why does Michael feel the need to watch Jenna Ward's house? How might his actions be considered a form of stalking? Discuss why Michael goes to the ghost tree. How does his trip to the ghost tree take courage? Discuss the role of the ghost tree in Jenna's healing process.
8. What are the stones that Michael MacKenzie must swallow? Discuss what stones he must swallow in the future. What lessons can teenagers learn from Michael's unfortunate experiences?

Coming Soon!

Joyce McDonald is working on a novel set in the South at the dawn of the Civil Rights struggle.