The Thing About Jellyfish

Curriculum connections
- Grief & Loss
- Friendship
- Marriage & Divorce
- Science & Marine Life

Ages: 8 – 12

by ALI BENJAMIN
BEFORE READING

Vocabulary
1. In Greek mythology, who was Medusa? What was prominent about her? Medusa also has a specialized meaning in terms of jellyfish. What is it?

2. While the word bell has multiple meanings it has one definition specific to jellyfish. What is it? Look at the illustration on page 4 and find the bell. In this story, the homophone belle is also used. What is the definition of that word?

3. What does extinction mean? There have been five recognized mass extinctions in history (Cretaceous-Tertiary; Triassic-Jurassic; Permian-Triassic; Late Devonian; and Ordovician-Silurian). What is the Sixth Extinction?

4. Without looking it up, define science. Keep that definition in mind as you read, considering how the word is defined throughout the novel.

5. What is an enigma?

6. The main character makes up the word jellyologist to describe a person. Using your knowledge of suffixes along with the book’s title, what do you think a jellyologist is?

AFTER READING

Structure
1. The book is divided into seven parts corresponding to the scientific method. Why do you think the author chose this structure?

2. What is the difference between possibility and probability? Was Suzy’s original hypothesis possible or probable? Explain your answer.

3. Suzy writes, “Everyone’s story is different, all the time. No one is ever really together, even if it looks for a while like they are “(p. 18).” Look at the tentacles of a jellyfish, where they overlap and then reach down on their own. Draw a jellyfish with each of the tentacles representing one of the multiple story threads in the novel. Where do they intersect? Where do they diverge?

Character

1. Suzy acknowledges that before The Worst Thing she used to chatter, what Suzy calls constant-talking. Think of examples of Suzy’s constant-talking. Why does she do that?

2. To have a friend you have to be a friend. What are the qualities you think one should have to be a good friend? Look over the flashback descriptions of Suzy and Franny’s relationship over the years. When do you see either girl display those qualities? When do they not? Is one girl a better friend than the other? Explain your answer.

3. Look at the following chart of character traits. Which do you think Suzy would use to describe herself? Which would you use? Which would Franny use? Explain your answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Traits</th>
<th>Suzy</th>
<th>Franny</th>
<th>You</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smart</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worthless</td>
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<td>Understanding</td>
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4. Reread Suzy’s initial introduction of Justin (p. 10). How do you see him from this description? How does Suzy? How does her opinion change?

5. After her jellyfish presentation, Suzy is given two nicknames—Medusa by her classmates and Belle by Justin. Are these names kind or cruel? Do either have a double meaning?

6. In the sixth grade, Franny and her friends move from indifference to teasing to bullying. What options does Suzy have when dealing with them?

7. Why does Suzy do The Worst Thing? Do you think her actions are justified? Why or why not?

8. When Suzy calls Franny’s mother, Mrs. Jackson seems pleased to hear from her. What did you expect Mrs. Jackson’s reaction would be? Why do you think she responded as she did?

9. Franny’s mother tells Suzy that one of the things Franny always admired about her was “that you never cared what anyone else thought.” Is this observation true? Why or why not? Use examples from the story to defend your answer.
**Theme**

1. Former Prime Minister of England Winston Churchill famously said in 1939 that Russia is “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” What do you think that phrase means? Substituting the word “death” for Russia, do you think the resulting sentence is correct? Why or why not?

2. Mrs. Turton says that sometimes we learn more from our failures than our successes. What were Suzy’s failures? What did she learn from them? Have you ever learned from a failure? If so, when?

3. Discuss the definitions of science (such as the ones on p. 19 and 69) that appear in the book. How are these like or different from yours? Would you now change your definition? If so, how? If not, why?

4. Suzy’s mother tells her that some things just happen. But humankind always seeks answers for the unknown. Our ancestors, for example, created stories, which we now know as folktales, to explain natural phenomena they didn’t understand. Can you think of examples of such today? Why do you think we as a species constantly strive for answers?

5. The need for change occurs throughout the story. Franny changes, Suzy does not. At the end of her story, Suzy writes, “We humans may be newcomers to this planet. We may be plenty fragile. But we’re also the only ones who can decide to change.” How and when does Suzy change both physically and emotionally?

6. Change may not always be positive. Give examples of negative change. Are Suzy’s changes positive or negative? Why or why not?

**Science**

1. On page 2, Suzy writes, “Mrs. Turton says that if you lived to be eighty years old, your heart would beat three billion times.” How many times a year does your heart beat? A month? A day? How old are you (years, months and days.) How many times has your heart beat?

2. Suzy is concerned about jellyfish killing humans and recognizes that sometimes their stings go unreported. There are many other animals that kill humans in the United States. Pick five from the following list and, by using reputable sources such as the Center for Disease Control (www.cdc.gov), find out, on average, how many deaths occur each year from five of these. Present your data in an infographic and cite your sources.
   - Bees
   - Cows
   - Dogs
   - Horses
   - Mosquitos
   - Sharks
   - Ticks
   - Venomous Reptiles
ABOUT THE BOOK

A stunning debut about how grief can open the world in magical ways.

After her best friend dies in a drowning accident, Suzy is convinced that the true cause of the tragedy was a rare jellyfish sting. Retreating into a silent world of imagination, she crafts a plan to prove her theory—even if it means traveling the globe, alone. Suzy’s achingly heartfelt journey explores life, death, the astonishing wonder of the universe...and the potential for love and hope right next door.

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Also available in downloadable audio and ebook formats

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

⭐ “An uncommonly fine first novel.” —Booklist

⭐ “A painful story smartly told, Benjamin’s first solo novel has appeal well beyond a middle school audience.” —Kirkus Reviews

⭐ “A shining example of the highs and lows of early adolescence, as well as a testament to the grandeur of the natural world.” —Publishers Weekly

⭐ “Authentic and poignant.” —School Library Journal

about the author

Ali Benjamin is the co-writer for HIV-positive teen Paige Rawl’s coming-of-age memoir, Positive, as well as Tim Howard’s New York Times bestseller The Keeper. She is a member of New England Science Writers and has written for The Boston Globe Magazine, Martha Stewart’s Whole Living, and Sesame Street.

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