

you  
against  
me

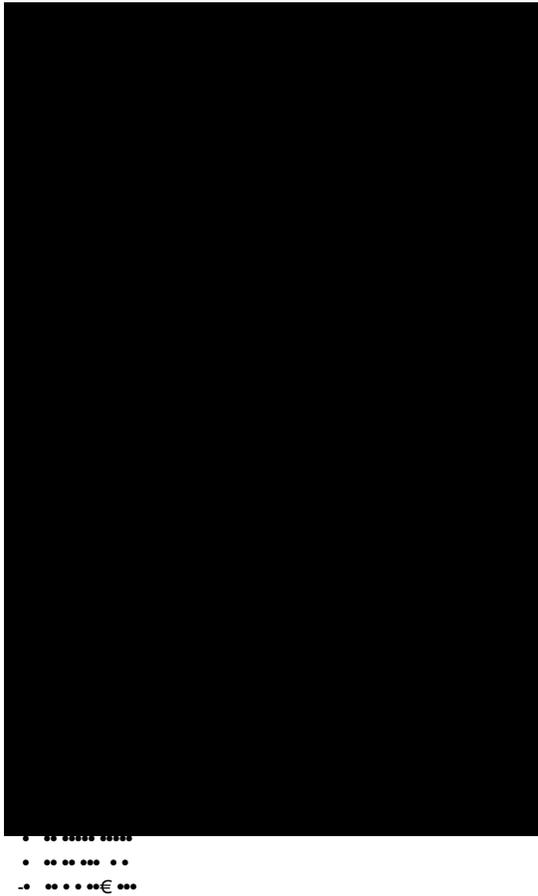
Readers  
Guide

jenny downham



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## about the book

Seventeen-year-old Tessa was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia when she was 12. That was the same year that her mother left home. Now, Tessa is in the final stages of her illness, and there are a list of things that she wants to do before she dies. This list confuses her father, who has quit his job to take care of her, but he ultimately understands that the list helps her focus on life rather than death. Zoey, Tessa's best friend, is by her side as she moves down the list. There are many symbolic relationships and events that help Tessa face her untimely death. Among them are Adam, a neighbor who is dealing with his own loss, but gives Tessa the romance that she is seeking; her mother's brief reappearance in her life; and, a return to a favorite family vacation spot.

## before reading the book

Discuss the five stages of grief: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Write a letter from the point of view of a dying person that expresses one of these stages of grief.

## discussion questions

- Describe Tessa's relationship with her father. How has this relationship been shaped by Tessa's illness? Debate whether Cal, Tessa's younger brother, feels neglected by his father. Discuss Tessa's relationship with her mother. Why did she leave home? When does Tessa miss her mother the most?
- Discuss the true qualities of a friend. Which of these qualities best describes Tessa and Zoey's friendship? What does Zoey offer Tessa that her father cannot give? Why does Tessa's father call Zoey when Tessa won't get out of bed? Cal hates Zoey. How does Tessa explain her friendship with Zoey to her little brother?
- Tessa's father is frustrated when she becomes withdrawn. He says, "If you won't talk about it, how can I help?" (p. 2) How does this withdrawal represent the first stage of grief? Why is talking about feelings always better than keeping them to yourself?
- Discuss why Tessa doesn't want to return to school. She says that Zoey is the only person at school that isn't afraid of her illness. Explain how difficult it is for teenagers to deal with the terminal illness of a classmate. What might Zoey say to other students that would help them know how to interact with Tessa?
- Tessa writes her private thoughts on the wall beside her bed. Why does she let Zoey read what she has written?
- Zoey tells Tessa that it's all right to be afraid. How does Tessa reveal her fear? How does she use her hat to hide her fear? Discuss how Cal, Adam, and Tessa's father express their fear.
- How is Tessa's list a form of bargaining and acceptance? At what point in the novel does Tessa accept the fact that she is dying? Explain how her list helps her "get on with living." Which item on her list is the most dangerous? Why does doing illegal things like shoplifting and driving without a license give Tessa a thrill?
- Tessa's father wants to know the things on her list. He says, "I need to know about it, not because I want to stop you, but because I want to keep you safe." (p. 80) Discuss how Tessa reacts to her father when he asks to see the list.
- Discuss the conversation between Tessa and her father after she is caught shoplifting. Why does he think anger is taking her over?
- How is Tessa's list confusing to her father? Explain how Tessa's list is self-centered. Her mum tells her, "You have to think about the people who love you." (p. 170) At what point does Tessa begin to think about Cal and her father? Explain why Tessa's mother speaks in past tense when she says, "We loved you." Why is it unrealistic for Tessa to think that she can rekindle her parents' relationship?

## discussion questions CONTINUED

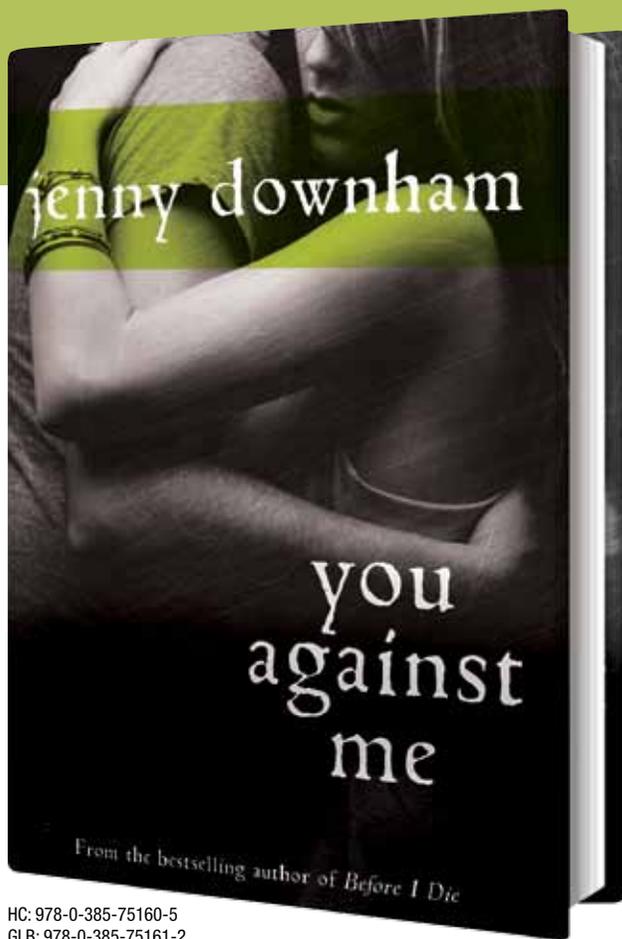
- Why do you think sex is number one on Tessa's list of things she wants to do before she dies? Tessa worries about being a "slag" if she has sex with someone that she doesn't know. Explain Zoey's reaction to Tessa's thoughts.
- Tessa says that walking up the stairs behind a boy she doesn't know reminds her of hospital corridors. What do the stairs and the corridors symbolize?
- Discuss the moments in the novel when Tessa is most depressed. Who helps her deal with her depression?
- Why does Zoey suspect that Tessa is in love with Adam? What does Zoey mean when she says, "I thought you understood the rules! Never let a bloke into your heart—it's fatal"? (p. 88) Why is Adam different than Zoey? Discuss what Adam means when he says, "I can't give you what you want." (p. 117) What does he ultimately give her? What does she offer him?
- Tessa asks the home health care nurse if she believes in God. What is the significance of this question? Tessa tells the nurse that she doesn't believe in heaven. Discuss the nurse's reaction to Tessa's confession. Why does the nurse think a support group might be helpful to Tessa? How does Tessa's list take the place of a support group?
- How does Tessa's dad react when he finds out Zoey wants to terminate her pregnancy? Discuss how his opinion is related to Tessa's terminal illness.
- Sorrow, loneliness, anxiety, and guilt are emotions associated with grief. How does each of the characters in the novel deal with these emotions?

## praise for *BEFORE I DIE*

★ "The eloquent dying teen can seem a staple of the YA novel, but this British debut completely breaks the mold. Downham holds nothing back in her wrenching and exceptionally vibrant story."

—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred

"This may sound too depressing for words, but it is only one indication of the inspired originality of *Before I Die*, by Jenny Downham, that the reader can finish its last pages feeling thrillingly alive. . . . I don't care how old you are. This book will not leave you."—*The New York Times Book Review*



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GLB: 978-0-385-75161-2  
EL: 978-0-375-98938-4

## BEFORE READING THE BOOK

There is help for rape victims in all communities. Find out about the rape crisis center in your city or community. What types of services do they offer? Is there a rape crisis hotline? Is there a support group? Are there services specifically for teenagers?

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*If someone hurts your sister and you're any kind of man, you seek revenge. If your brother's accused of a terrible crime but says he didn't do it, you defend him.*

When Mikey's sister claims a boy assaulted her, his world begins to fall apart. When Ellie's brother is charged with the offense, her world begins to unravel. When Mikey and Ellie meet, two worlds collide.

This is a brave and unflinching novel from the bestselling author of *Before I Die*. It's a book about loyalty and the choices that come with it. But above all, it's a book about love.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Mikey McKenzie is already the “man” of his family. How is he forced to take total responsibility for his family after Karyn is assaulted? He says that taking care of Karyn makes him feel “adult, male, and purposeful.” (p. 20) How does his mother’s inability to accept responsibility for her family contribute to Mikey’s sense of duty?
- Discuss the difference between a primary and secondary survivor of sexual assault. Karyn is the primary survivor. How might her family be considered secondary survivors? Mikey is angry with Tom Parker and is determined to retaliate by fighting him. How is this a typical response from a secondary survivor? Debate what action Mikey should have taken. It is common for a secondary survivor to feel guilt, shame, frustration, and helplessness. How do each of these emotions describe Karyn’s mother?
- Debate whether Ellie Parker is a secondary survivor. At what point does she feel frustrated and helpless? Discuss whether it’s guilt and shame that ultimately causes her to tell the truth.
- Karyn’s mum deals with her daughter’s rape by hiding away. How do the Parkers deal with the rape? Why do they plan a party for their son when he gets bail? Debate whether this type of celebration is a form of hiding. Why does the party make Tom nervous?
- The McKenzie family is overtly dysfunctional, and requires the aide of social services. How is the Parker family covertly dysfunctional? Which family faces the toughest road toward becoming a functioning family unit? Discuss their greatest obstacles.
- Karyn’s mum takes her to the police because she thinks they will help her. A policewoman is assigned to Karyn’s case. Why does Karyn refuse to talk with her? Discuss why Mrs. McKenzie is sorry she ever got the cops involved.
- Ellie Parker is a primary witness for her brother. She feels a mixture of “pity and fear” in this role. For whom does she feel pity? Discuss who and what she fears the most. How does watching her family preceding the trial escalate her feelings?
- Karyn won’t go to school because she fears that people will stare at her as if she deserved to be assaulted by Tom Parker. Explain why Karyn feels that her peers will think she “deserved” the assault. Her friends are supportive, but she blocks them completely out. Why does she refuse to see them?
- Ellie Parker is a new kid at school, and finds it difficult to make friends. How does being the sister of an alleged rapist make Ellie even more an outsider? Discuss how Karyn’s friends treat her. Compare and contrast Ellie’s relationship with Tom to Karyn’s relationship with Mikey. How do Ellie and Tom restore their relationship at the end of the novel, in spite of their father?
- Mikey says to Ellie, “What I did to you was out of order. What you did to me I probably deserved. So we’re even, ok?” (p. 227) Why was it legally dangerous for Mikey and Ellie to take matters into their own hands? How do they both grow and change because their plans went awry?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS *continued*

- Explain what Mikey's mother means when she tells him, "If you want a girl to like you, you have to listen like a woman and love like a man." (p. 166) How does Mikey treat Ellie with respect and tenderness once they realize that they care for one another?
- Both Karyn and Ellie are afraid of going to court. What does Karyn fear most about testifying before a judge? Discuss Ellie's fears. Debate whether they have conquered their fears by the end of the novel.
- Ellie admits that she lied to the police. She tells Mikey, "You might think that I'm brave, but really I'm a coward." (p. 296) Why does Ellie think that she is a coward? How does it take bravery to tell the truth? Discuss how Ellie is the bravest member of her family.
- Ellie's mother and father react very differently to her confession. What causes the change in Mrs. Parker? Debate whether she is strong enough to support her daughter through the ordeal of the trial.
- Ellie still has to testify against her brother. Discuss the wrath that she is likely to experience from her father. Why is Mr. Parker so willing to sacrifice his daughter's reputation to save his son? Explain Mr. Parker's reaction when Tom says, "I can't do it to her Dad. . . . You said yourself that they will break her apart." (p. 399)
- Mikey tells Ellie that Karyn gets help through social services. How does Mikey provide Ellie the help she needs? Why does he think it a good idea that Ellie talk to Karyn?
- At the end of the novel, Mikey says, "Maybe we can grab something good out of this while we can." (p. 409) What good has come out of this entire situation? Talk about the lessons that Karyn and her peers, and Tom and his mates, have learned. Discuss whether the novel is Ellie and Mikey's story or Karyn and Tom's story.
- As in the novel, many sexual assault cases are one person's word against another. What is the overall message that a reader should take away from *You Against Me*?



Photograph © Rob Merritt

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenny Downham trained as an actor and worked in alternative theater before starting to write. Her first novel, *Before I Die*, became a bestseller. She lives in London.