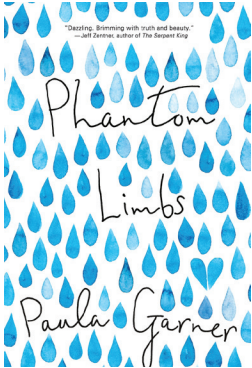




Walker Books Classroom Ideas



Phantom Limbs

By Paula Garner
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*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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Outline:

Otis and Meg were inseparable until her family abruptly moved away after the terrible accident that left Otis's little brother dead and both of their families changed forever. Since then, it's been three years of radio silence, during which time Otis has become the unlikely protégé of eighteen-year-old Dara—part drill sergeant, part friend—who's hell-bent on transforming Otis into the Olympic swimmer she can no longer be. But when Otis learns that Meg is coming back to town, he must face some difficult truths about the girl he's never forgotten and the brother he's never stopped grieving. As it becomes achingly clear that he and Meg are not the same people they were, Otis must decide what to hold on to and what to leave behind. Quietly affecting, this compulsively readable debut novel captures all the confusion, heartbreak, and fragile hope of three teens struggling to accept profound absences in their lives.

Author/Illustrator Information:

Paula Garner lives in Chicago with her family and their psychotic cat. Phantom Limbs is her first novel.

How to Use These Notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

These notes are for:

- Secondary years 8-10
- Ages 14+

Key Learning Areas:

- English

Example of:

- Novel

Themes/Ideas:

- Grief
- Pressure
- Family
- Sport

Discussion Questions and Activities:

1. When Otis and Meg see each other again, there is three years' worth of unspoken emotion between them. How is that period of time evident in the way they act around each other?
2. It's hard to go on after someone important to you is gone. Have you ever felt, as Otis does, that a new person in your life will never really know you since they never met your lost loved one? If you haven't experienced this, can you understand why Otis feels this way?
3. Otis has many chances to learn what really happened on the day Mason died, but he puts it off as long as possible. What do you think about his wish to not be able to picture his brother's death? Do you think knowing exactly what happened is important? Why or why not?



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Discussion Questions and Activities (cont):

4. While Otis would rather not think about the day Mason died, Meg needs for him to know the truth so that he can understand how she feels. What does this tell you about the relationship between moving forward and looking back?
5. All of the characters feel some degree of guilt over the loss of loved ones, whether it's for feeling in some way responsible, like Meg and Dara, or just for still being alive when a loved one isn't, like Otis. Why is guilt such a common part of grief?
6. If someone you love didn't talk to you for three years, would you be as forgiving as Otis?
7. Dara and Otis are nothing alike but become very close friends. Why do you think their friendship works?
8. Why is it so hard for Dara to admit to herself the way she feels about Abby?
9. After her accident, Dara's not ready to give up her Olympic dreams, so she transfers them onto Otis. Why do you think she does that?
10. Meg thinks Otis and Dara's dynamic is strange and unhealthy, and she's not alone. But how is the friendship — as odd as it may look from the outside — helping both Otis and Dara heal?
11. Meg's PTSD affects her primarily through sensory triggers, like the sight and smell of chocolate or the sound of kids screaming. Did you notice any other triggers that were a bit more subtle?
12. What did you think of the scenes between Otis's mom and Meg? What do you think their relationship will be like in the future?
13. Over the course of the novel we witness many different kinds of mourning — in Otis and his parents, in Meg, and in Dara. What does this tell you about grief? Is there any one correct way to mourn? Are there any wrong ways?
14. Otis's dad copes with his grief in different ways than Otis's mom does. How does grieving affect the “unspoken agreements” (page 112) that make their relationship work?
15. Otis remembers his mother watching Mason's face instead of the fireworks. Why is that scene so crucial to Otis's understanding of his mother? How did that memory affect your reading of Otis's mom?
16. How does the book contrast the childlike, innocent love that Otis and Meg have when they're thirteen with the messy, unpredictable connection they feel as older teens?
17. What Otis and Meg want above all is to reconnect and find a new way forward. If someone you once knew well disappeared from your life and then re-entered as an almost stranger, how do you think you would react? What might be the hardest part of reconnecting?
18. What kind of future do you see for Dara's relationship with her father?
19. One thing Meg and Dara can agree on is their admiration for Otis. They joke about him being a “dark horse” (page 119). Do you agree? Were there any points in the story when Otis's actions surprised and impressed you?
20. Think about the representations of loss in this book. What are some examples that show how grief can affect a person physically?
21. The title of the novel is a reference to Dara's missing arm. How are her phantom limb pains symbolic of the loss felt by Otis, his family, Meg, and Dara herself?