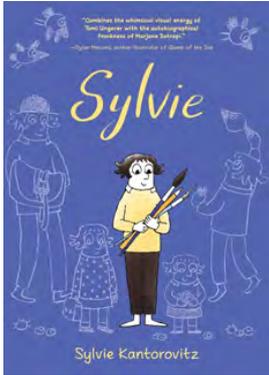




Walker Books Classroom Ideas



Sylvie
Sylvie Kantorovitz
ISBN: 9781536207637
March 2021

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

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Outline:

Sylvie lives in a school in France. Her father is the principal, and her home is an apartment at the end of a hallway of classrooms. As a young child, Sylvie and her brother explore this most unusual kingdom, full of small mysteries and quirky surprises. But in middle and high school, life grows more complicated. Sylvie becomes aware of her parents' conflicts, the complexities of shifting friendships, and what it means to be the only Jewish family in town. She also begins to sense that her perceived "success" relies on the pursuit of math and science—even though she loves art. In a funny and perceptive graphic memoir, author-illustrator Sylvie Kantorovitz traces her first steps as an artist and teacher. The text captures her poignant questioning and her blossoming confidence, while the droll illustrations depict her making art as both a means of solace and self-expression. An affecting portrait of a unique childhood, *Sylvie* connects the ordinary moments of growing up to a life rich in hope and purpose.

Author/Illustrator Information:

Sylvie Kantorovitz was born in Casablanca and grew up in France. She is the author-illustrator of many picture books. This is her first graphic novel. She lives in New York's Hudson Valley with her partner, author-illustrator Barbara Lehman.

These notes are for:

- Primary 4-6
- Ages 9+

Key Learning Areas:

- English

Example of:

- Graphic Novel
- Memoir

Themes/Ideas:

- Family
- Growing Up
- Art
- Friendship



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Discussion Questions and Activities:

Before Reading

Before reading *Sylvie*, view the cover and title and identify the following:

- The title of the book
- The author/illustrator
- The publisher
- The blurb

Based on the cover, what do you think this story is about? How do you think it will begin/end? Once you've finished reading the book, revisit your answer to this question. Were your predictions correct?

Exploring the Text

Even though *Sylvie* is a memoir, do you think the story still has an orientation, complication and resolution? If so, what are they? As a class, discuss how these narrative features give meaning to stories, in both fiction and non-fiction.

The story is told as an older Sylvie reflects on her childhood and adolescence. How does this framing affect you as a reader? How might the story be different if it were told in present tense?

Sylvie grows up living in a school. In what ways was Sylvie's childhood different to yours? Were there any ways in which it was similar?

Choose one of Sylvie's closest family members – her mother, father or Alibert – and write a paragraph about their relationship with Sylvie and how it affects her life. Do they get along? What interests or traits do they have in common, and how do they disagree? Remember to include both the positive and negative aspects of their relationship with Sylvie.

In small groups, discuss how Sylvie demonstrates the following character traits:

- Courage
- Resilience
- Compassion
- Resourcefulness

How does Sylvie grow and change as a character? How is grown-up Sylvie different to when we first met her as a child? How is she similar? How does Sylvie find self-belief and self-confidence through the events of the book?

As a child, Sylvie feels different because she wasn't born in France and because her family are Jewish. Have a class discussion about inclusivity, and why it's important to make sure everyone feels like they belong no matter where they're from or what they believe.

Throughout the book, Sylvie's mother has a lot of expectations of her that Sylvie finds it hard to live up to, including how she should behave and what she should study. How does this affect Sylvie? Have you ever felt pressured to be or act like someone you're not, and how did it make you feel? As a class, discuss how to ask for help if you're struggling with external expectations and pressures.

How does Sylvie explore imagination and creativity? How does art provide a comfort and an escape for her? Are there any hobbies that bring you the same kind of joy that drawing does for Sylvie?

For a long time, Sylvie isn't sure what she wants to study or what career she might like to pursue. Ask students to think about what job they might like to do one day. Is the same answer they would've given a year ago? How about five years ago? What about five years from now? Discuss as a class why it's okay to not be sure what you want to do when you grow up. As *Sylvie* shows, sometimes it takes some time – and you can always change your mind.

In her author note, Sylvie Kantorovitz says "Finding out who we are, and not who others think they are or want us to be, is the most important search in life." Do you agree with this quote? Why or why not? How does it relate to her life we see in the book?

Choose an event from your own childhood and write and illustrate it in the style of *Sylvie*, but remember that memories aren't always reliable. Thinking about the childhood event, how closely can you remember what people said or how you felt at the time? Other than memory, what are some other potential challenges that might arise when trying to write your memoir?



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Discussion Questions and Activities:

Exploring the Illustrations

Take a section of the book and recreate it as unillustrated prose. Think about how to convey the mood, imagery, action and dialogue in words, rather than in graphic novel style. After completing this exercise, have a class discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of each style. Which do you prefer writing?

Visit your school or public library and collect several other graphic novels. Compare them with *Sylvie*. How is it similar or different to other graphic novels?

In most graphic novels (and comics), there is usually a white space between the panels called the gutter. Consider the difference between large and small panels, square and irregular shapes and full-page illustrations. Copy a page of the book, cut out the frames and arrange them on a piece of paper with a smaller gutter between each frame and then with a larger gutter. What difference does this make to our reading?

The graphic novel format allows creators to employ filmic techniques in the narrative. Find examples of filmic techniques in the book and discuss how Sylvie Kantorovitz has used them to enhance the narrative.

How does the art style of the book change as Sylvie grows? You could consider the colours, detail, chapter art and sections of Sylvie's own drawings throughout the book.

Choose several spreads from the books and perform a visual analysis by responding to the following points:

- Objects – What objects and people can you see?
- Size – What size are the objects in relation to each other?
- Setting – Is a setting obvious? What is it?
- Colours – What are the predominant colours used?
- Position – Where are objects in relation to each other? Are they in the fore-, middle- or background?
- 'Camera' angle – From what angle do the pictures appear to be drawn? For example: high eye level, low, bird's eye view.
- 'Shot' type – What type of 'shot' has been used: close-up, medium, long, very long, etc.?
- Depth of Field – What is and isn't in focus?
- Light – Is the picture light or dark? Is it the same all over?
- Lines and vectors – In what direction do lines in the picture lead the eye?
- Body language and clothing – What facial expressions, gestures and use of space can you see? What is being worn?