

Teacher Guide for Lara M. Zeises's *Contents Under Pressure*

Revised by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer

About the book:

Lucy Doyle is about to explode. She's sure her name might as well be Loser because she's never, ever been kissed. To make matters worse, nearly all of her friends have left her behind for boys. Even Lucy's favorite brother doesn't seem to have time for her anymore. He's just moved home from college with a distant new attitude and a big-haired girlfriend Lucy can't stand. Freshman year is definitely *not* off to a good start.

So when Lucy attracts the attention of Tobin Scacheri, the junior everyone wants to date, she can barely believe her luck. Tobin's cute and funny, and he might like Lucy as much as she likes him. But Lucy's brother has a secret that will turn her already mixed-up world completely upside down. Now, Lucy must figure out how far she's willing to take her relationship with Tobin—and how to deal with a brother who's not as perfect as she thought.

About this guide:

This guide includes discussion questions and projects intended to extend the use of the novel into classrooms, book clubs, and literature circles. It should promote discussion on the themes of the novel including family, friendship, teen relationships, secrets and fitting in.

Author interview:

1. *Friendship plays a key roll in all of your novels. Do you do this intentionally?*

Nothing I write is intentional – I pretty much always start with a character and then play the “what if” game. I like the process to be organic; I’m almost always surprised to discover what comes next and I prefer it that way. But also I find it hard to imagine any teenager whose friends don’t have a profound effect on his or her life.

2. *Can you share a bit about your writing process for Contents Under Pressure?*

I was getting ready to go to grad school, to pursue my MFA in creative writing. I knew I was going to be taking an adolescent novel writing course, but I knew nothing about the genre. So, I did a little research and read an article that said the market was in need of books about normal teenagers dealing with normal teenage things. I tried to think about what affected me at fourteen, and I remembered there being a huge dividing line between girls who had boyfriends and those who didn’t. Also I remember that as the age that I realized the people I looked up to most weren’t perfect. To me, that’s one of the hardest parts about

growing up – watching the people you’ve put on pedestals fall off them one by one.

3. *How did your life change when you transitioned from middle school to high school?*

I went through a very sullen-girl phase – it started the summer before tenth grade. I dyed my hair black, avoided the sun to cultivate a paste-white complexion, and spent a lot of time feeling angry, lonely, and misunderstood. It was very Winona Ryder.

4. *Which of these characters – Lucy, Jack, Hannah, Allison, Tabitha, or Tobin – would you like to have crash on your couch for a semester? Why?*

I’d have to say either Hannah or Tobin. Hannah because she seems like a great big sister, and I’m an only child. Tobin because he’s ... you know. *Tobin*. I think I fall a little bit in love with all of my guy characters, Jack included, but I’ve grown past the phase of wanting to “fix” wounded boys.

5. *What’s the best part about being a writer? What’s the worst?*

There are so many things I love about being a writer – getting paid to do what I love; getting letters and e-mails from readers who’ve been affected by my words; visiting high schools and libraries and talking with teens about what it means to be a young adult in this day and age. The worst parts are boring: no health insurance, sporadic income, and using a room in my home as an office – the work day never really ends.

Pre-Reading Discussion:

What preconceptions did you have before coming to high school? What were your fears, hopes, etc? How, exactly, was it different from what you expected? What were the biggest changes that you encountered? Did your friendships from middle school survive the transitions? Why or why not?

Comprehension Check:

1. Using three adjectives, describe Lucy and Allison’s friendship.
2. Describe Lucy’s high school experience. How is it similar to your own? How is it different?
3. Describe Lucy’s encounter(s) with Tobin.
4. Explain why Lucy doesn’t go to her homecoming dance.
5. Compare and contrast Lucy’s relationships with Ally, Tabitha, and the Kims before and after high school.
6. Explain Lucy’s extreme makeover. Why does she do it?
7. How does Lucy’s relationship with Jack change over the course of the novel?
8. What changes have happened over the course of this year for Lucy?

9. What happens to Hannah? How does this change Lucy's relationships as well?
10. Predict what the future will bring for each of these characters, and defend your choices from their previous actions in the story.

Discussion Guide:

1. Discuss Lucy's relationship with her brother Jack. How does it change over the course of the novel? Do you think this close of a sibling relationship is a good thing or can it interfere with other friendships? How does birth order effect sibling relationships? How does Jack get knocked down off of the pedestal that Lucy put him on?
2. "When you have a semi-permanent social circle, it pretty much becomes your identity. Like you're one-fifth of a whole, and not five individual people who simply hang out together." (p.4) Do you agree with Lucy's assessment of this social rule? How can having a group of friends actually limit your social calendar? How else can people miss out on knowing the real you?
3. How did Lucy's friendship change over her freshman year? Why do some friendships fail while others get stronger when faced with change? Can you insure a friendship will survive? How?
4. Lucy's friends reserve cocoa conversations for those really important moments when they have to discuss something critical. These rituals help them deal with whatever stress they are having. Describe their whole ritual. What rituals do you have with your own friends? And family?
5. Lucy is conflicted because she would like to catch up to her friend's interest in boys yet she sees the consequences of those actions with Hannah and Jack. How does this resolve itself by the end of the book? How can Lucy be more comfortable with the pace of her own life? Is this peer pressure or self-induced pressure? How can it be relieved?
6. Describe Lucy's family. Would you consider them a close family? Why or why not? Do you think family game night is a good idea? Does Lucy? How can families stay close? Do you consider your own family close? Compare Lucy's relationship with Brody to Jack.
7. Lucy's mother says, "There's a big difference between being in love and building a life together. You can be ready for one without being ready for the other." (p.182) What does she mean by this? Whose life will be more changed – Jack or Hannah? Should it be this way?
8. Re-read pages 195-200. Hannah gives Lucy some good advice about sex and the emotional turmoil that inevitably coincides with it. In your opinion, what is the best piece of advice Hannah tells Lucy? If you had a younger sister ask you similar questions, would you have any alternate advice? What's the best advice you ever got about sex?
9. Allison confronts Lucy saying, "...we always said we'd never be the kind of girls who ditched their friends for some guy." (p.202) Do you think this is a

reasonable expectation for girls to have of each other? Do you think guys would ever make the same kind of pact? Why or why not?

10. Discuss the consequences and changes that everyone will face at the close of the novel. Are they the same decisions you would make? Why or why not? Who is sacrificing the most in your opinion? Who should?

Projects Across the Curriculum

Language Arts/Vocabulary:

Have students create a chart with the following words and fill out a chart with the following columns: 1) the sentence in which it appears, 2) I've never seen this word before, 3) I recognize this word, 4) I know this word, 5) I think I know what this word means by the way it is used.

tentative (p. 2)
futile (p. 9)
dormant (p. 14)
pillaging (p. 17)
daintily (p. 53)
plausible (p. 61)
skulk (p. 72)
equidistant (p. 77)
gape (p. 82)
albeit (p. 86)
braying (p. 88)
imminent (p. 94)
deftly (p. 104)
intricacies (p. 113)
inherently (p. 114)
catatonic (p. 122)
contorting (p. 132)
infiltrate (p. 157)
monstrosity (p. 165)
bellows (p. 168)
hypocrisy (p. 202)
traipsing (p. 218)
quizzical (p. 222)
gleaned (p. 234)
retorts (p. 240)

or

Consider the following passage:

“And this is how both of us avoid dealing with the Big Things hanging over our space, like heavy clouds about to burst into rain” (p. 167).

Write down the “Big Things” that you have experienced in your life. Then, like this example from Chapter 21, think of your own simile that relates to it. Try to write three similes for three different “Big Things.” Ex. college, relationships, marriage

Math:

In *Contents Under Pressure*, Hannah becomes pregnant even though she and Jack used protection. Research the effectiveness of condoms, the birth control pill, and other forms of contraception. Make a pie graph to show which are the most effective.

Art:

On the cover of the book, there are four pictures of Lucy, each with different colors and shades. Which picture do you think best represents the real Lucy? Draw your own picture of her with different colors.

Drama:

Predict what changes will happen in the following year of Lucy’s life. Then, in small groups, write a scene using your prediction and act it out.

Music:

In Chapter 16, Lucy listens to her Miles Davis CD, *Kind of Blue*, after having a bad day at school. She says to herself, “It feels like the soundtrack of my life” (p. 109). If you could pick a CD that relates to your life, what would it be? Why? Choose three specific songs from the CD, and explain how you identify with the lyrics and/or the music.

Health:

In small groups, have students look through magazines and find articles or advertisements that promote sex. What kind of magazines/newspapers did they find the most articles or advertisements? Are they targeted towards teenagers? Young adults? Parents? Then have students discuss issues of teenage pregnancy, and how having a baby affects your lives.

Journal:

Lucy goes through a lot of changes during her first year of high school. On page 158, she says, “*Everything has changed.*” Think back on a time in your life when something suddenly happened that changed your life completely. Write a journal entry about this time, and how you’ve grown as a result of that experience.

This teacher’s guide was revised by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, a reading specialist and author of *Sketches from a Spy Tree*. Visit her site, www.tracievaughnzimmer.com, to find other guides to great YA literature.

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