

A Discussion Guide to
TENDING TO GRACE

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Story Summary

When Cornelia is dropped off at Aunt Agatha's house by her mom and the boyfriend, she wonders how she'll be able to fix things. Aunt Agatha sure doesn't want to be fixed. She's messy and bossy and grows her own food. All Cornelia can do is wait for Lenore to come back. But in the meantime, Cornelia has a hard time finding her voice, and Aunt Agatha is no help at all. She forces Cornelia to speak for herself, not an easy task for a girl who stutters and can barely say her own name. Cornelia must learn to make a life with her aunt and find a way to be heard.

Tending to Grace is a beautifully written story that lends itself to teaching writing and the use of language. When using this book in the classroom, discuss similes and how they compare two things with like or as. Talk about how they help to “show” and not “tell” a scene and how they help to paint a picture in the reader’s mind.

Vocabulary

bibliophile	metaphor	supple
shudder	translucent	tremble

Discussion Starters: Chapters 1 – 12

Chapter 1:

1. How does the clothesline describe Cornelia’s life?
2. Why do you think the author chose to use a clothesline?

Chapter 2:

1. What does the author mean by watered-down books?
2. What is the simile that is describing the sentences in these books?

Chapter 3:

1. Why do you think Cornelia doesn’t want to read aloud?
2. What is the simile that describes Betsy’s voice?

Chapter 4:

1. How is Cornelia like the gardenia bulbs her mother planted one summer?

Chapter 5:

1. Can you remember a time when you felt embarrassed like Cornelia does in this chapter?
2. Did you react the same way or differently?

Chapter 6:

1. Why do you think Cornelia isn't an honor student when she can read honors books?
2. What books have you read that you'll always remember?

Chapter 7:

1. Do you think her mom and boyfriend will go to Vegas?
2. Do you think they'll take Corns with them?

Chapter 8:

1. How would you describe the boyfriend?
2. How would you describe her mother?

Chapter 11:

1. What does it mean to turn to stone?
2. Why is Cornelia turning to stone?

Chapter 12:

1. Find and describe the similes in this chapter.
2. How do they help paint a picture of these characters?

Questions for classroom use:

1. What is the role of friendship, both positive and negative, in *Tending to Grace*, and how does it play out?
2. The American Library Association awarded *Tending to Grace* the Schneider Family Book Award because it "artistically portrayed the disability experience." What is the major disability portrayed in the novel, and how is it dealt with? You might want to think about courage and perseverance, and transformation.
4. How is Cornelia "caught in that lonely place between what I want to say and what I can't"?
5. Why does Cornelia miss and resent her mother? Is her mother believable? Why or why not? Why does her mother not make everything "all better" for Cornelia at the end?
6. Why won't Agatha speak for Cornelia?
7. Why does Cornelia think that cleaning will fix her life?
8. What role does the tee pee play in the novel? Why does Cornelia need to be alone when things are really bad?
9. How does Bo's nonjudgmental friendship help Cornelia to grow?
10. What are the things that Agatha is hiding and why are they important to the novel?
11. Why are books and reading and literacy important to both Cornelia and Agatha? Show examples.
12. What is the importance of the cocoon and butterfly images in the novel?