

Educator Discussion Guide

Dumplin'

By Julie Murphy

Louisiana Teen Readers' Choice Nominee 2018

Grade 9-12

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Clover City, Texas, teen Willowdean Dickson (her mom still calls her “Dumplin’”) is confident and comfortable in her plus-sized body. She and her (thin) best friend Ellen keep secrets, give advice, and share an obsessive love of Dolly Parton. Life starts changing when Willowdean meets Private School Bo, a handsome athlete, at her fast food job and is attracted to him. The attraction is mutual, but Willowdean begins to have doubts about herself. In the midst of her confusion, self-doubt, and multiple male suitors, *Dumplin'* is also surrounded by the chaos of her mother organizing the annual Miss Teen Blue Bonnet Pageant. Although Willow has never been interested in the pageant, she and a few other unlikely recruits enter it to boost their self-confidence and to remind Clover City that they are comfortable in their bodies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Murphy, a former librarian, lives in North Texas with her husband, their Pomeranian pup, and two cats. When she is not writing or out searching for stray cats to add to her family, Julie enjoys reading, traveling, or watching movies. *Dumplin'* is her second novel; it has received two stars from Publishers Weekly and Booklist. Disney has optioned film rights for the story.

Biographical information taken from the author's website at

www.juliemurphywrites.com/bio

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PREREADING ACTIVITIES

Role Models

Ask students whom they admire, respect, or find “invincible.” Have them explain what they respect about these people and what makes these people good role models.

State Parks and Landmarks

Discuss fun places to visit in Louisiana. Have students research landmarks, monuments, and state parks in small groups and share their findings with the class.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The cover of the book features the adage, “Go big or go home.” How does this phrase apply to the story? In what ways does Willowdean (or another character) “Go big?” Does she ever “Go home?”
2. Although Aunt Lucy is dead, how is she part of this story? Explain the author’s reason for including Lucy in the story.
3. Compare and contrast Willow’s relationship with her mother to her relationship with Lucy.
4. “We’ve always been opposites. Lucy always said that the greatest friends have nothing and everything in common all at once” (Murphy, 79). Is it believable that Willow and Ellen are such close friends? What do the girls have in common? What makes them different?
5. *Dumplin’* is set in a small Texas town. In what ways would a different setting change this story?
6. Imagine yourself in this story. Where do you fit in the cast of characters? How would the story change if you were part of it?
7. Why is Bo initially attracted to Willowdean? Why is she initially attracted to him?
8. Explain Willow’s reaction when she learns Bo will attend her school instead of his private school. Is Willow justified in reacting this way? How would you have reacted? Should Bo have told her his news sooner?
9. Why doesn’t Willow tell Ellen about the time she spends with Bo after work during the summer?
10. Willowdean reflects, “If I could change only one thing about my mom, it would be the pageant. In fact, I’m sure that my whole life would fall together like a set of dominoes if I could delete that one annual event from my existence” (Murphy, 31). How would Willowdean’s life be different if her mom were not involved in Clover City’s Miss Teen Blue Bonnet Pageant?
11. Why does Willowdean enter the pageant? Explain whether she takes the pageant preparations seriously or not.
12. The pageant judges ask Willowdean to define “loyalty” during her interview, and she gives them her answer. Did she do a good job? What would you add to her answer? How would you define loyalty?
13. Are there any parts of the story that you find out of place or not quite believable? How different would the story be without these scenes or details? Why does the author include these details?

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Language Arts:

- Willowdean is sad when she realizes she cannot turn to Ellen for advice or to vent frustrations like she used to do. If Willow posted her troubles on an advice forum, what kinds of answers would she receive? Have students write forum posts between Willowdean and anonymous “posters.” Students can consult the following website for tips, suggestions, and possible advice: <https://www.girlshealth.gov>
- Willowdean frequently communicates with her mother and her friends through text messages. Compose a series of text messages between Willowdean and at least one other character in the story. In these messages Willow should have an honest conversation about a real conflict in the story and discuss possible solutions.
- *Dumplin’* is told entirely from Willowdean’s point of view. Ask students to consider how other characters perceive or react to plot events, and then assign specific scenes or chapters for students to rewrite from other characters’ points of view.

Art and Music:

- Have students look at the lyrics to *Jolene*, the song Willowdean “sang” for her talent portion of the pageant. Have them discuss why she chose this song and what message the song sends. In small groups, have students write their own songs for Willow to sing onstage. Lyrics to *Jolene* can be found at <http://www.dollyon-line.com/archives/lyrics/jolene.shtml>
- Showcase your students’ talents. Ask students to bring in visual representations of their talents, as well as photos of themselves, and use these to create a display for the classroom or school library.

Health and Physical Education:

- Willowdean works at a local fast food restaurant, but her mother discourages Willow from “eatin’ that greasy food” (Murphy, 13). Have students research the nutritional values associated with their favorite fast food or take-out meals. Have them devise alternative, healthier meals; nutritional guidelines can be found on the following website: <https://www.nutrition.gov/life-stages/adolescents>
- Body image is a recurring theme in the book. Purdue University has a 17 page Lesson Plan available with 4 activities to help students understand what healthy body image is, how to be healthier and how to look critically at body images and messages the media and advertising world shows us. <https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/cfs/cfs-737-w.pdf>

Vocabulary:

Abomination	Incredulous	Paradox
Cliché’	Kiosks	Sentiment
Egomaniac	Livid	Stance
Epitome	Mantra	Stockholm syndrome
Flail	Mortified	Unfathomable
Incarnations	Palpable	Vapid

RELATED WEBSITES

Official Dolly Parton—Latest News, Tour Schedule & History

<https://dollyparton.com>

Learn more about singer Dolly Parton’s background, career, and philanthropic and business ventures.

Travel Texas—It’s Like a WHOLE OTHER COUNTRY

<https://www.traveltexas.com/#/>

Explore the culture, geography, and attractions of Texas, setting of *Dumplin’*.

Welcome To Louisiana Travel/Louisiana Official Travel and Tourism Information

<http://www.louisianatravel.com>

Learn about the festivals, attractions, and natural beauty of our own state.

Julie Murphy’s ‘Dumplin’ Strikes a Chord

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-book-news/article/67830-julie-murphy-s-dumplin-strikes-a-chord.html>

Transcript of an August 2015 interview with Julie Murphy about her choice of a plus-size main character in *Dumplin’*.