



One

READING GUIDE

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In Brief

A bold, moving and exquisitely crafted novel about the unbreakable bonds of sisterhood, identity and love.

In Detail

Sixteen-year-olds Grace and Tippi are conjoined twins who must venture out into the world when their parents can no longer afford to homeschool them. As anticipated, the 'bugging-out eyes' (p.53) and hostile curiosity of the sisters' peers mar their first day of high school, but they find unexpected happiness when fellow outsiders Yasmeen and Jon befriend them.

As Grace and Tippi experience the joys of friendship for the first time, and Grace finds herself falling in love with Jon, the sisters' home life becomes increasingly fraught. Their unemployed father is drinking too much, their mother is made redundant and their sister, fourteen-year-old dancer Dragon, might have to give up on her dreams. When it looks like the family's only option is to move to a different state, Grace and Tippi make the ethically difficult decision to be filmed for a documentary in order to earn money.

Shortly after solving their family's financial problems by agreeing to be filmed, the sisters are dealt an inconceivably brutal blow when Tippi collapses and doctors discover that Grace is being supported by her sister's heart. If either of them is to survive, they must undergo a risky separation procedure, and Grace will need a heart transplant. Acutely aware that Tippi 'bears the burden of keeping [her] alive' (p.303), and convinced that she's a 'parasite' (p.304), Grace wants them to separate in order to save her sister. In contrast, Tippi is firmly against it:

*She says 'We're meant to be together.
If we separate, we'll die.'*
(p.304)

And so the sisters face an excruciating decision and the possibility of a future without their soulmate, the prospect of which is even more unbearable than that of death.

About the Author

SARAH CROSSAN is originally from Dublin. She graduated with a degree in philosophy and literature before training as an English and drama teacher at Cambridge University, and has been working to promote creative writing in schools ever since. She taught English at a small private school near New York before becoming a full-time writer. Sarah completed her Masters in creative writing at the University of Warwick in 2003 and in 2010 received an Edward Albee Fellowship for writing. Two of her previous novels, *The Weight of Water* and *Apple and Rain*, were shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal. Sarah lives in Hertfordshire with her family.

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Pre-Reading Activities

Ask students to examine the cover of the book and discuss what they think the novel's themes might be. Ask them to think about the title and strapline, and the central image.

Explain that the novel is about conjoined twins. Ask students to think about how it might feel to live as a conjoined twin. Do they agree with the student in the novel who said that:

*'Being a Siamese twin has got to be
The Worst.
Thing.
Ever.'*
(p.106)

For Discussion

- 1 After reading the novel, revisit your preliminary thoughts about how it might feel to live as a conjoined twin. Did your reading of Grace and Tippi's story expose any misconceptions? What surprised you most about the sisters' lives, outlooks and opinions?
- 2 Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from the point of view of one of the sisters? What effect does Grace's first person, present tense narrative have?
- 3 How does the author give insights into Tippi's character? How different are the two sisters? Which of the sisters do you think is stronger?
- 4 Discuss how the author communicates how it *feels* to be Grace and Tippi. Think about the metaphors Grace uses to describe their first days at school. For instance, when the twins enter the common room on their first day at school, Grace describes the attention of the other students:

*like we are
lunch
and they are
starved animals ready to feed.*
(p.59)

- 5 *One* is written in free verse. How did this affect your reading experience?



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6 *I do wonder if being our sister
sucks sometimes,*

*if being our sister
makes her a freak
too.*

(p.10)

*'... who am I apart from your sister?
Can you tell me that?'*

(Dragon, p.91)

What does Grace's statement reveal about her character?

What does Dragon's comment reveal about her sense of self? Do you understand her anger on p.91? Why do you think Dragon doesn't want Grace and Tippi to meet her boyfriend?

7 How did you feel when Dragon was given ballet shoes that were too small for her (p.39)? What does it reveal about her place in the family?

8 *'It's shitty because they're so damn pretty,' he says.
'What a waste'*

(Jon, p.135)

What does Jon mean by this? Can you understand why he feels this way? What did you think of Yasmeen's explanation and Jon's apology? Why do you think the four of them became friends?

9 Why do you think Grace says she's fine and was only 'joking' when she can't breathe (p.149–150)?

10 *... for a moment
I had forgotten
her.*

(p.212)

What is the significance of this realisation? How did it make you feel?



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11 'We can do anything,
OK?'

...

*'But we can never
ever
fall in love ...'*

(Tippi, p.187)

Why does Tippi say this? Is this a statement of fact, or a demand?

12 Why do you think Grace and Tippi's classmates view them, with their 'forever togetherness', as 'a couple cursed' (p.224), whereas the search for a lifelong soulmate is revered? Do you think there's 'something very, very wrong' (p. 225) with the sisters for not wanting to be apart?

13 Reread 'Divided' (pages 227–228) and think about what makes an individual who they are. Are we defined by our physical form, or by our mind? Did anything about Grace and Tippi's story cause you to question your views about what makes a person who they are?

14 Why do you think Grace and Tippi changed their minds and agreed to be filmed for a documentary? What does this decision reveal about their natures?

15 ... when Tippi and I consider cashing in on our
bodies,
everyone frowns.

Why is that?

(p.248)

Reread 'Double Standards' (p.248). Why do you think it's seen as acceptable for 'gorgeous people' to be 'paid for idiots to gawk' at them, whereas 'everyone frowns' when Grace and Tippi decide to do the same? Do you think it's 'distasteful' for the sisters to get paid for being filmed? Do you think this viewpoint represents a double standard of our society?

16 What did you think of the twins' dad? Do you think he's bad father? How did you feel when he moved out? And what did you think of his reason for doing so?



One

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- 17** *'You laugh a lot. It's inspiring.
Even in your condition, you embrace life.'*
(Caroline, p.270)

How do you think this makes the twins feel? Did you find Grace and Tippi inspiring? In what ways do they 'embrace life'?

- 18** *'Do you think Tippi and Grace
should be separated?'*
(Caroline, p. 323)

What do you think?

Consider Tippi's comment:

*'... we're meant to be together.
If we separate, we'll die.'*
(Tippi, p.304).

What did you think of Tippi's resistance to the separation? What does her statement reveal about the sisters' relationship, and her sense of identity?

- 19** *I don't want it anymore.*

I don't need it.

Luck is a lie.
(p.392)

Why do you think Grace removes her rabbit's foot pendant the night before their operation? What does she mean by 'luck is a lie'?

- 20** Reread the chapter 'Tippi' (p.407). Why do you think Tippi's name is repeated over and over as a question? Why is there no question mark after the final instance of 'Tippi'? What does this chapter reveal about Grace's state of mind, and her personal identity?
- 21** Did you foresee Grace's illness and the decision the sisters were forced to make? Did you foresee how the novel ended? How did it make you feel? Did the ending make this novel sad? How did the novel make you feel overall?
- 22** Does humour play any role in the novel? Did anything make you laugh?
- 23** Think of three alternative titles for *One*.



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Beyond The Book:

WRITING ACTIVITIES

1) Back cover blurb

Write your own back cover copy for *One*. Think about which elements of the story potential readers should know about. Think about the style and tone of your copy – it needs to grab the attention of potential readers and give a taste of the book, without giving too much away. You might like to consider including a short excerpt.

2) Dragon's Diary

Reread pages 386–387 and write Dragon's diary entry from that evening. Think about how she feels after saying goodbye to Grace and Tippi, and why she decided not to go to hospital in the morning.

3) What happens next?

Write an additional chapter to the novel set one year later. How is Grace adjusting to life without Tippi? How are the other members of the family coping? Are Grace, Jon and Yasmeen still friends? Are Grace and Jon a couple? Is she still on the transplant waiting list?

ART

1) Picasso-style painting

*'I like Picasso,' I say.
'He paints the essence of things
and not only what the eye can see'
(p.16).*

Research Picasso and Cubism, and then draw or paint a Cubist-influenced self-portrait that captures your 'essence', and 'not only what the eye can see'.

CITIZENSHIP AND PHSE

- 1) Reread 'Maternal Impressions' (pages 215–216) and consider Grace's remark that medical research into conjoined twins might mean that in future 'they could prevent people like us from ever being born again' (p.216). Have a debate about the medical ethics raised by Grace's comments in this chapter: is 'science and progress' always 'a good thing' (p.216)?
- 2) Research attitudes to conjoined twins throughout history. Refer to the Author's Note at the back of the book, and to Grace's remarks on p.215.



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Suggested Further Reading

By the same author:

Apple and Rain

The Weight of Water

Breathe

Resist

By other authors:

Wonder, R.J. Palacio

The Fault in Our Stars, John Green

Before I Die, Jenny Downham

The Sky is Everywhere; I'll Give You the Sun, Jandy Nelson

Heartbeat, Sharon Creech

