

When You Reach Me

Rebecca Stead

ISBN 978-1-921656-06-4

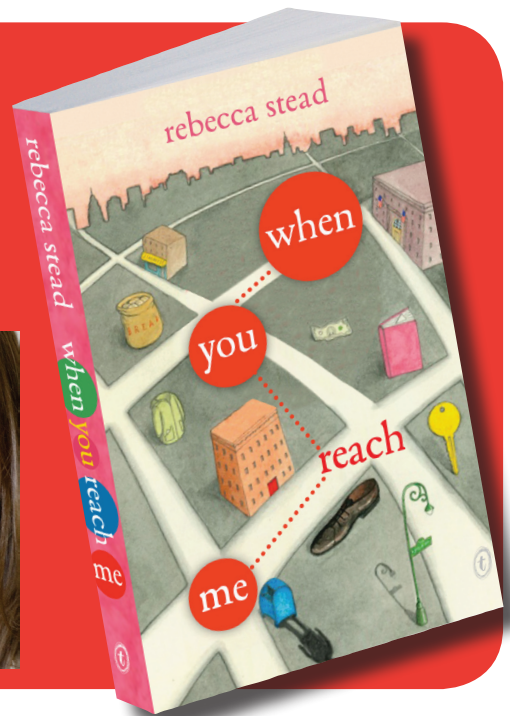
RRP AUS\$16.95, NZ\$19.95

Fiction, B paperback

Recommended for Upper Primary/Lower Secondary

Resource Kit Contains

- Praise
- Synopsis
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Praise

'Humorous, pacey, mind-bending.' Martine Murray

Synopsis

It is 1978 and twelve-year-old Miranda lives in New York with her mother, who is practising to win a TV quiz show. Miranda's favourite book is *A Wrinkle In Time* and her best friend is Sal. Things begin to change when Sal is punched in the stomach on the way home from school, and weird letters begin arriving for Miranda. When Sal refuses to be Miranda's friend any more, she must unravel the increasingly knotted puzzle that the letters have delivered on her own. With the local homeless man whom they call 'laughing man' becoming increasingly stranger, Miranda begins to feel her life is beginning to resemble her favourite book. Her only chance for normality is to solve the puzzle and win back Sal.

About the Author

Rebecca Stead grew up in New York City and still lives there, with her husband and their two sons. *When You Reach Me* is her second novel for young readers.

Themes

In many ways the novel is realistic. It deals with everyday lives, with the quirks of families and friends and school.

At the same time it is most definitely a mystery story. The puzzle knots become more complex as the story unfolds, making it very hard to put down. What on earth is going on? The book sizzles with the repeated questions, why and how? It is only at the end that the clues are deciphered and the knots untangled very carefully and clearly.

It is sometimes a very sad story. The account of the break up of Sal and Miranda's friendship is very moving and we can feel her hurt.

It is also a very funny story, with humour that we can all relate to. '*The school dentist was like a professional smiler which makes sense for a dentist.*' The relationship between Miranda and her mother is a very warm one but Miranda has some very funny digs at her mother's dress sense and electric blue nails.

The book can also be described as science fiction as it deals with the idea of time travel. You should have a lot of fun and argument discussing this, but if it gives you a headache as it does Miranda, you will still enjoy the book for its basic realism.

Close study of the text

things you keep in a box

Notice the titles of each chapter. What two things have been kept in a box? There is much that is mysterious in this chapter. What questions are you asking by the end of it?

Bella says a few pages later that you can judge a book by the first line. Why are the first and last sentences in this chapter so gripping? What makes this an excellent first chapter?

things that go missing

Does Miranda mind being a latchkey child? What are the good and bad things about being a latchkey child?

What things go missing? What does the 'swiping' from work show about the mother's attitude to her work?

things you hide

Miranda carries around a battered book that she has probably read a hundred times.

Do you have books that you like to read over and over? What is the best book you have ever read? Do you picture the characters the way you feel they should be, as Miranda does with Meg?

We learn a lot about Miranda's mother from this chapter. Would she make a good mother? What little details tell us so much about her?

Write your own short story beginning, 'It was a dark and stormy night.'

Draw a picture of Miranda's mother.

the speed round

What more do we find out about Mom in this chapter?

things that kick

This is a very moving chapter. Why is losing Sal's friendship so important to Miranda?

The laughing man is not just another character. He is also a part of the mystery which will only be unravelled at the end of the book.

things that get tangled

What are the things that are tangled? Why is it hard for Miranda to decide where to start her story?

things that stain

Describe in your own words what happened when Sal was attacked. Do you think this is going to be a part of the mystery?

Do you think there is more to the laughing man's crazy mutterings than meets the eye?

Do you have any idea why the beginning of her story might be the end of her lifelong friendship with Sal.

Mom's rules for life in New York City

Would you have liked to live in New York City in the 1970's?

Miranda says that she has found out that most of the people she is afraid of are really quite friendly. Is this the same for you? What sort of people are you afraid of? Have you changed your mind about any of them?

things you wish for

What sort of things do you wish for? Why does Miranda say that she doesn't want her father? Mom's wish list for if she wins the contest is on the fridge. Richard and Miranda have a different wish. What do you think it

might be? Is your wish list only for yourself or does it include friends and family?

things that sneak up on you

What unexpected person has sneaked up on Miranda? What would be your reaction to this situation?

things that bounce

Does Miranda bounce back at all from her hurt about Sal?

The girls at school are quite expert at being unkind to each other. Is this usual for twelve-year-olds? What causes this nastiness? What do you think of Julia?

things that burn

Would you like Annemarie for a friend?

the winner's circle

See if you can work out a similar game that you could play in small groups in your classroom.

things you keep secret

The description of the student project is quite funny. Do you recognise any of the same dynamics in a classroom project you have been involved in?

How would you describe Marcus? Do you agree with him that commonsense can get in the way of new ideas

This chapter introduces the concept of time travel. You could have a lively debate in class about these ideas. Why are some people reluctant to think about it?

things that smell

What is the difference between nice-weird and creepy-weird? Would you be allowed to go and work in a local shop at lunchtime. Why? In what other ways does there seem to be less strictness at this school than at your school?

things you don't forget

How is the mystery becoming more complicated? What are some of the scary elements that are creeping into the book?

the first note

How does the situation become weirder?

things on a slant

What is the significance of the V cut?

white things

Why was Miranda embarrassed when Annemarie came to visit? Is this a commonplace reaction to introducing new people to your home and family? Is it necessary?

the second note

How do you imagine that the note-writer knew that Miranda had shared her note? How is Miranda feeling about Colin?

things you push away

What is the invisible veil that Mom says we have between ourselves and the rest of the world. How does it affect the way we see other people and interpret events?

things you count

How do we know that Julie is now the outsider?

messy things

How are things messy in this chapter?

invisible things

Who is invisible in this chapter? Why?

things you hold on to

Can you explain why Jimmy refused to have Julia in his shop?

salty things

How do you account for the name of this chapter?

Do you share Mom's view of jails?

things you pretend

Does your view of Julia change at all in this chapter? Why?

things that crack

Who cracks in this chapter? Is there any humour to break the tension?

things left behind

Where do you think the rose came from?

Find out what you can about epilepsy.

the third note

How does the writer build up the tension in this chapter?

things that make no sense

What reason does Marcus give for hitting Sal? What does it tell us about Marcus?

What does Marcus mean when he says that time is just a construct and not a line stretching out in front of us?

How does Julia try to explain time?

Why does Miranda find it hard to accept the idea that everything is happening at the same time? What do you think of this idea?

the first proof

Why did Colin take the two bread rolls? How could the note writer have possibly known about it?

things you give away

The laughing man is becoming a motif or recurring pattern in the book. He seems familiar. Why is Miranda becoming increasingly worried about the notes?

things that get stuck

Mom is stuck. Why is she so afraid to take any steps that might change her life, like getting married? Why do people sometimes find it very hard to make big decisions?

tied-up things

Why couldn't Miranda hug her mom?

What did Annemarie think of Mom?

things that turn pink

Jimmy is robbed and Miranda can't stop feeling hurt about Sal.

things that fall apart

Why do Annemarie and Miranda fall out?

Why do you imagine Jimmy thinks Julia stole his money? Can you make any kind of sense out of his racism? Is there ever any sense in racism?

Christmas vacation

Why does it still matter so much that Sal doesn't want to walk to school with Miranda any more?

the second proof

What is the second proof that whoever wrote the notes knew that things were going to happen before they happened?

What was the worst aspect of Miranda's fear?

things in an elevator

Why was this the best morning for Miranda?

Why wouldn't her mom give Richard a key?

things you realize

What three things did Miranda realise when she went back to school?

What do we learn here about Miranda's basic kindness?

things you beg for

How and why did Miranda make peace with Julia?

things that turn upside down

What does Bella mean when she says that it is simple to love someone but hard to know when to say it out loud? Is this your experience?

Why was this a day in which everything changed?

things that are sweet

What was sweet about the afternoon at Julia's place?

the last note

This is no doubt the most terrifying chapter in the book. Why do you think the author put down the events in note form? What effect does this have on the pace and tension of the chapter?

What is significant about seeing Richard's shoe?

What had the laughing man meant by his mantra, bookbag, pocketshoe?

difficult things

Richard's knots are a metaphor for the puzzles facing Miranda and it is fitting that she struggles with these knots while she tries to figure out the meaning of what has happened.

Can you figure out why the laughing man says his trip was such a difficult one? Why had he taken such a difficult trip?

things that heal

Why had Sal broken away from Miranda? Do you think it is important to have more than just one special friend?

things you protect

The story of how Marcus was saved from the police is very funny and provides a break from the stress and sadness of the previous few chapters. How much was Marcus responsible for what happened. Can we set things in motion without really meaning to?

things you line up

What things are being lined up for the denouement - the untying of all the knots and puzzles of the plot?

The \$20,000 Pyramid

How is the tension maintained during the account of the contest?

magic thread

The magic thread, the untangling of the mystery comes suddenly to Miranda. How is it revealed?

Who is the magic thread? What is the solution to the great puzzle?

Do you believe in time travel? If it were true, would you want to travel forward or backward?

things that open

Things are opening for both Richard and Miranda's mother in this chapter. How is this represented by the presents they both receive?

things that blow away

Why did the laughing man/Marcus sleep with his head under the mailbox?

Why is it significant that one day the drawing will just blow away?

Sal and Miranda, Miranda and Sal

How does Miranda and Sal's relationship end up? Why is it better this way?

parting gifts

How satisfying do you find the ending? Why is it not necessary to tell Marcus everything?

ACTIVITY

Could you write a story in which time travel takes place?

Before you start, write a profile of three or four characters you will have in your story. What puzzles will it create and how will it end up? You might enjoy doing this in groups.