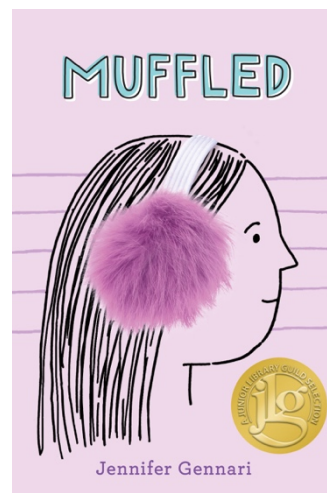


Reading Group Guide for *Muffled*

By Jennifer Gennari

www.jengennari.com



About the Author

Jennifer Gennari has been a writer and editor for more than twenty-five years. A graduate of Vassar College and the University of Virginia, she holds a MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. *Muffled* is her second book; her first is *My Mixed-Up Berry Blue Summer*, a Bank Street Best Children's Books of the Year selection and an American Library Association Rainbow List title. An engaging speaker and thoughtful teacher, Jen has presented at SCBWI workshops, Highlights Foundation, and schools. Her poems have appeared in *Orange Quarterly*, *The Lascaux Review*, *typishly*, and numerous issues of the *Marin Poetry Center Anthology*. A member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators since 1999, Jen is a bicyclist, environmentalist and reader. She and her husband have four grown daughters together and live on the water in the San Francisco Bay Area and summers on Lake Champlain in Vermont.

About the Book

"Sometimes I wish I could change how I am," Amelia says. That's how she feels at home, at school, and just about everywhere except for the majestic and very quiet Boston Public Library. For Amelia, almost all noises are just too loud. Sounds that don't bother other people make her flinch. In fourth grade, she wore noise-canceling headphones at school, but she felt isolated, and some kids were mean about it. As she starts fifth grade, her mother and the school counselor want her to quit wearing them. But her father, who knows how she feels, gives Amelia purple earmuffs for when it gets too loud—like in her required music class. To her surprise, learning the trombone helps Amelia connect with her classmate Madge, who's loud but kind. Maybe they can be friends if Amelia, with a little help from her parents, can find a balance between too loud and too lonely that will make her feel comfortable and safe.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe Amelia, her living situation, and her personality. Discuss the ways that noise bothers her. How has that affected her life? What are solutions that she and her parents have tried? What has helped?

2. What is Madge like? Describe the start and progress of her friendship with Amelia. What do they have in common? How does that help their friendship? What is Madge's living situation? Talk about Oma and how Amelia feels about her.
3. Who is Deb? Explain her past relationship with Amelia. How does Deb act toward Amelia? Why are they no longer close friends? Why does Amelia call her "Deb-and-Kiki"? How does Kiki treat Amelia?
4. How do other students at school, including Jax, act toward Amelia? Describe some of those students, and explain why you think they act this way. How does Amelia feel about school as the book opens? Why does she feel like this?
5. What is the music requirement at Amelia's school, and why does it present a challenge for her? What does she try, and how do those attempts work out for her? Why does she end up with the trombone? Describe Ms. Parker and how she interacts with Amelia.
6. Describe some of the other adults at school, including Mr. Fabian and Mr. Skerritt. How do they try to help Amelia? Find examples of times she thinks they are helpful, and when she thinks they don't understand her. Do you feel understood by the adults in your life? Explain your answer.
7. Who is Belle, and how does Amelia encounter her? What effect does Belle's playing have on Amelia? How does Madge react to Belle? Why does Belle wear earbuds? How does that end up helping Amelia?
8. Describe what happens during Amelia and Madge's visit to the Boston Public Library. Why does it create conflict between them? Relate that incident to Amelia's mom's observation that "Friendship is hard. . . . Sometimes we have to be patient with each other's differences."
9. After Amelia and Madge go to the library, Kiki says, "The only reason Madge wanted to be Amelia Mouse's friend was for math help!" How does Amelia react to the remark? Shortly afterward, Madge falls in the cafeteria, and Amelia laughs at her. Why does Amelia laugh? How does Amelia feel when she finds the note in her lunch bag?
10. One day, when things are particularly difficult for her, Amelia says, "Outside, I head straight for my tube tunnel, my footsteps on the ladder a prelude to peace and quiet. Just

five minutes, I think. That's all I need to recharge by myself in my cocoon." Why is the tunnel important to her? What does she mean by "recharging"? Name other places and times where she recharges. What do you do to recharge?

11. Discuss Amelia's relationship with her father and why he understands her in ways that her mother doesn't. Why does he give her earmuffs? Explain what you learn from Amelia's comment, "I don't know how Dad has trained himself to concentrate only on one birdcall amid all the outside noise."

12. After the concert, Amelia's mom tells her, "You see, if you try harder, it will get easier and easier." In response, Amelia thinks, "Mom still thinks I'm not trying hard enough." What does this show about their relationship? What does Amelia's mom want for her? Do things get better between them over the course of the book? Explain your answers.

13. At the end of chapter ten, Amelia hears her parents arguing about her, and she thinks: "Two parents plus one is three. Three minus one is two. Two minus one is one. Me, always alone. I rest one muffed ear on my shoulder. Sometimes I wish I could change how I am." How do her observations make you feel? Why do you think she responded this way? What would you tell Amelia if you were there with her?

14. One of Amelia's techniques for ignoring noises that bother her is to count. Give examples of when she uses this technique to soothe herself. Why does she like numbers? How does she help Madge in math? Why does Ms. Parker say that math is a "great skill for a musician"?

15. Discuss why Amelia loves to read and why she says, "Friends in books are the best." What does she mean when she later observes, "You can't have a conversation about math expressions or state capitals or trombone positions with friends in books"? Explain why the library is so important to her.

16. Review Amelia's list at the beginning of the novel, her two lists in the middle, and her list at the end. How does she use these lists? How do they make her feel? What do the lists have in common, and how are they different?

17. Describe the story's setting, including specific places where Amelia spends time. How might the story change if she lived in a suburb or rural area? What if it were set in a different time period? Consider the author's note about growing noise pollution in your discussion.

Activities

1. Ask students to pay attention to sounds they like over the next twenty-four hours, and then pick ten of their favorites. Make a class list of everyone's sounds. Hold a discussion about similarities and differences in the list, and have students tie it to the theme of similarities and differences in the novel.
2. Now that students are in the habit of listening, have them choose a time and place to listen carefully and list all the sounds they hear. They will then use that list to write a poem about the sounds to share with the class.
3. One way that Amelia and Madge bond is to write notes to each other with the words written backward. Invite students to find a scene between two characters in the novel, and compose notes written backward for the characters to exchange. Discuss codes as a class, including how they are used and why people enjoy them.
4. As a class, listen to a recording of Melba Liston play her trombone (such as the one found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojwANp_D_fE). Then have students do some research on her life and return to the group with five facts. If possible, read aloud from the picture book mentioned in the novel, *Little Melba and Her Big Trombone* by Katheryn Russell-Brown, and discuss it along with the information students gather about Liston.
5. The novel uses vivid figurative language to create images in the reader's mind. For example, "Each noise bounces around the walls of my head like a rubber ball" and "Everyone's gaze is like a hundred headlights." Ask students to find other examples of figurative language in the story, identify what's being compared, and discuss the impact of the images. Have each student take a few of the images and write their own figures of speech that the author could have used instead.

Guide written by Kathleen Odean, a youth librarian for seventeen years who chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee. She now gives all-day workshops on new books for children and teens. She tweets at @kathleenodean.

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