

CROSSING THE LINE

DIANNE BATES

This novel gives the reader a rare insight into the mental illness of despair and depression from a personal perspective. The story is told by Sophie and the issues that face her and what she believes are presented in a sensitive but credible manner. The reader learns of her background and understands why she feels the way she does and even comprehends her need to harm herself by cutting.

Dianne Bates treads a fine line in the telling of this story by having the reader relate to Sophie because her emotions are portrayed realistically and unfold as a consequence of how she is feeling and what she has already undergone in her life.

Official care for Sophie through the Department is shown as going through the motions and duty of protecting and caring for her but not really addressing her needs. When her psychiatrist puts her in hospital to prevent her harming herself she is treated by Doctor Helen Marshall who in a session shows Sophie sympathy by embracing her. Sophie mistakes this for genuine feeling and becomes obsessed with her doctor, believing she loves her – as a mother would. Sophie unreasonably pursues the doctor and cannot find a way to get her out of her mind and restore balance to her life. She has good supportive friends in Amy and Matt, the flatmates she has been placed with, but finds it impossible to see any other point of view other than her own.

The story ends on a positive note with Sophie established in a strong relationship with Matt and returning to school with prospects of being able to face the future.

By reading *Crossing the Line* the reader is able to see how someone with a mental illness thinks and acts and has some idea about how a troubled mind works. By the end of this story both Sophie and the reader have learned a great deal.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

- How is the story told?
- Who is telling the story?
- Where does the story take place?
- Who is Marie?
- What does Sophie like about her new place of residence?

- How does she come to be living there?
- Explain the role of the Department
- What happens when you sleep? (p.8)
- How does Amy's past explain her behaviour? (51)
- What effect does Jan's going away have on Sophie? (56)
- What does Sophie do to calm her *churning mind*? (69)
- What does Matt's visit do for Sophie? (90)
- How do you know when Sophie begins to get better? What changes? (99)
- Why does Sophie find Helen so attractive?
- How was Arlene's love demonstrated? (110)
- What sort of homecoming do her flatmates give Sophie when she returns from the hospital?
- What *bombshell* is dropped by Marie? (168)
- What is Noel's explanation of Sophie's behaviour after she has been to Helen's place?
- In what way does Doctor Helen Marshall 'cross the line'?
- How does Sophie overstep the mark?

From the text find parts that show:

- kindness, sympathy, empathy
- being there for someone
- caring for others
- Find sections where thoughts and emotions are conveyed as Sophie tells her story

Opening

- What is the moment she has been waiting for?
- Why is Sophie so happy?
- Explain the situation at the opening of the story.
- In what way is this a whole new beginning for Sophie?

Vocabulary

Whilst reading you can increase your word power by noting words that are used in an unusual manner or words with which you are not familiar.

Use a dictionary to look up any words you do not know the meaning of.

- ♣ Use sentences to show the meaning of the following words:
palpable (page 2), demure, wan (67) excise (76), fazed (83)
stock-still (144), ominous (168)

Some English words convey different meanings in different contexts
Show how you can use the following words to mean different things:

- ♣ bridle (p12), drift (151). Find further examples from the text.
- ♣ Examine the use of adverbs to convey more meaning to an action:
for instance: brazenly (p 93) tentatively (p178) profusely (p179).
- ♣ Practise using adverbs in your own writing.

Characters

- Describe Matt and Amy and the role they play in the story
- Do a character sketch of Noel Palmer

Look at:

- the way the reader sees Sophie
 - how her carers see Sophie
 - how others see Sophie
 - how Sophie sees herself
- What are some of the signs that Sophie's behaviour is not balanced?
 - Find a place that indicates what a troubled soul Sophie is.

Find places in the novel that show Sophie:

- ♣ does care what others think of her.
 - ♣ does things to deliberately get a reaction.
 - ♣ is kind and considerate.
- Do a case study of Sophie taking in her background, appearance, attitude, likes and dislikes, how she sees herself, her mode of behaviour – how she operates and why she behaves as she does. Mention the strategies she uses to protect herself, the way she thinks and how she relates to others.

Style

- ♣ Look at the way in which the author tells the story and comment on the language Dianne Bates uses.

Title

- ♣ How does this novel get its title? Discuss this term and its applications further.

Cover and design

- ♣ Look at the cover for ***Crossing the Line*** by Dianne Bates and make some observations about it.
- ♣ Talk about what a cover does for a book.
- ♣ Examine the details of the design and layout of this book and the different fonts used and what their purpose is.

Speaking

- Much of Sophie's life and what she does is an act.
- Read out to the class a portion that shows this.
 - What do you consider is the turning point for Sophie?
 - Give reasons for your choice.

- Act out a case conference with Sophie, Marie and Department officials showing how each behaves and how Sophie feels.
- Talk about writing poetry and what it does.
- Do a review of this novel for your local radio.

Discussion

- There are many instances in this novel that show different ways of seeing things and different perceptions and perspectives – discuss this further.
- Talk about the importance of colour and the way it affects how people see things.

Using the story as a starting point, talk about the following subjects:

- | | | |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| ♣ family | ♣ guilt | ♣ pretence, lying |
| ♣ trust | ♣ attitude | ♣ caring |
| ♣ friends | ♣ hopes | ♣ identity |
| ♣ laughter | ♣ obsession | |
| ♣ foster care system | | |

- unrealistic expectations
- mental problems
- being in touch with people and knowing what is needed (91)
- different kinds of love
- the art of listening (34)
- the place of gifts.
- how important is it to have a sense of belonging?
- feelings of abandonment
- the place of mind games in people's lives

- What is Sophie's greatest need?
- What *is* the line that is crossed, as indicated in the title?
- Why does it exist, do you think?
- Why do you think Sophie doesn't want to get involved with people?
- What does Sophie do to escape?
- What motivates people?
- What is people's behaviour dependant on?
- Talk about the incidences in this novel where Sophie cuts herself and try to ascertain the reasons behind this.
- Talk about the system for taking care of young people like Sophie as portrayed in this novel.
- What did you learn from this novel?

Issues

The following issues can be examined further using this novel as a starting point:

- mental illness in adults and young people: its causes and treatment and how effective this is
- patient /doctor relationships
- stalking
- depression
- rejection

- anxiety
- self-harm
- mutilation

THE CRAFT OF WRITING

Look at the use of direct speech and dialogue

- ⌘ Consider what telling a story in the first person enables an author to do.

There are places in this novel where the reader is given a hint about something that has not happened in the text so far: there is an instance on page 77.

- ⌘ Find others and reflect how an author is able to use this device and reflect on using this strategy in your own writing.
- ⌘ Look at the change in style and writing at the end of chapter one
- ⌘ Observe how a writer can keep the reader's interest by making variations like this.
- ⌘ Find a section that you felt was vividly portrayed and read this out to the rest of the class saying why you have chosen this portion.
- ⌘ Pick a place in the story that is descriptive and assess what this adds to the novel.
- ⌘ Find an image from the text that you felt was particularly powerful or apt and read it out to the class.
- ⌘ ***Crossing the Line*** deals with a very serious subject but are there any light moments that provide relief?
- ⌘ Thoughts and feelings play a big part in this novel. Chose an example of each from the text and read them aloud to an audience, putting them in context. Ascertain what they do for the story.
- ⌘ Find what you felt was a poignant piece from the story and attempt to express what the writer has done to move you.
- ⌘ Find a place where Dianne Bates portrays the physical side of emotional turmoil.

To be a writer you need to be a good observer and relate details to make your characters credible for the reader.

- ⌘ There are many mannerisms that belong to various characters – Find some instances and see how they make the character come alive
- ⌘ Find a part where body language is used to convey meaning.
- ⌘ Examine a portion from the story that you found confronting.

Writing

- Describe Sophie's first interaction with her flatmates.
- Write about 'home' for you.
- As Matt, tell your story
- Write about the differences between Sophie and Greta.
- As Helen Marshall, write a private report on Sophie.
- Mental illness affects many people. Write about this.
- *Laughter is the best medicine* Do you agree?

Research

Do some further study of the following:

- sleep
- nightmares
- relationships
- friends
- doctor/patient ethics
- mental illness
- depression
- self-mutilation
- fantasising
- anger

About the author

Dianne Bates has written 100 books for young readers including the Prize-winning *The Last Refuge* which sold into Europe. Dianne has won national and state awards for her books and has been an editor for children's magazines.

Currently she compiles *Buzz Words (The Latest Buzz on Children's Books)* an online magazine for people in the children's book industry.

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