

Everything We Keep

Author
Di Walker

Synopsis

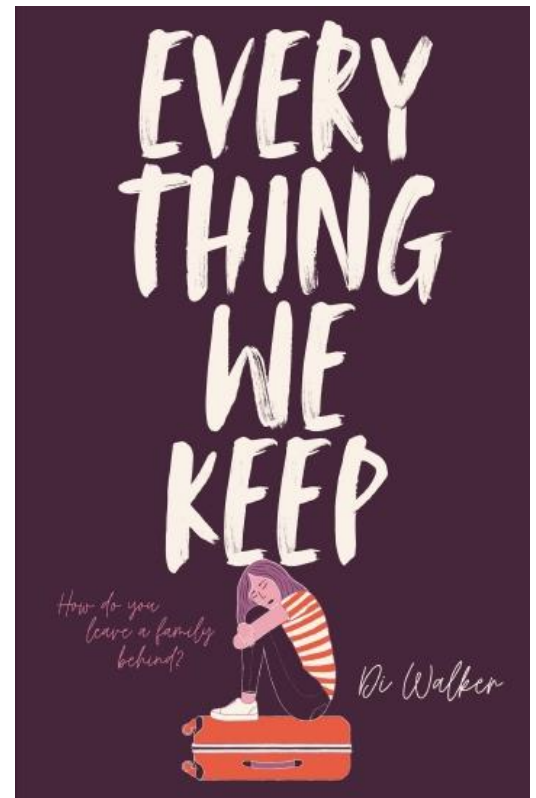
Agatha loves her parents. She loves them, and wishes desperately that she could help them, because ever since tragedy struck her family back when she was only seven, it has become clearer and clearer that her parents are both absolutely failing to cope with life at all. And for Agatha this is more than just something to worry about, because when you are only 13 and your parents are failing to manage even their own lives, it leaves you with no one to look after you and to help take care of you as every child deserves. Agatha has been shuttled between foster homes and her parents ever since it first became clear that there was something dreadfully wrong in her home, and with the calm and patient Katherine she has finally found a place where she feels safe and cared for, and can start to relax. So when a social worker once again turns up to return her to her parents for yet another attempt at living with them, Agatha is filled with uncommunicative despair. But Katherine's trust in Agatha's good sense is stronger than Agatha knew, and when she makes sure that Agatha not only knows that she will always be welcome in Katherine's home, but also that she has the resources needed to make her own way there if necessary. A series of events is set in motion that leaves Agatha with more hope for the future than she has had in over half her lifetime. An insightful and utterly sympathetic look into the issues that can cause, and can come from, hoarding behaviours, and how mental illness can have a devastating impact on the lives of children caught up in it, *Everything We Keep* is both deeply moving and filled with compassionate hope.

About the Author

Di Walker is an author based in regional Victoria. Her first book, *Unpacking Harper Holt*, debuted in 2018. *Everything We Keep* is her first book with Scholastic.

Themes

Key Themes include: Mental Illness; family; tragedy; loss; coping strategies; bullying; self-determination; courage; love; compassion; friendship; hope.



Writing Style

Written in the third person the story follows the viewpoint of thirteen year old Agatha throughout. The narrative is for the most part chronologically straightforward, with the prologue being set six years before the main action of the story. The details of past events from Agatha's childhood are revealed slowly through both action and dialogue, as she and her parents share the events of that horrific day with friends and with each other. Agatha's current life is likewise revealed to the reader over the course of the action and as part of natural plot progression, which both maintains reader interest and gradually builds plot tension throughout. Characters are consistently complex and multi-faceted and there is a recurring thematic progression regarding personal emotional growth and self-confidence, and a constant re-iteration in the protagonist's life that there is no one correct way to feel about a situation, merely a choice of ways in which one can respond. Despite the subject matter being serious, and at times distressing, the novel maintains and builds a hopeful tone overall, while also exploring the impact of mental illness and childhood trauma and tragedy on the individuals involved.

TEACHER NOTES

- 1) Before reading the story, as a class look closely at the cover and title, and discuss what you can learn from them. Some things to include in your discussion might be:
 - What does the image on the cover show?
 - Who do you think this book might be about and why?
 - What does the title of the story tell us about the content - what might it plausibly be about?
 - What is the emotive impact of the cover artwork - how do you feel when you look at it?
- 2) After reading the novel, as a class discuss the title and what you think it means in the context of Agatha's story. Think about both the figurative and literal meanings of the phrase, and how keeping things can harm, or can help.
- 3) Why does Agatha's mother keep so many things, that there is no space for people in the house?
- 4) What was Agatha's mother's reaction when other people tried to clean out her house and threw out some of the things that were cluttering up her life?
- 5) How do you think Agatha's mother must feel about her life and her house? As a class discuss what it must be like from her perspective. Use your discussion to help you write a character analysis of Agatha's mother, and then rewrite one of the scenes where Agatha is interacting with her mother from her mother's point of view.
- 6) When Agatha travels from her home to Katherine's house, she has to catch two trains and a bus. On a map of your local area, choose a random spot some distance from your home, and work out how you could get there by yourself if you had to. How many trains, trams and/or buses would you need to catch, or could you walk, ride, or jog there? Think about both time and distance when you are working out your route, and remember the shortest distance isn't always the quickest way to get somewhere.
- 7) Routine is very important to both Katherine and Lawson, and in her time living with them Agatha has also come to appreciate its benefits. Some people stick to a daily routine rigidly, while others prefer a more flexible lifestyle. What routines do you have in your life? Think about the places you go and the things you do on a regular basis and what routines you might have surrounding these activities. What is the classroom routine at school? As a class create a weekly timetable that shows what your class

- /school routine is. Individually write a piece reflecting on the importance of having a routine to fall back on and whether you find strict adherence to a routine comforting or inhibitory.
- 8) How do the different people who have come into Agatha's life affect her self-perception? Choose one of the other characters in the novel and write an analysis of how Agatha's interactions with this character influence her understanding of events and her decisions over the course of the novel.
 - 9) Create a collage from (clean!) found materials collected from the classroom recycling bin that you feel in some way represents part of Agatha's story.
 - 10) What were the pivotal moments in Agatha's life where Agatha made a decision that had far-reaching consequences for her life as a whole? Identify at least three key decisions Agatha made, and describe why they were important, what the alternative might have been had she chosen otherwise, and how they affected her mentally and emotionally.
 - 11) Agatha has a difficult and complicated relationship with her parents. She loves her parents, and even though she knows that they have failed her, it still hurts when she hears others criticise them. As a class discuss how it is possible to care about someone, while still being aware of their failings. Some things you might wish to include in your discussion could be:
 - How does it make you feel when people criticise your family or friends?
 - What sort of things can you say to yourself when you feel others are judging you, your family, or your friends?
 - Why do you think Agatha still loves her parents?
 - Do you think Agatha's parents love her?
 - What do Agatha's parents do or say that demonstrates that they still care about her?
 - Why do you think Agatha's parents can't change their behaviour and give Agatha a safe home?
 - How does it make Agatha feel when she realises that even though her parents love her they can't change for her?
 - How do Katherine and Lawson make Agatha feel about her parents and their home?
 - 12) Do you think that Agatha should have left Tully's house in the middle of the night? Why/why not? Write a brief description of events at Tully's house the morning after she first met Agatha. As a class discuss how Agatha's meeting Tully, and then leaving her home so suddenly, affected both Celeste's perception of Agatha, and the development of Tully and Agatha's friendship.
 - 13) Agatha and Katherine go on a walk down to the beach every day. Not everyone lives near enough to a beach to walk there, but there are different interesting destinations to walk to everywhere. If you went on a morning walk around your local area every day, where would you like to go? Write a brief description of where you would like to walk to, why you would choose that destination, how long it would take you, and what you would expect to see or do when you arrived. Illustrate your description with a coloured sketch of your destination, or somewhere along your proposed walking route.
 - 14) Recreate the science experiment competition that Tully and Agatha won at school. You will need at a minimum a balloon, a string, a straw, and some tape. Record your thoughts before, during, and after the activity, and draw diagrams of your final model. Write a summary of what you discovered and why your balloon rocket worked or didn't work. You might also want to research the scientific principles behind this activity.