

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Alone at Ninety Foot

by

### Katherine Holubitsky

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### Book Information

Katherine Holubitsky, Alone at Ninety Foot

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Book Level: 3.9

Interest Level: UG

This is a story of a young girl struggling to come to terms with the death of her mother.

**Award:** ABA Children's Book Council; ALA Notable/Best Books; Canadian Library Association Honour; Misc./Other; Red Maple Award/Nominee; Ruth Schwartz Children's Book Award; Violet Downey Children's Book Award; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

**Topics:** Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); Character Traits, Self Improvement; Family Life, Death; Family Life, Mothers; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; Recommended Reading, NY Publ. Library Best Books for the Teen Age

### Main Characters

April Collins Pam's baby sister, who died when she was eight months old

Danielle Higgins a conceited and popular girl in Pam's class

Danny Kim one of Pam's classmates, who is an excellent student but is overshadowed by a delinquent brother

Emily Carr an artist whose dark and haunting paintings appeal to Pam

Jennifer Reid Mr. Collins's new girlfriend, who becomes close with Pam

Joanne Robertson Pam's best friend, who is consumed with thoughts of boys and popularity

Krissy Marshall a little girl who is missing in Lynn Canyon Park

Lynette one of Mr. Collins's previous girlfriends

Mandeep Gill one of Pam's girlfriends

Matt Leighton an eleventh-grade boy who becomes Pam's boyfriend

Mr. Bartell Pam's English teacher, who also teaches their dance class

Mr. Collins Pam's father, who refuses to go back to the place where his wife killed herself

Mrs. Collins Pam's mother, who killed herself one year before the action in this story takes place

Mrs. Marshall Krissy's mother, who is traumatized by her daughter's disappearance

Nana Jean Pam's grandmother, who shares memories of her dead husband with Jennifer and Pam

Pamela Mary Collins a fourteen-year-old girl who tries to understand her mother's suicide

### Vocabulary

**etiquette** the practices of socially correct behavior

**gorge** a deep narrow passage with steep rocky sides

**hermit** a person who is withdrawn from society

**impale** to pierce with a sharp stick or point

**intricate** complex and elaborate

### Synopsis

Pamela Mary Collins is a fourteen-year-old, self-proclaimed hermit who tells her story through her journal from May 25th until August 15th. The previous year, Pam's mother committed suicide by jumping off a suspension bridge in Lynn Canyon Park after her eight-month-old baby, April, died. Pam's journal describes some of her feelings about her mother's death as well as the conflicts she faces in her last year of junior high school.

Pam's best friend, Joanne, often annoys her by smoking, obsessing about boys, and doing things that she believes will gain her popularity. Although Pam writes that she herself is not popular, she does have several good friends such as Joanne, Mandeep, Danny, and, eventually, Matt. Pam's friends and teachers are aware of the circumstances surrounding her mother's death, yet even though they try not to upset Pam, they often say the wrong thing by mistake.

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One of Pam's hobbies is collecting things from places she has visited. She keeps sand, water, and grass from these locations in April's old baby-food jars. Though her father has never again set foot in the park where Mrs. Collins committed suicide, Pam spends much of her free time on the rock by Ninety Foot, a natural pool in Lynn Creek. On this rock, Pam reflects on her friends, her feelings, and her mother's death.

Pam's father, Mr. Collins, has had several girlfriends since his wife died. His newest girlfriend, Jennifer, is a caring woman who eventually wins over Pam and Pam's grandmother, Nana Jean. Jennifer, a competent businesswoman, is the first person to make Mr. Collins laugh wholeheartedly since the death of his wife, which makes Pam like the woman even more.

At the end of the school year, Pam and Joanne are invited to a graduation party. Danielle Higgins, a popular yet conceited girl in the class, shows up drunk and makes a fool of herself. When Danielle notices her eleventh-grade boyfriend, Matt, talking to Pam, Danielle tells Matt that Pam is crazy just like her dead mother. Pam calls Danielle a "doofus" and humiliates her in front of everyone. When Pam rushes home, she confides in her father. Finally, she feels comfortable enough to ask her father why her mother committed suicide. Her father explains that her mother did not feel she could make Pam happy anymore, and she thought Pam and her father would be better off without her. After his explanation, Pam and her father spend the rest of the evening reminiscing about her mother.

For her junior high graduation, Matt gives Pam a bottle filled with water from Ninety Foot, which almost makes her cry. Her father and Jennifer give Pam a copy of Emily Carr's journals and a print of "Mountain Forest," a painting that reminds Pam of her mother and April. By mid August, Pam and Matt have started dating. At the end of the novel, Pam writes that she does not visit her mother in Lynn Canyon anymore. Now she carries her mother's memory within her. Her journal entry ends with

Pam's promise to her mother that she is going to "live life and love life."

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

At the end of the novel, Pam finally speaks to her father regarding her feelings about her mother's suicide. According to her father, why did her mother commit suicide?

*According to Pam's father, her mother never felt the same after April's death. He believes she committed suicide because she did not think she could make Pam happy again. He explains that Pam's mother had always been full of life before she became mentally ill. After April's death and the onset of her illness, Pam's mother thought that Pam and Mr. Collins would be better off without her.*

### Literary Analysis

Pam's mother taught Pam how to make beaded articles, and they often took walks together in Lynn Canyon Park before her death. After her mother's death, Pam continues to frequent the park and, later, to create things with beads. Why do you think she does this?

*Pam is probably trying to relive past moments with her mother. By sitting on the rock near Ninety Foot and creating beaded bracelets, Pam probably feels closer to her mother. Also, by doing things they used to do together, Pam is able to keep a part of her mother alive.*

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#### **Inferential Comprehension**

Pam agrees to go to the mall with Jennifer to help her pick out clothes for a dinner at Nana Jean's house. During their trip, Pam discovers that she and Jennifer have a liking for the same artist, Emily Carr. In your opinion, what effect does this discovery have on Pam's feelings toward Jennifer?

*Pam has already started to like and accept Jennifer. She agrees to help her find clothes that are more stylish to make a good impression on Nana Jean. Her discovery that they like the same artist reaffirms her belief that Jennifer may be different from her father's past girlfriends. Although she is not looking for anyone to take her mother's place, Pam becomes more interested in Jennifer now that she knows someone else who appreciates Emily Carr's work.*

#### **Constructing Meaning**

According to Emily Carr, Pam's favorite artist, "Nothing is dead. Not even a corpse. It moves into the elements when the spirit has left." Do you agree or disagree with this statement?

*The answers to this question will vary. Some students may feel that the quote is very true. They may see life as a continuation of energy that does not end with death. However, some students may disagree with this sentiment. They may have different opinions about the finality of death.*

### **Teachable Skills**

**Recognizing Setting** Much of this story takes place at Pam's school, home, and at Lynn Canyon Park. Ask your students to create a drawing or painting of one of these locations based on the descriptions from the novel.

**Describing Actions or Events** Mr. Bartell, Pam's English teacher, teaches her class social dance. To Pam's horror, she is forced to dance with Mr. Bartell. Ask your students to write a summary of this scene. Then, ask the students to write a paragraph that explains why they themselves do or do not enjoy dancing. If they do like to dance, ask them to describe their favorite dance step.

**Recognizing Details** Pam's little sister, April, died of sudden infant death syndrome at eight months old. Ask your students to research information on SIDS. Then, ask them to write a one to two-page report on the syndrome.

**Responding to Literature** This story has many characters with very different personalities. Ask your students to choose one character they identify most with. Then have them write a response on their reasons for their choice.