

CASSIDY WASSERMAN

# ON GUARD!

"A great story about a kid finding her footing (and a cool new sport!) despite the shifting sands of divorce."

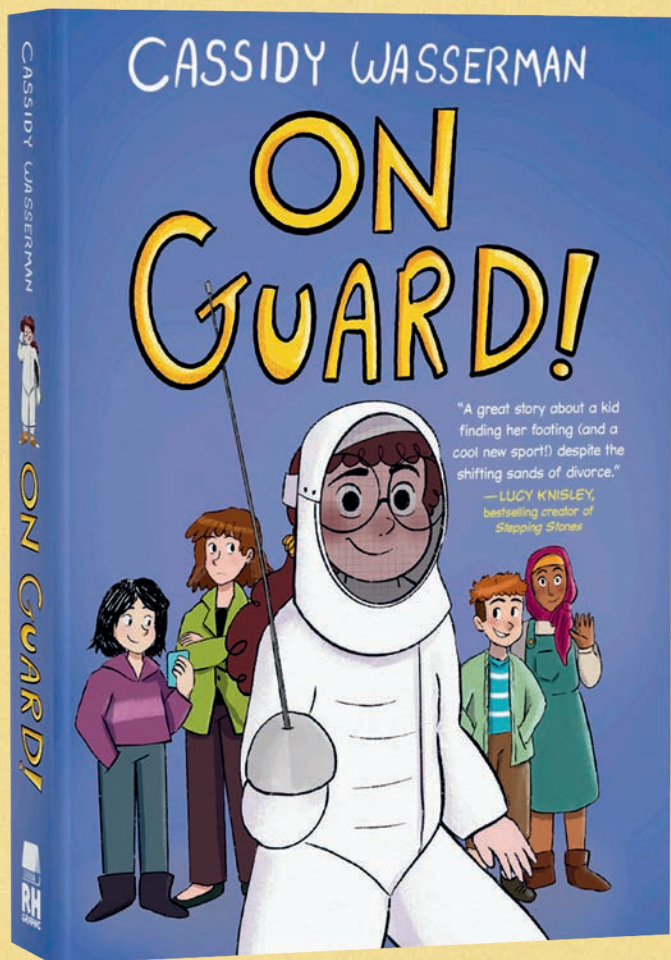
—LUCY KNISLEY,  
bestselling creator of  
*Stepping Stones*



EDUCATORS' GUIDE

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

On guard? Ready? Fence!

Grace isn't ready for a new school year. Her best friend Ava dropped her at the end of last year, the dust is still settling from her parents' messy divorce, and things are not going well between Grace and her mom. Mothers and daughters are always so close in movies, but that's never been Grace and her mom. So now Grace has no friends, no hobbies (band was Ava's thing), and home feels even more complicated than school. There's not a single place Grace can just relax. Until she sees the school's fencing club practicing. They look so sure of themselves. So steady. It may not solve everything . . . but could this be a place Grace can finally belong and be herself?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Cassidy Wasserman** is an artist in the game industry and is making her graphic novel debut with *On Guard!* When she's not creating, Cassidy enjoys épée fencing, listening to soundtracks from musicals, and agility training with her dog, Zag.

Cassidy lives in the mountains of Maine, where she is working on her next graphic novel. Find her online at [cassidywasserman.com](http://cassidywasserman.com) and connect with her on Instagram at [@caswasshere](https://www.instagram.com/caswasshere).





## DEAR READER,

This is Cassidy Wasserman, the author of *On Guard!* Thank you so much for reading my book. I wanted to tell you a bit more about the story behind the story.

While *On Guard!* is fiction, some of Grace's story is inspired by pieces of my own life. I was a little older than Grace when my parents split, and I did protest their original custody agreement. Unlike Grace, I did not have a fencing team at my school to help me through such a turbulent time. But I loved to draw and read—my pencil was my épée. Today, I have a pencil and a sword.

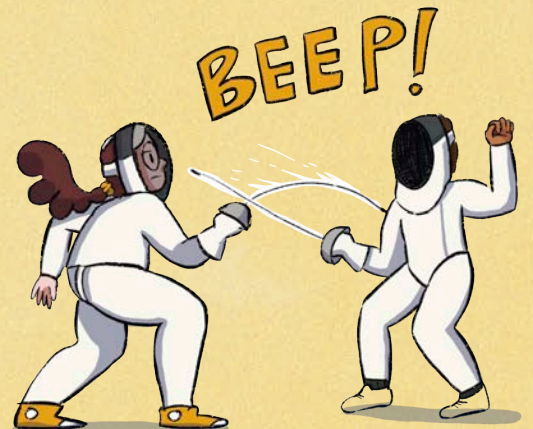
After college, I was also able to finally fulfill my dream of taking up fencing. When I started to fence, I realized what a great tool it became for my mental health, and it helped me unpack my past. Maybe my own experiences could help someone?

A lot of media portrays a mother-daughter relationship as this beautiful, best-friend bond. Inseparable and unbreakable. But that isn't the reality for everyone, and it certainly wasn't the reality for me. Grace's mom is fictional, but my relationship with my own mom has always been complicated. Seeing all of these TV shows and movies about moms and daughters made me angry; I could not understand why my life wasn't like *Rory Gilmore's*! Then, around fifth grade, I read Gennifer Choldenko's *Notes from a Liar and Her Dog*, and it was the first story I had ever read that felt similar to my relationship with my mom. It was also the first time I felt like I wasn't alone. This was my biggest reason for writing *On Guard!*, to help readers know that they are not alone or doing anything wrong.

*On Guard!* originally began as a story about losing your best friend, with the divorce being just a backdrop. But as I wrote it, I realized this story was about mothers and daughters, and how we need to learn to advocate for ourselves. This is one of the many exciting and confusing things about writing books: Sometimes the real story has to find you along the way.

Thank you again for reading this book. I hope you enjoy Grace's story and maybe even consider trying out an épée yourself!

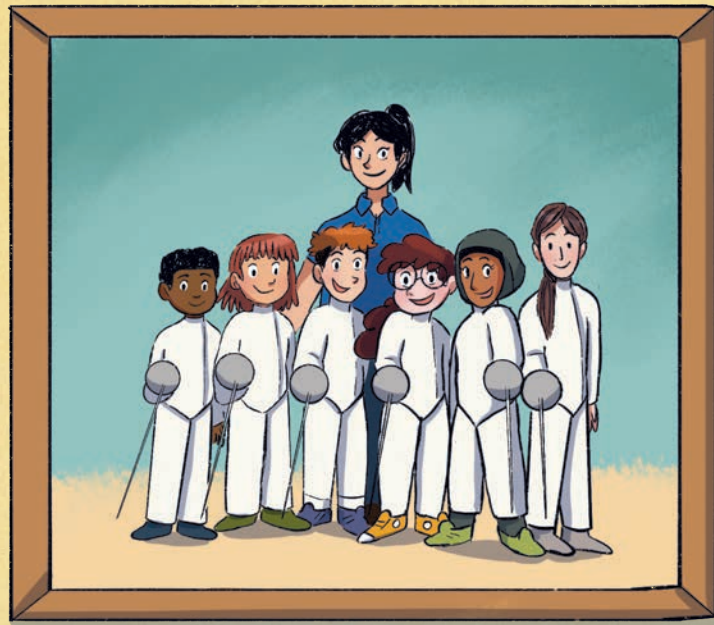
Cassidy Wasserman





# PRE-READING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Spend some time looking at the front cover of the book. What do you notice? What questions do you have? Who do you think each of the characters are?
2. On the back cover of the book, it states, "Find your people. Find your voice." From this tagline, what do you anticipate will be the themes of the story?
3. Grace is about to enter seventh grade. What emotions do you think she might be having? How would you feel if you were Grace? Have you ever not looked forward to the start of the school year?
4. In addition to managing the typical challenges of middle school, Grace's parents have recently gotten divorced and she travels between houses. Grace and her father get along well, while the relationship with her mother is strained. How might these added complications impact her as she begins seventh grade?
5. Have you ever felt like you didn't have a space where you could relax and be yourself? What makes you feel most "at home"?
6. In the face of change, two constants from which Grace takes comfort are her cat and her sketchbook. Where do you turn when things are tough?
7. Read the author's letter included in this guide. In it, the author writes, "We need to learn to advocate for ourselves." Was there a time when you had to advocate for yourself with a friend or a parent? What were you feeling beforehand? How did you feel afterward?
8. In the story, Grace discovers fencing and finds a place where she makes friends, has fun, and builds confidence. Have you found something that does the same for you? If not, is there something you've been wanting to try?

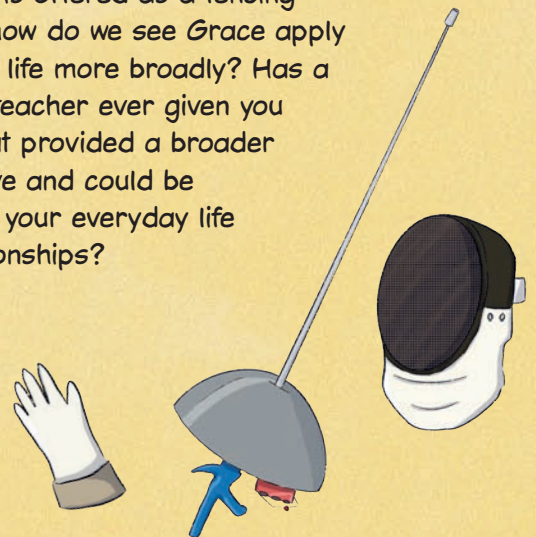


MARSHALL MIDDLE  
FENCING CLUB  
GRADE 7



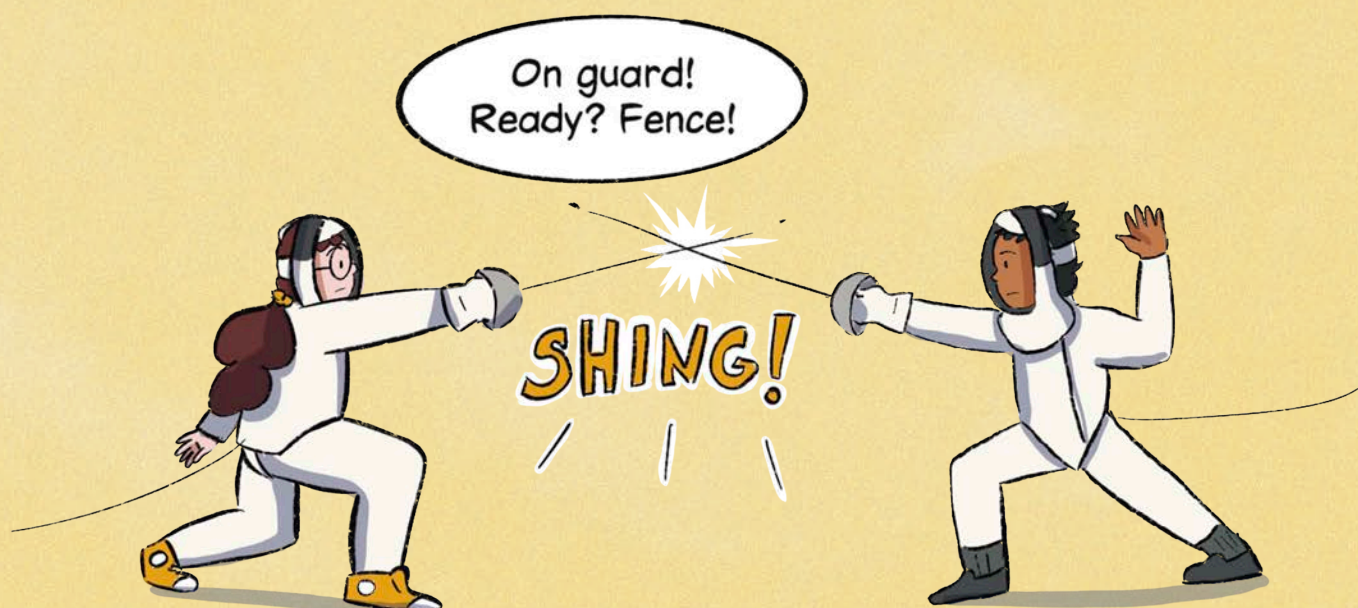
# QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Graphic novels use combinations of textual and illustrative techniques to tell the story. As you read, take note of how these features convey emotion, sound, and movement. What examples can you identify? (Fuzzy/soft edges differentiate thoughts from spoken text; motion lines/emanata to indicate emotion and movement; onomatopoeia and font to indicate sound)
2. In the opening pages of the graphic novel, we are introduced to Grace and her parents. She receives starkly different reactions from her father and mother about her first-day look. What do the differing reactions reveal about her relationship with each of her parents? How do their reactions impact her attitude and behavior? How do you respond to other people's opinions about you?
3. On the bus ride to school, Grace thinks about her friendship with Ava. In that memory sequence, the author uses several techniques to differentiate it from the rest of the story (pp. 12–14). What differences do you notice? (Soft edges on frames of panels, blurred text when Grace stops listening)
4. Grace's parents recently got divorced. When she learns that she will alternate living with her father for one week and her mother the next, she gets very upset that she wasn't consulted on the custody arrangement. Was there a time when a big decision impacted you but you weren't given a voice or a choice? How did that make you feel?
5. Without a best friend by her side, Grace feels alone and unsure about seventh grade. Despite her father's encouragement to make new friends, she spends the second week of school by herself. Then the fencing coach notices her and invites her to consider joining the team. Ava visits several other groups before begrudgingly deciding to add her name to the club list for fencing. How might the coach's invitation have influenced Grace? When have you entered a new and/or uncertain situation? How did you meet new friends or decide to try something new?
6. After a frustrating evening where Grace feels ignored by her mother, things escalate when she shouts, "You don't even see me! You just want to get back at Dad! . . . You're selfish!" (p. 99) In response, her mother slaps her. Grace begins sobbing, and her mother sends her to her room. How did this scene make you feel? Why do you think the author chose to include it? How does this act of physical violence change their relationship?
7. Even after Asher and Grace become friends, practicing together and texting each other, she continues to eat lunch alone in the gym. It isn't until Asher initiates their eating lunch together that they really get to know one another. Why do you think Grace remains hesitant to initiate deepening this friendship? In the pages that follow (pp. 107–109), we see several other friends join them at lunch. What visual cues show how Grace's demeanor changes over that period of time?
8. At Asher's house, Grace sees the ease with which Asher and their mom interact. She appears elated and then saddened (p. 115). In the following days, time spent with her mother is juxtaposed with time spent with Asher (p. 119). How do these pages portray Grace's feelings about these very different relationships?
9. At fencing practice, Coach Lore observes Grace's stance and offers her advice: "If you're backed up against the end of the strip, cornered . . . you want to be sturdy and calm. Breathe . . . and proceed." (p. 122) While this is offered as a fencing strategy, how do we see Grace apply this in her life more broadly? Has a coach or teacher ever given you advice that provided a broader perspective and could be applied to your everyday life and relationships?





10. After another particularly tense interaction with her mother, instead of holding back as she usually does, *Grace* shouts, "Shut up!" (p. 136) *Grace* is upset and embarrassed by her behavior, worrying about what her teammates will think about her. The situation continues to escalate when they return home, and *Grace* exclaims, "I HATE YOU!" (p. 143) and blocks her mother on her cell phone. Why do you think *Grace* reacted this way in this instance? How might she have handled the situation differently? When have you been pushed to a breaking point? How did you respond?
11. After witnessing the end of the explosive argument with her mother, *Grace's* father intervenes to separate them. What happens when *Grace* and her father talk the next day? How does this show the importance of speaking up and setting boundaries? What boundaries have you set to safeguard your emotional and mental health?
12. *Grace* opens up to *Asher* about her challenging relationship with her mom (pp. 167–169). In response, they share their experiences as children of divorce. What effect does this conversation have on their friendship?
13. Coach Lore says, "You can't control what the other fencer is doing . . . So focus on what you can control. Your own moves." (pp. 185–186) How does this piece of advice help *Grace* with her fencing? How does *Grace* apply it to her relationship with her mom?
14. Despite her growing interest in fencing and developing friendship with *Asher*, *Grace* continues to be preoccupied with fears and anxieties about interacting with her former best friend *Ava*. Because of this, she hides during lunch, drops out of the band, and tries to make herself invisible. She's even distracted and performs poorly while fencing because *Ava* is in the room. What happens when the former best friends finally run into each other (p. 194)? How does this help *Grace* to think differently about her relationship with her mother?
15. Heading into the final bout of Marshall Middle School's first fencing competition, the team is behind by one point. After parrying back and forth, it's down to the wire and *Grace* has tied the score. On the last point, her opponent scores a touch, and her team loses. *Grace's* teammates rush to her side, cheering and congratulating her on her efforts. How does their support affect her reaction to a tough loss?
16. At the novel's end, *Grace's* mother comes to watch her fencing match. Afterward, her mother offers an apology and suggests the two have ice cream. *Grace* declines and suggests an alternative option at a later date. She inhales and exhales. How does this interaction reveal the potential for a change in their relationship? How have the characters changed in the way they interact?





# POST-READING QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. The title of the graphic novel is *On Guard!* How does this title apply to Grace's personality? In what ways do you see Grace change over the course of the story?
2. Grace and her mother have a strained relationship. Grace's mother doesn't appear to be interested in listening (cutting her off, changing the subject, or simply not responding to what Grace is saying). Both characters leave the interactions frustrated and feeling their intentions and motivations are misunderstood. Is there a relationship in your life where this happens or has happened? How did you move forward?
3. Over the course of the story, despite differences in their personalities, Grace and Asher become good friends. How would you describe Grace? How would you describe Asher? What shared experiences deepen their friendship? How does Grace's friendship with Asher help her to face challenges in other relationships? How do your friends help you to become more like the person you aspire to be?
4. Grace borrows strategies from fencing to better handle issues in her emotional life and relationships. What strategies have you learned from your hobbies or extracurricular pursuits that you could or already do apply to better address the challenges you face in everyday life?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. This story uses fencing terminology that may be unfamiliar. When you come across an unfamiliar term, write it down, with a definition or a picture to illustrate its meaning. Here are some examples to include:
  - épée
  - bout
  - on guard
  - advance
  - retreat
  - stance
  - strip
  - touch
  - block
  - parry
2. The book includes a spread of Fun Fencing Facts. What did you know about fencing before reading *On Guard!*? To learn more about the sport of fencing, visit [usafencing.org](http://usafencing.org). You can also search the internet for youth fencing programs in your area.
3. The book also includes a Concept Art Gallery, where the author shares some early character sketches. Grace likes to draw and uses her sketchbook throughout the story. Make your own sketch of what you think might happen next in Grace's story. Does she continue fencing? What happens with her relationship with her mother? What fun things might Grace and Asher do together outside of fencing?



*This guide was prepared by Alicia Blowers. Alicia is a school librarian and coach of young athletes in Alexandria, VA, whose mission is to foster connection and build community through books and reading.*



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