

# The Search for a Real Family

by Pat Scales

Upper elementary school through middle school

## *Sister Spider Knows All* by Adrian Fogelin

A contemporary coming-of-age story that touches on themes of social class, belonging, and the meaning of family, *Sister Spider Knows All* by Adrian Fogelin can provide rich topics for discussion in the classroom. Neither sentimental nor condescending, 12-year-old Roxanne's narrative is marked by wry humor and follows her struggle to find her place in the world even as she learns to appreciate her nontraditional family.

### About the Story

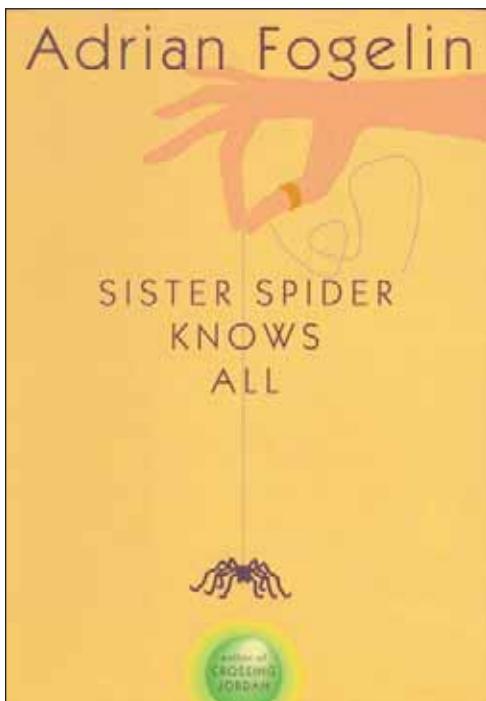
Roxanne was abandoned by her mother when she was only three

months old and left in the care of her grandmother, Mimi, who lives in a small trailer and earns a meager living by selling knickknacks at a local flea market on weekends. John Martin, Roxanne's 23-year-old cousin, lives with them, and contributes to their livelihood by working a construction job when he isn't attending classes at a nearby community college. Roxanne never doubts Mimi's love, but the truth is that she harbors a desire to know more about her mother. Mimi isn't willing to talk about her missing daughter, and John Martin is too focused on the present to worry about the past. Roxanne isn't an especially good student, and she feels like an outcast at school because of her family situation. John Martin encourages her to try harder so that she might have opportunities to better herself in life, but she only aspires to work at the flea market

alongside Mimi and interact with the other vendors, who are like family to her.

Life in the trailer gets a little more interesting when John Martin brings home a new girlfriend. Lucy is the daughter of a local doctor and is intrigued by her boyfriend's family. She is quite aware of the social class differences between her family and his, but she admires and envies his family's love for one another. At the same time, she recognizes some ways that she can help Mimi tackle her health problems and Roxanne deal with issues related to her missing mother. She proposes that Mimi stop smoking, eat a healthier diet, and quit working long weekend hours. Mimi realizes that Lucy is right about her unhealthy lifestyle, but she doesn't appreciate such advice coming from an outsider. Then Roxanne finds a diary that her mother had hidden in the trailer just before leaving town. Unsure about what to do with her new discovery, Roxanne confides in Lucy and, with a little prodding, begins reading her mother's secret and innermost thoughts.

Making a connection to her mother's past turns out to be very therapeutic for Roxanne. When she sees her mother's handwriting and reads her mother's words, she understands why she left town. Like Roxanne, her mother was the victim of social class differences, and like her, her mother could see no way out. Finally, Roxanne understands what John Martin has been trying to tell her: there is a way out, but only if she works hard at school. She cannot worry about the snobbish kids in her class, or the



**Fogelin, Adrian.**  
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**Gr. 5-8.**

busybodies like Mrs. Tully, the town snob and gossip. She has to try harder. She has to do this for her future. Roxanne learns that her mother came close to giving her a regular family, but she realizes now that Mimi, John Martin, and even Lucy are all she really needs. And she will work hard to make things easier for Mimi—the woman who ultimately does give her a real family.

## Discussion Questions

- Define *family*. How are Roxanne, John Martin, and Mimi a family? Discuss how Roxanne, Mimi, Danny Swain the Tire King, Spice Marie, Miss Louise, and the other vendors at the flea market are a family. Lucy, John Martin's girlfriend, is from a very different type of family. What about Roxanne's family is so appealing to Lucy?
- Roxanne never doubts Mimi's love for her, but she has a need to know why her mother abandoned her. How does Lucy help Roxanne come to terms with her mother's disappearance?
- Social class is very evident in this book. Discuss how social class differences affect Roxanne. How is Lucy blind to the social class differences between her family and John Martin's family? How does Mrs. Tully epitomize the social class structure of the town?
- Roxanne says that at school she is invisible. How does she work at being invisible? Discuss how the tornado makes Roxanne popular for a day. How does she respond to this sudden popularity?
- Explain what Roxanne means when she says that the flea market is "the world's best parade." Joelle, a classmate, calls it a "freak show." How is Joelle's

view of the flea market a snobbish view?

- John Martin encourages Roxanne to work harder in school. Mimi doesn't discourage Roxanne from being a better student, but she doesn't encourage her either. At what point does Mimi begin to see a better future for Roxanne?
- Lucy is a positive influence on John Martin, Mimi, and Roxanne. How does Lucy cross the line between being judgmental and being helpful? At what point does she realize her mistake? What is Lucy searching for?
- Explain the title of the story.

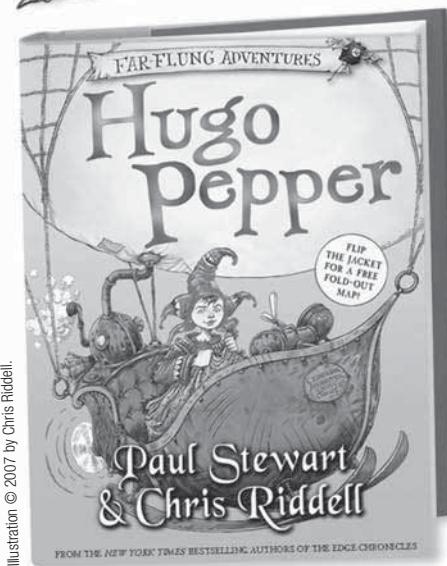


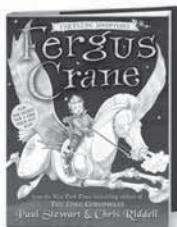
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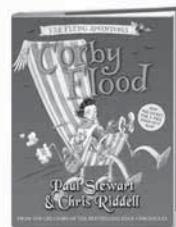
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## Activities

- Write a diary entry that Roxanne might write after reading her mother's diary.
- Roxanne and her grandmother sell perfume bottles and various other items at the flea market. Bring an item to class that you would like to sell to Roxanne and Mimi. Prepare a sales pitch for the item.
- Write a paper that Roxanne might write for English class called "My Most Unforgettable Character."
- Be a journalist and write a story for the local newspaper that appears the day after the tornado hit the flea market. Include interviews with Roxanne and other vendors at the flea market.

## Related Bibliography

Cleaver, Vera, and Bill Cleaver. *Where the Lilies Bloom*. 1969. 224p. HarperCollins, \$15.99 (9780397311118); HarperTrophy, paper, \$5.99 (9780064470056).

Gr. 5–up. Mary Call, the second of four children, promises her father on his deathbed that she will continue wild-crafting to make enough money to keep the orphaned family together. When a cruel landlord and the local welfare department try to interfere, Mary Call is faced with the reality and guilt of breaking her father's death wish.

Kornblatt, Marc. *Izzy's Place*. 2003. 128p. Simon & Schuster/Margaret K. McElderry, \$16.95 (9780689846397).

Gr. 4–7. Ten-year-old Henry Stone is sent to spend the summer with his recently widowed grandmother while his parents work on their troubled marriage. He is doomed to spend idle hours at his grandmother's jewelry store until he befriends Mr. Fine, an elderly neighbor.

MacLachlan, Patricia. *Journey*. 1991. 112p. Yearling, paper, \$5.50 (9780440408093).

Gr. 4–7. Eleven-year-old Journey spends the summer searching for clues as to why his mother abandoned him and his sister, Cat, until his grandfather uses photography to help Journey understand his mother's disappearance.

Paulsen, Gary. *Alida's Song*. 1999. 96p. Yearling, paper, \$5.50 (9780440414742).

Gr. 5–up. In this companion novel to *The Cookcamp* (Orchard, 1991), a 14-year-old boy seeks a life outside his unstable family and joins his grandmother to work on a farm where she is a cook.

Ryan, Pam Muñoz. *Becoming Naomi León*. 2004. 240p. Scholastic, \$16.95 (9780439269698); paper, \$5.99 (9780439269971).

Gr. 4–7. Naomi León and her brother Owen are abandoned by their mother and go to live with their great-grandmother. When their mother returns and tries to take them away, Gram and the children take off in search of the children's father. For a "Book Strategies" article about this book, see "Crossing Borders, Finding Family" in the January 2007 issue of *Book Links*.

Ryan, Pam Muñoz. *Esperanza Rising*. 2000. 272p. Scholastic, \$15.95 (9780439120418); paper, \$5.99 (9780439120425).

Gr. 6–9. When 14-year-old Esperanza's father is killed, she and her mother leave Mexico and come to the United States, where they find work in farm labor camps. Accustomed to a much better life, Esperanza is not prepared for hard work and the responsibility of providing for her family when her mother becomes too ill to work.

Voigt, Cynthia. *Dacey's Song*. 1982. 208p. Simon & Schuster/Atheneum, \$17.95 (9780689309441); Pulse, paper, \$6.99 (9780689851315).

Gr. 7–up. In this Newbery Medal

winner and sequel to *Homecoming* (Simon & Schuster/Atheneum, 1981), Dacey Tillerman is having a difficult time forgetting about her momma, adjusting to life with her grandmother, and learning to both love and be loved.

White, Ruth. *Belle Prater's Boy*. 1996. 208p. Farrar, \$17.50 (9780374306687); Yearling, paper, \$6.50 (9780440413721).

Gr. 5–9. In this Newbery Honor Book, 12-year-old Woodrow comes to live with his grandparents in Coal Station, Virginia, after his mother disappears without a trace. He finds a soul mate in his cousin Gypsy, who is dealing with the truth about her father's death. In the sequel, *The Search for Belle Prater* (Farrar, 2005), Woodrow and Gypsy set out to find Woodrow's mother in a search that begins with a mysterious telephone call on Woodrow's birthday.

## Sampling Fogelin

*Anna Casey's Place in the World*. 2003. 224p. Peachtree, \$14.95 (9781561452491); paper, \$6.95 (9781561452958). Gr. 4–6.

*The Big Nothing*. 2004. 224p. Peachtree, \$14.95 (9781561453269); paper, \$6.95 (9781561453887). Gr. 5–8.

*Crossing Jordan*. 2000. 160p. Peachtree, \$14.95 (9781561452156); paper, \$6.95 (9781561452811). Gr. 5–8.

*My Brother's Hero*. 2002. 224p. Peachtree, \$14.95 (9781561452743); paper, \$6.95 (9781561453528). Gr. 5–8.

*The Real Question*. 2006. 240p. Peachtree, \$15.95 (9781561453832). Gr. 7–up.

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