



Mermaid Tears: A Michaels Middle School Story

Susan L. Read

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(258pp)

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Mermaid Tears is a touching middle grade story about the hard work of self-acceptance in the face of challenges.

Wrought with symbolism and heartache, Susan L. Read's *Mermaid Tears* is a middle grade novel about a young girl overcoming her mental health challenges.

Sarah is fascinated with mermaids. Their lives seem so much easier than hers: she is teased at school, disappoints her parents, and struggles to understand her explosive feelings. As Sarah acts out, pushing away those she loves, she begins to feel that she will never be worthy of love. She decides to run away. But with the guidance of a kind teacher, she realizes that maybe she is worthy just the way she is.

The first half of the story centers around Sarah struggling to understand her feelings. The beginning is slow—exposition mixed with blow-by-blow descriptions of Sarah's day. But then the plot picks up with Sarah lashing out at bully, Shannon; the earlier details begin to seem more relevant, and the clues to Sarah's diagnosis come together.

Told from Sarah's point of view, the story makes clear the damage that is done when parents mitigate their children's feelings. Sarah tries to explain to her parents that she cannot control her behavior, resulting in a camping disaster, but is met with distrust. The second half of the story follows Sarah's diagnosis of bipolar disorder and her work to manage it.

One of the story's strengths is that it features Sarah's parents' growth as well: they begin to realize they were too harsh to her, and they seek family counseling. Mental health is never treated as an issue that one should deal with alone, but rather as a valid, ongoing struggle that friends and family ought to seek to understand. And other strong role models also provide guidance for Sarah, reminding her of her value. Her grandmother encourages art as an outlet for her emotions, and kind Mr. Douglas is the first to realize that Sarah's struggles are not some personal failure, but something she herself does not understand.

The mermaid motif is strong throughout the story. Sarah collects sea glass (mermaid tears) and ponders what could cause a mermaid to cry, when their lives seem so perfect. While the mermaids at first represent escape, and the sea represents a faraway world where no one could hurt Sarah, they gradually become a sign of victory. Sarah learns to accept even her messier parts, the tears alongside the beauty. Her mother encourages her to hang up her mermaid art, and the symbolism is epitomized in Sarah's decision to finish the knitted mermaid she started with her grandmother, but abandoned when she felt too overwhelmed. The sea glass too becomes a sign of acceptance, a thing broken and yet turned into something beautiful, much like how Sarah feels. The poetry—usually involving mermaids—that is scattered throughout the book is another view into Sarah's mind.

The book ends full of hope, not presenting a fully "cured" Sarah, but one who realizes that she is worthy of love even as she is. She learns how to deal in a healthy manner with her disorder. A sweet surprise at the end of the story

closes it on a heartwarming note, with the reminder that the lessons learned from one own's struggles can often be just the encouragement that another person needs.

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VIVIAN TURNBULL (July 16, 2021)

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