



RUNAWAY  
Wendelin van Draanen  
Laurel Leaf Books/Random House  
Fiction  
Hardcover: 0375835229  
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288 pages

**Summary:**

Twelve-year-old Holly Janquell's father died when she was very young and her mother died two years ago from a drug overdose. After being abused in a series of foster homes, she decides to run away. Holly makes her way to the West coast to become a "sea gypsy" and survives by stealing food and finding any place she can to sleep such as caves, under porches, in a movie theater, and in a cardboard box. Along the way, Holly keeps up with the journal and poetry assignment that a teacher gave her. In the journal, Holly describes the circumstances of her flight. More importantly, Holly vents her feelings of anger, hope, distrust, resilience, courage, forgiveness and healing. She discovers that she has the heart of a poet and writing poetry is a way to pour out her heart.

**About the author:**

**Wendelin Van Draanen** (born on the 6th of January, Chicago, Illinois) is an American author of children's books. She lives in California with her husband and two sons. The daughter of chemists who emigrated to the U.S. from Holland, she worked as a math teacher and then as a high school computer science teacher before becoming a full-time writer. Her books feature spunky lead characters and very real classroom dialogue. Van Draanen is probably best-known for her Sammy Keyes series of novels, featuring a teenage detective named Samantha ("Sammy") Keyes. Sammy Keyes and the Hotel Thief won the 1999 Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Juvenile Mystery. In 2004-2005 Van Draanen wrote a four-book series for younger readers called Shredderman, about a 5th grade boy who assumes a secret identity to help him win the battle for truth and justice. These two series manage to be character driven and very funny while featuring fast-paced plots. Van Draanen also wrote the standalone teen romance Flipped, which won the Judy Lopez memorial award, in a he-said she-said style about two protagonists alternately presenting their perspective on a shared set of events. Her 2006 book *Runaway* is about a girl named Holly who tries to escape from her latest foster home. The 12th book of the Sammy Keyes series was released in October of 2008. (Wikipedia)

Author's website: [www.wendelinvandraanen.com](http://www.wendelinvandraanen.com)



## Themes:

Abuse/Child Abuse  
Homelessness  
Journal Writing  
Orphans  
Poetry  
Runaways

## Pre-reading discussion questions:

1. How would you treat a homeless classmate?
2. What should social services do to protect children from abusive foster homes?
3. If a foster child is abused, what should he or she do?
4. Is it ever ethical to steal, even if it is necessary for survival? Why or why not?
5. If you had to run away, like Holly, what necessities would you take with you, and why?
6. What are some of the benefits of keeping a journal?

## Discussion Questions

1. Describe Holly's life with the Benders?
2. Do you think Holly's mother was abusive? Why or why not?
3. When Holly first says, "Words can't fix my life," what did she mean?
4. What is the one important thing that Holly needed when she ran away and why was it important?
5. Why are dogs so important to Holly?
6. Holly uses sarcasm throughout the story. What is sarcasm? Why does Holly use it? What does it do for her?
7. Although Holly complains about keeping a journal, she keeps up with it. Why does she do this? What does the journal do for her?
8. How does Holly grow as a poet throughout the book? How do her poems parallel her personal growth?
9. What qualities does Holly possess that help her travel, find food and shelter, and survive?
10. Why doesn't Holly want to describe herself as homeless? In the end, how does her admission of her situation help her find a home?
11. A homeless woman tells Holly, "omeless don' write in journals!" Do you think that is true? How did Holly learn to use correct grammar and become such a descriptive writer?
12. Discuss how Holly felt when the lunch wagon lady defended her from Venus.
13. If you were alone in the world, with no family, no friends, no home, what could you still be thankful for?
14. Holly compares her experiences as a runaway minor to the experiences of runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad. What similarities do the two situations have: What are the differences?
15. Holly is forced to lie and steal to survive. Is it okay to lie or steal under certain circumstances?
16. If Holly was a boy, do you think she would have done anything differently?
17. Holly's story is a story of survival. How is it similar to other survival stories? How is it different?
18. What does the myth of the Blue Lady represent to Holly?
19. Why does Holly prefer the term "gypsy" to "homeless"? What is the difference?
20. How does Holly define freedom? Does she ever find it?



Write your own poem about Holly's experiences. Choose from one of these forms:

*Forms of poetry:*

Cinquain

Poetry with five lines. Line 1 has one word (the title). Line 2 has two words that describe the title. Line 3 has three words that tell the action. Line 4 has four words that express the feeling, and line 5 has one word which recalls the title.

Couplet

A couplet has rhyming stanzas made up of two lines.

Narrative

A poem that tells a story.

**Vocabulary words:**

1. Skittish (p.13)
2. Ironic (p.35)
3. Shinnied (p. 39)
4. Loath (p. 53)
5. Paranoid (p. 53)
6. Putrid (p. 64)
7. Plucky (p.78)
8. Shrewd (p. 78)
9. Dilapidated (p. 90)
10. Uppity (p. 130)
11. Rancid (p. 170)
12. Sabotaged (p. 217)

**Bibliography of books about homeless children:**

Brooklyn Bridge by Karen Hesse

In 1903 Brooklyn, 14-year-old Joseph Michtom helps out in his father's toy-making business and tells the joys and heartaches in the lives of Russian-Jewish immigrants at the turn of the 20th century. A parallel narrative is devoted to abandoned children who forge a life for themselves under the shelter of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Can't Get There From Here by Todd Strasser.

Teens survive on the streets of New York City by becoming a family.

Homecoming by Cynthia Voigt

After their mother abandons them in a mall parking lot, four children travel to where their only known relative, a rich aunt, lives. If they go to the police they may be separated from one another and placed in foster homes. If they make it to the aunt's house, however, they might be able to stay together. After they've discovered they have a grandmother, they find themselves on the road once more to Salisbury Maryland.

Little Match Girl by Hans Christian Anderson

An unnamed girl is sent out into the cold by her abusive father to sell matches. One night, after a day of no sales, the child, lights her matches and sees happy visions. The next morning she is found frozen to death in the snow.

Little Princess by Frances Hodgson Burnett

Young Sara Crewe, adored only child of a rich, indulgent father, arrives at Miss Minchin's Seminary for Young Ladies. When her father dies, the unscrupulous Miss Minchin reduces the girl to rags and relegates her to the attic. Sara demonstrates that purity of spirit can overcome material poverty, displaying the nobility of a real princess throughout her travail.

Monkey Island by Paula Fox

An eleven-year-old abandoned boy learns to survive on the streets of New York City.



### Bibliography of journal-style tales of teens:

Alice, I Think by Susan Juby

Homeschooled Alice agrees to attend public high school and records the craziness that goes on  
Catherine Called Birdy by Karen Cushman

An independent young maiden who lives in the 13<sup>th</sup> century doesn't want to be married off  
Life as We Knew It by Susan Beth Pfeffer

Miranda records the end of the world as it was after a comet hits the moon  
Princess Diaries by Meg Cabot

Mia Thermopolis learns she is the heir to the throne of Genovia and learns how to cope  
Runaway by Wendelin Van Draanan

The story of Holly's struggle to survive after running away from a series of abusive foster homes  
Skeleton Creek by Patrick Carman

A housebound boy investigates strange occurrences in his town by viewing emailed video clips  
Spud by John Van de Ruit

Spud recounts the hilarious life of an all-boys boarding school  
Thura's Diary by Thura Al-Windawi

19-year-old Thura describes life at the beginning of the war in Iraq and the chaos that followed

### Local websites for organizations that help the homeless and runaways:

<http://www.heartoftexashomeless.org>

Heart of Texas Homeless Coalition: The HOT Homeless Coalition was formed for charitable and educational purposes relating to the promotion, support, development, and furtherance of rehabilitation services, resources and treatment programs for persons who are homeless in the Heart of Texas Region of the State of Texas.

<http://www.centraltexasyouthservices.org>

Central Texas Youth Services, shelter and services for runaways and kids thinking about running away. 1-800-421-TEEN (8336). Assists in educating kids about the national SafePlace program through the National Runaway Switchboard: 1.800.RUNAWAY.

### Websites of organizations that help homeless and street kids:

<http://www.standupforkids.org>

The mission of STANDUP FOR KIDS is to help homeless and street kids.

<http://www.nationalhomeless.org>

<http://www.saferchild.org/homeless.htm>

Safer Child's mission is dedicated to providing parents, caregivers and educators worldwide with the resources and information they need in order to help all children grow up healthy, safe and happy.

<http://www.familyhomelessness.org/>

National Center on Family Homelessness

<http://www.covenanthouse.org>

Covenant House cares for thousands of homeless and runaway kids who might otherwise weather a dangerous night alone on the streets.

### Other websites:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780375835223>

The official Random House website which includes author bibliography, reviews and teacher's guide.

<http://www.teenread.com/reviews/0375835229.asp>

