

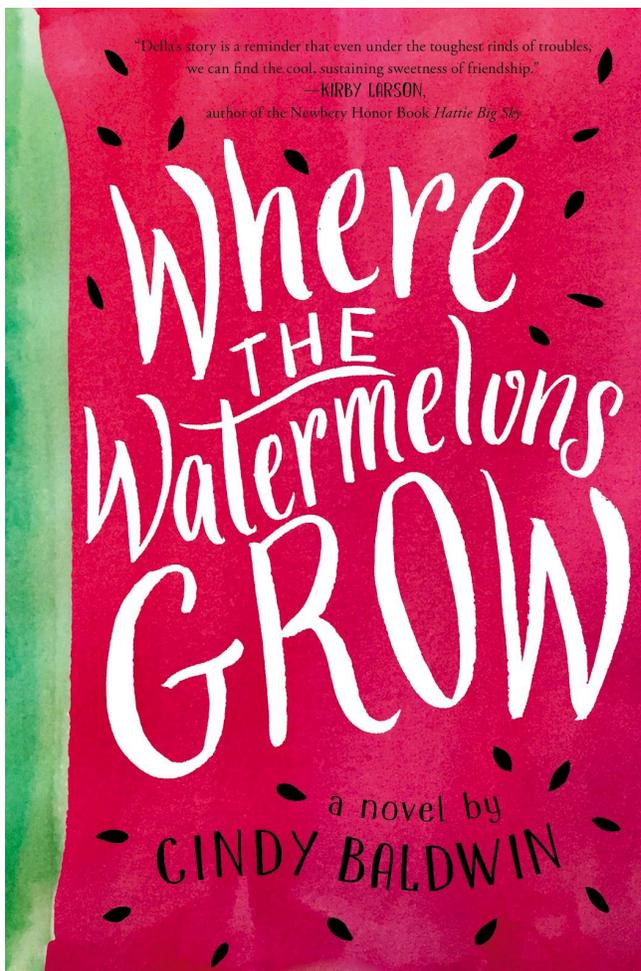


middle grade at heart  
discussions & resources for  
teachers, parents, and kids

## WHERE THE WATERMELONS GROW Discussion Guide

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### What's it about?

When twelve-year-old Della Kelly finds her mother furiously digging black seeds from a watermelon in the middle of the night and talking to people who aren't there, Della worries that it's happening again—that the sickness that put her mama in the hospital four years ago is back. That her mama is going to be hospitalized for months like she was last time.

With her daddy struggling to save the farm and her mama in denial about what's happening, it's up to Della to heal her mama for good. And she knows just how she'll do it: with a jar of the Bee Lady's magic honey, which has mended the wounds and woes of Maryville, North Carolina, for generations.

But when the Bee Lady says that the solution might have less to do with fixing Mama's brain and more to do with healing her own heart, Della must learn that love means accepting her mama just as she is.



## Author Interview

### **1. What was the inspiration behind *WHERE THE WATERMELONS GROW*?**

Four years ago, I was singing the children’s song “Down By The Bay” to my daughter when I became captivated by the story at the heart of the song: a child who had run away from home because their mother was losing touch with reality, and they couldn’t bear to see their mom so sick. I found myself thinking about that story a lot—I just couldn’t let that little girl and her mom go, especially because I, too, was a disabled mom, grappling with the guilt of knowing that I would probably never be able to be the kind of mother I would like to be as a result of my serious illness. As soon as the story idea came into my head, I also knew that I didn’t want it to end with the mother being cured. For me, a lot of my life has been a journey to accept that my disability is

incurable, but that my life can have value and meaning anyway. In most media, disabled characters have really only two endings: they die an inspiring death, or they are cured of their disability so that they can go on to live happy lives. I wanted to show that disability can be complicated and difficult, but also that it can be just one part of a full and happy life, and that even if your disability (or that of your family member) is never removed, it doesn’t mean that you can’t have a beautiful, meaningful life.

### **2. You’ve talked before about how this book explored your own insecurities about motherhood. How so?**

From the time I was a teenager, LONG before I had a kid, I worried about how I’d be able to balance my illness (cystic fibrosis) and parenting. I have always been anxious that my daughter might grow up resenting me for all the things I can’t provide. She has definitely had her own wrestle with what it means to be the daughter of a disabled mother; as a five-year-old, the mothers in her games are very often sick and unable to do much of anything interesting, which can be a knife through the heart for me to watch! *WATERMELONS* gave me a chance to explore the fears I have that my daughter might resent me because of my illness, and unpack them a little. In many ways, I wrote this book both for myself and for my daughter, to remind us both that being disabled doesn’t mean a mom loves her children any less—just that that love may sometimes look a bit different than other mothers in their community.

**3. While this is not an #ownvoices book, it delves deep into mental illness. Can you talk to us about the research that went into portraying Della's mother sensitively and what you learned along the way?**

LOTS of research! I spent a long time reading first-person accounts of living with schizophrenia—especially what it felt like to experience serious delusions and slowly lose touch with reality. I also read a fair bit from psychologists and other medical professionals, exploring things like when schizophrenia onset usually begins for young women, how schizophrenia is impacted by pregnancy and postpartum, what treatments are like for acute episodes, and what a patient's overall trajectory tends to be over their lifetime. I also had a number of friends and readers throughout my writing process—as I was drafting, after I'd finished initial drafts, and then after the book was accepted for publication—who answered my questions and pointed out places in the story where they felt my facts were a little off. I tried hard to make my portrayal feel honest but never sensationalized; mental illness in general, and schizophrenia in particular, tends to be written from such a voyeuristic perspective much of the time, and I didn't want that at all. In so much media, disabled characters exist only to prop up the journey of other characters around them, and I didn't want that for WATERMELONS—I wanted it to be the story of the whole family struggling through hard things together, and Della coming to see her mother as a fully-rounded person of great inherent worth, rather than having her worth tied to whether she was sick or not.

**4. Before WHERE THE WATERMELONS GROW, you considered yourself a YA writer. What made you decide to tackle MG and what do you love about it? How is it different than what you were writing before?**

Although I'd always written YA, I'd read equal amounts of YA and MG and actually been a middle grade book reviewer for a few years. I have always loved classic-feeling middle grade stories, and the way they explore that fascinating period when you feel caught between being a kid and being a grown-up. I knew I wanted to write MG someday, but before WATERMELONS, I'd never had an idea that shouted loud enough for me to write it! In some ways, YA and MG are similar, but there's also a lot of differences. Length, obviously, but the emotional journey a character experiences is also very different; middle grade books tend to be about making sense of the world around you and coming to recognize your place in a community. Often, in middle grade, books end with a character realizing and accepting family or community support that they haven't previously understood. In young adult, the emotional journey is often opposite—YA is very much about coming to understand who you are *separate* from your family and friends. It often deals with characters striking out alone, either emotionally or physically, and coming to recognize their own strength and who they are independent of other people. (There's a reason parents are so often missing or emotionally absent in YA!) In adolescence, kids are really caught in that middle place where they aren't really *children* anymore, but they're also not quite *teenagers*, and so they have a lot of characteristics of both. Once they're high-school age, though, kids usually feel much more solidly "adult;" they're not looking

back quite as much, but instead focused on things like relationships, college, future jobs, coming up with big dreams, and so forth. Obviously, there are exceptions for ALL these rules, but to me, those are some of the big differences in how you approach writing for preteens vs. teens!

**5. Every writer faces rejection on their path to publication. Were you ever rejected? What advice would you give to aspiring writers about rejection?**

Before I started trying to get an agent for WATERMELONS, I queried two other novels (both young adult). Between the two, I racked up two years and over 120 rejections! Trying to get WATERMELONS published was actually going to be the last thing I did before I quit for awhile. I was really discouraged, and felt like I would NEVER be able to write a book people actually wanted to read! I really feel like getting published takes two things: perseverance (you have to be willing to try again and again), and flexibility (you have to be willing to change what you're doing if it's not working for you). And rejection isn't all bad—rejections can be a huge window into what you still need to work on. For me, I learned from my rejections that I needed to work harder at making sure my story had enough tension in it, because that was something that a lot of my rejections said. I was able to take the advice from those rejections and write a better book—one that eventually got published!

**6. What are you working on next?**

I have another middle grade book coming out from HarperCollins, though the publication date hasn't been decided for that one yet. It's a story about making the scary choice to love again after a tragedy, and combines some of my favorite things, like music, donuts, and my hometown (Durham, NC)! I can't wait to reveal more information about that one down the road.

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## Discussion Questions

1. Della tells the bee stories to her sister Mylie to help her sleep or to help calm her down when she's upset. Do you think Della needed to hear the stories, too? What is it about stories that help bring us hope?
2. Della draws a chalk picture with her friend Arden—two halves of a sun, one side bright and yellow, one side dark and gray—and Della says she likes “the way the happiness and the sadness swirled together in the middle, two halves of a whole.” Do you think it's important to acknowledge and express both the good and bad, the happy and the sad in life? Why?
3. Miss Lorena and Thomas build a box library and fill it with books, including the copy of Emily Dickinson's poems that Della borrows. If you were to make a lending library, what books would you put in it?
4. The taste/sight of watermelons held so many strong memories and emotions for Della. What is a flavor that brings powerful memories and/or emotions for you?
5. Why do you think it was so difficult for Della's daddy to ask for help or talk about what was happening in their family? How did his reaction to the circumstances affect Della's reaction? How can we help the people in our lives who are going through difficult things feel more comfortable and safe talking about it?
6. Della admits that she thinks her mama's illness is her fault because it was after she was born that her mama's schizophrenia symptoms began. But do you think there were more reasons that Della felt so responsible and driven to “fix” her mama? What other reasons may have motivated her?
7. How did Della's perspective change by the end of the story, even though her circumstances stayed the same?
8. Do you think the realization that she couldn't fix her mama was freeing, difficult, or both for Della? Why?
9. Did this book change your understanding or assumptions about mental illness? If so, tell us how.
10. How can we better help those in our family and/or community living with mental illness feel loved, accepted, and cared for?

## Recipe: Honey-Sweetened Watermelon Limeade

*"Della, honey,' said Grandma through the phone, 'I found a recipe yesterday that made me think of you.' Grandma's words were always like slow, sweet syrup, and no matter what she was saying, listening to her always made me feel better. Grandma grew up in Georgia before she married Grandpa, and you could still hear that Georgia sun in every word she said. 'Watermelon limeade. Bet you'd like that, wouldn't you, sweetheart? Soon as I saw it, I said to your granddaddy, 'I gotta send that to our little watermelon girl.'"*

## Ingredients

About 4 cups cubed seedless (or de-seeded) watermelon

1/2-3/4 cups lime juice

2 Tbsp magic honey, more if desired for taste

## Method

Purée ingredients in blender until smooth. Blending a little ice into it makes it a perfect slushy on a hot day!

## Activity: Sidewalk Chalk Murals

Della and her friend Arden love to draw murals with sidewalk chalk, and Della says she likes the way drawing combines the two things she is best at: math problems and telling stories.

First, consider what Della means. How does drawing combine these two things? Do an internet search for “sidewalk chalk art” to get some inspiration, and look at how the



examples you find seem to incorporate mathematical principles and also tell stories.

Then, think about all the different bee lady stories that Della tells her baby sister Mylie or the reader. Choose one of these bee lady stories or Della's own bee lady experience from the book. Find a good stretch of pavement outside and create your own sidewalk mural that captures the bee lady story you have chosen. You can try to preserve your mural by following Arden's tip and spraying it with hairspray...or you can let it fade the way Della and Arden like to do and then try to create another work of sidewalk chalk art that captures another bee lady story, a favorite story that you've heard one of your family members tell, or a story you make up!

