

# Teachers Notes

by Dr Susan La Marca

## Shifty

by  
Lynn E Hazen

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Recommended for ages 12-15+ yrs

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Introduction .....	2
Structure .....	2
Language .....	3
Characters .....	3
Soli .....	3
Sissy .....	4
Martha .....	5
Themes .....	5
Family .....	5
Siblings .....	6
Foster care .....	6
Resilience .....	6-7
Names .....	7
Perceptions .....	8
Further reading .....	8
About the writers .....	9



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## **INTRODUCTION**

Solomon (Soli), aka Shifty, is a fifteen year old living in foster care. His past is marked by misunderstanding, pain and loss and this colors his interactions with the world around him. When the novel opens he is attempting to trick his way out of a ticket for parking illegally and hoping that the parking officer will not ask for his license as he does not have one. While Soli is seemingly a law breaker with attitude and a questionable past, in reality he is a caring, loving young man who is pushing close to the edge. He is only just holding it all together and each new problem brings him closer to possible disaster. This is a heartfelt exploration of family and the meaning of commitment.

Soli lives in a foster family with Martha, a caring woman who gives everything she has to those in her charge but the results of a car accident have left her fighting to regain good health. As well as Soli, Martha is a foster parent for Sissy, a seven year old girl with emotional and physical scarring who longs for permanence and love. Sissy is smart and resourceful and the connection between her and Soli is both strong and meaningful. Also in Martha's charge is Chance (Thaddeus), a baby who was born addicted to drugs. Though life began hard for him he is steadily becoming more settled and happy. Chance is treasured by Martha and caring for him brings him closer to the other two children who want the best for him as he mirrors their own tough starts in life.

The novel documents a difficult period in the life of this family. Martha is tired, Soli is finding it hard to not continually break the rules and Sissy feels a need to be there for everyone. Social workers, the perceptions of others, work, money, the future and the past all weigh heavily on their lives.

Though dealing with difficult issues, this novel is caring – not bleak. The pacing of the story and, above all, the character of Soli help to lighten the tone. Teenagers will respond to Soli's self-protective dry wit and enjoy watching him get into one crazy scrape after another while never losing his pleasant, easy-going manner. Life may have taught Soli to play his cards close to his chest, but he is essentially an optimistic character.

Hazen has created realistic characters that encourage us to care. As she unfolds their lives she takes her readers on a roller coaster ride of emotions that makes this a fulfilling, engaging read which challenges perceptions and highlights the needs of our community's most needy.

## **STRUCTURE**

Consider how Hazen uses the structure of the novel to contribute to the feelings she is trying to convey. Short, pithy chapters keep the action moving along and the reader constantly wanting more. Consider this technique and the way it impacts upon how we read.

- Ask the students to write a story that is constructed as a series of very short chapters.

Hazen also uses chapters with cliff hanger endings to continually engage the reader and get them to turn the page.

This story is a traumatic, and often painful, account of a family attempting to withstand a number of difficulties. Despite this it concludes with a hopeful end and positive vibes about a possible bright future.

- Do you find this ending convincing and satisfying? Can you see other possible endings to the same story? These views could be explored in a writing exercise.

## LANGUAGE

The language of *Shifty* is in keeping with the voice that Hazen uses to tell her story. Soli's voice is young and direct, heartfelt and real. The descriptive language is in keeping with the story.

Soli's voice is, at times, humorous and often ironic and skeptical. His world is not described in a flowery or overly descriptive style but Hazen still allows him words that demonstrate interesting use of language to convey feeling.

Encourage students to analyze the text as they read, looking for examples of Soli's descriptive turns of phrase that gently color the book. Some examples:

'That old lady's got deep wrinkles like someone ironed them in.' (p.14)

'I don't like the way she's walking on a slight tilt, deflated. Reminds me of driving around on our spare tire. Like the air that's supposed to be holding us up is gone.' (p.141)

## CHARACTERS

### SOLI

Soli is an unusual character. Foster care is a government-supported institution in many countries but there are very few books written where the central character is in foster care. Hazen handles what could be a very complex situation with a deft hand, exploring the issues inherent in Soli's situation with feeling whilst simultaneously not shying away from the hard reality. Though it is not a common topic a number of very good authors have tackled characters living in a foster care arrangement. Compare Hazen's efforts to an extract from one of the following examples:

*Beast* by Ally Kennan

*Dustbin Baby* by Jacqueline Wilson

*My Sister Sam* by Jean Ure

*Pictures of Hollis Woods* by Patricia Reilly Giff

*Raven's Gate* by Anthony Horowitz

*Ruby Holler* by Sharon Creech

*Strays* by Ron Koertge

*Strays Like Us* by Richard Peck

*The Forbidden Room* by Sarah Wray.

*The Grave* by James Heneghan

*The Last Chance Texaco* by Brent Hartinger

*Waving not Drowning* by Rosie Rushton

Consider how the author conveys the characters' lives. In particular, compare the voice, language and story structure, noting similarities and differences.

Soli's background is made clear early in the text (p.16) when he manages to read his file (pp. 63, 79-86, 87-90) and more of his early life falls into place for both Soli and the reader. There are no easy answers and, it seems, little hope and endless further unanswerable questions.

Consider Soli's lists of likes and dislikes (pp.76-78).

- What do they tell you about him?

Soli finds that he may have been looked after by his grandmother when he was very young, having been abandoned on a bus by one or both of his parents not long after his birth.

- As a creative writing exercise students could write a short story using the few brief details about either of these periods that are known to Soli. What might life have been like for the baby Soli with his grandmother? Why was he abandoned on the bus?

Read over the passages that describe Soli caring for the family and their home life (pp.86, 147-161).

- What do these episodes tell us about Soli?

When Soli rocks Chance, crying for him (p.157-158), and perhaps himself, knowing that Chance will be leaving the next day, we see a Soli that is not in view to the rest of the world. Chance, and what is happening to him, has a great effect on Soli. Why?

How do these descriptions of Soli compare with the perceptions of others? The social worker Sheila, the restaurant owner Angelo (pp.130-137), Darlene's father (pp.163-168) and Martha and Sissy, all have different views of Soli.

- Who is the real Soli?

## **SISSY**

When we first meet Sissy she rarely speaks (p. 9, 11). She has been abused as a young child and her arms are covered in scars that she tries to hide (p.23-24). Overcoming this, she has begun to come out of her shell whilst living with Martha and Soli. She has responded to their care and has built a strong bond with Soli.

She is still unsure of her place in the world, though, and is worried about what might happen to her and her foster family. She is obsessed with the very idea of family. This is worthy of analysis. Look for all of the occasions in the text when Sissy focuses on the ideal of family, in particular the image of 'mother' (for example - the mother doll, p.12, 18 and the doll's house, p.41 & 78).

Despite Sissy's preoccupations and her painful past she is a very strong character with a particularly powerful influence over Soli. Soli admires her, calling her 'crazy brave' (p.55). Even her silences can sway his attitudes and actions. When she is sitting 'getting silenter and silenter' (p.15), Soli is greatly affected. He cares about her as another human being but also she often advises him and is there to help and assist. They are very close. (See sub-heading 'siblings', below). As the novel unfolds it also becomes very clear that Sissy is a very caring and perceptive young person, in some ways wise beyond her years. Her caring treatment of Annie and Lester; her concern for Annie's son, William; and her efforts on all of their behalves are noteworthy.

Even though Sissy displays an inner strength, everyone around her recognizes that her needs are still great and are consuming her. She is craving a solid future. When Martha suggests that she might be able to adopt the two children, both she and Soli recognise that they cannot tell Sissy until it is set. They know 'Sissy needs a sure thing' (p.183);

she cannot cope with any more setbacks without first having a family behind her. It is clear, though, that with this aspect of her life settled she may be capable of anything.

- The story 'The Three Pigs' appears to have significance to Sissy (pp.23, 72, 78). Why do you think this is?
- What do Annie and Lester represent to Sissy?

## **MARTHA**

Martha is a caring, loving human being who has fostered a number of children during her life. Read over the section where her early adulthood is described (pp.74-75). Martha had the possibility of a different life until the death of her husband Carl.

- Why does Martha offer foster care?
- Why does she decide to attempt to make her arrangement with Soli and Sissy more permanent?
- Why does Chance leaving upset her so markedly?

## **THEMES**

### **FAMILY**

This book is all about family; but not the traditional biological family. It concentrates on the family we create for ourselves by caring and trusting each other.

At the end of the book Martha suggests to Soli that she would like to adopt the two children. She says to Soli you 'are in my heart' (p.181).

- Is this what it means to be family?
- Is this in any way different to biological family?

In discussing the role of family in the novel consider the following quotes:

*Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.*  
Leo Tolstoy (1828 - 1910), *Anna Karenina*, Chapter 1, first line

*Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city.*  
George Burns (1896 - 1996)

*The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other's life. Rarely do members of one family grow up under the same roof.*

Richard Bach (author of *Jonathon Livingstone Seagull*)

Sissy buys a mama doll for her friend's birthday present – 'Sissy rolls up the edge of her bag and squeezes it tight like that plastic mama might try to jump out and run away' (p.18). This is an important symbol for her. Sissy is clearly obsessed with the idea of what constitutes a happy family. Her fascination with toy people and, in particular, the pleasure she gains from the doll's house and her family of paper people, clearly represent her desire to be part of what she sees as the ideal.

- Why does she spend time drawing bricks onto her cardboard house walls? (p.78)

Martha, like the children, is working her way through her own issues. Family is something that she is also striving for and the children offer her a chance of a different, more lasting, future. Martha's views about how the children should be treated have been instrumental in bringing them together. Her caring attitude, her attempts to ensure the children are not labelled and her obvious trust of Soli and Sissy are very important. Martha says:

'But you're a good kid and you're like my own son now. You're in my heart, Soli—you and Sissy both' (p.181)

The news that Chance may leave the family is difficult for Martha to cope with (pp.117-118); This demonstrates the strong bond she has formed with all three kids and the important place they have in her life. Despite this, Martha and the kids know that Chance going to a mother who wants him is an opportunity for him (pp.157-158, 159-161, 180-181).

- Why does Soli rock Chance in Martha's chair? (p.157)
- Why does Soli feel the need to confess to Martha? (pp.181-183)
- Martha describes her feelings for Soli and Sissy as being 'invested' (p.183) in them. What does this mean?  
Consider the connotations of this word. In a wider context, does it have other meanings?
- Consider the last words of the book - 'We all head home' (p.188).  
What does this imply?

## **SIBLINGS**

Soli, Sissy and Chance are not biologically related. Is their connection similar to that of siblings? Perhaps it has greater significance because there is choice involved, a conscious commitment rather than a relation that one is born into. Discuss.

Go back to the text to enrich the discussion. Consider the feelings conveyed in the moment when Soli is parted from Chance:

'...she gently reaches over and unwraps Chance's tiny hand from my finger. But she might as well have used a big sharp knife to pry us apart, it hurts so much. My throat can't squeeze any tighter, and my heart is about to bust open. I don't know how Martha can care for all these kids, then let them go.'  
(p.187)

And this interaction between Soli and Sissy:

'She reaches over and pats my back – her little hand staying there a heartbeat or two, before she lifts it up and pats again. Like there's something invisible but real holding us together.'  
(p.155)

## **FOSTER CARE**

Through her characters and her plot, Hazen conveys a number of attitudes about foster care as an institution controlled by government authorities and also as a construct that creates families based on factors other than biology.

With reference to the text, explore what you think the views of the different characters might be to foster care. Soli, Sissy, Martha and the various social workers, including Karen and Sheila, will all have different views of the system and the outcomes.

Soli says when Chance is taken away to go to a new home:

'I don't know how Martha can care for all these kids, then let them go.'  
(p.187)

- Does it take a special kind of person to do foster care?

### **Further research**

The author, in a postscript addressed to readers, lists websites that outline a number of organizations that work with children and youth in foster care.

These are:

[www.nationalcasa.org](http://www.nationalcasa.org)

[www.ahomewithin.org/donors.html](http://www.ahomewithin.org/donors.html)

[www.sfcasa.org/giving.htm](http://www.sfcasa.org/giving.htm)

[www.youthlaw.org](http://www.youthlaw.org)

Students could be directed to these to broaden their knowledge of the area.

## **RESILIENCE**

Sissy, Soli and Martha all demonstrate amazing resilience. Why? How?

What is it that helps them to keep going even when the odds are stacked against them?

Soli says about Sissy, earlier in the text:

'I don't want to worry her, but the sooner she learns not to trust people, the better.' (p.23)

- Is Soli right to feel this way?

Do attitudes such as these contribute to his ability to survive in what has been a harsh and unfeeling world before he came to live with Martha? This should be contrasted with Martha's absolute trust of Soli and Sissy.

Martha and Larry both have strategies for aiding Soli; for supporting his growth. Larry explores his idea of the X moment (pp.84, 175) and Martha has her inspiring newspaper articles (p.102)

- Are either of these ploys effective? Do they influence Soli? Do they contribute to his resilience or sense of self?

## **NAMES**

The significance of names and how they are used to label and identify people is an important feature of Hazen's book. At the very outset Martha attempts to educate the children about how words are used to label them and babies such as Chance. Sissy, in particular, takes this lesson to heart relating what she has learned to a number of people that she comes into contact with throughout the story.

Soli, though more subtly, takes Martha's words on board. Her view about them being children and people before they are foster children contributes to his and Sissy's ability to generate a sense of self worth. She enables them to see that they are the same as anyone else. This is a powerful message for all of them.

Explore:

- ~ Shaky new baby (p.14)
- ~ Soli thinking on new names for the baby - 'Crack Baby, Hopeless, Shaky Boy, Scrawny' settles on Chance (p.27) because 'You got a little tiny scrawny chance - just your size.' (p.26)
- ~ Why Soli is called Shifty. (p.42)
- ~ '...not a bag lady. She's a lady with bags' (p.43)
- ~ 'Homeless people - people with no homes' (p.45)
- ~ 'Rude Sheila' (p.67)
- ~ The meanings behind nicknames (pp.82-83)
- ~ Officer calling Soli 'Solo man' (p.88)

- ~ 'Old saw lady – lady with the saws' (p.100)
- ~ 'We're not foster kids' (p.166)
  - Does inverting the words in phrases like 'homeless person' or 'foster kid', as Martha encourages the children to do, really make a difference?
  - The detention officer calling Soli 'solo man' upsets him. Why?
  - Discuss the power of words. Perhaps it is not the words but how they are said. Or is there power in insulting words regardless of tone?

## PERCEPTIONS

Martha trusts Soli, though many others don't. In his words:

'I like how Martha is all trusting of me. Not too many people trust me like that. No one besides Martha, in fact. I got a whole file full of people saying how I'm shifty and not to be trusted.' (p.10)

- Is Martha's perception of Soli just different from everyone else's? Why?
- Are the others justified?

The social worker who is giving the family a difficult time calls Sissy's cardboard doll's house 'trash' (p.68). Sissy's, and also Soli's and Martha's perception of the doll's house is markedly different.

- Is the way one sees a toy such as this merely a matter of perception?
- What colours the perception of those involved?
- Are the perceptions of the children also coloured by a variety of factors?

Soli's old friend Wired had always mentioned an uncle who he was sure was going to come and collect him soon. When Soli meets up with Wired he finds that the 'fake' uncle is actually real (p.178) but that the uncle is not what Wired had hoped (pp.112-113).

- Why would Wired keep this false perception alive in his mind throughout his time in the group home?

Angelo, the restaurant owner, has no preconceived ideas of Soli or knowledge of his real or constructed background. In the manner in which Soli handles a stressful situation, Angelo sees a smart and trustworthy young man (pp.130-137).

- Compare this to the views and treatment Soli receives from others – the juvenile detention officer, Sheila the social worker, Martha and Sissy.

On page 14 Soli has hidden inside a store hoping that a parking officer outside will go away so that he can move Martha's car. Of a clerk inside the store Soli says:

'He doesn't want to help me. He wants me to steal something so he can call security.' (p.14)

- Is Soli's view a fair comment?
- Do his perceptions of others sometimes unfairly paint everyone with the same brush or is he justified in being mistrustful based on his past experience?

## FURTHER READING

*Solo* by Alyssa Brugman

*Way Home* by Libby Hathorn and Gregory Rogers (picture book)

*Beast* by Ally Kennan

*Dustbin Baby* by Jacqueline Wilson  
*My Sister Sam* by Jean Ure  
*Pictures of Hollis Woods* by Patricia Reilly Giff  
*Raven's Gate* by Anthony Horowitz  
*Ruby Holler* by Sharon Creech  
*A Drowned Maiden's Hair: A Melodrama* by Laura Amy Schlitz  
*Starring Tracey Beaker* by Jacqueline Wilson  
*Strays* by Ron Koertge  
*Strays Like Us* by Richard Peck  
*The Forbidden Room* by Sarah Wray.  
*The Grave* by James Heneghan  
*The Last Chance Texaco* by Brent Hartinger  
*Waving not Drowning* by Rosie Rushton

## **ABOUT THE WRITERS**

### **LYNN E HAZEN**

*Shifty* is Lynn Hazen's first novel for teenagers and young adults and comes after her initial success as a writer for younger readers. Her junior novel, *Mermaid Mary Margaret* (Bloomsbury 2004), was hailed 'a winner' by *Kirkus Reviews*. Lynn has written a picture book, *Buzz Bumble to the Rescue* (Bloomsbury 2005); and two young chapter books, *Cinder Rabbit* and *The Amazing Trail of Seymour Snail* (Henry Holt 2008 & 2009).

She earned an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults at Vermont College, an MA in Education at San Francisco State University, and a BS in Applied Behavioral Sciences at UC Davis.

Lynn lives with her family in San Francisco.

Visit the website, [www.ShiftyTheBook.com](http://www.ShiftyTheBook.com), for more information about Lynn and her novel. See also [www.myspace.com/ShiftyTheBook](http://www.myspace.com/ShiftyTheBook) .

### **DR SUSAN LA MARCA**

Susan La Marca is a secondary school teacher-librarian. Her PhD, completed in 2003, explored how a teacher-librarian creates a reading environment.

Susan works for the School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV) and edits their research journal *Synergy*. She is also an associate editor of the journal *Viewpoint: on books for young adults* and editor of a number of books on reading and school library design. She is the co author, with Dr Pam Macintyre, of *Knowing readers: unlocking the pleasures of reading* (2006).

Susan works as a consultant and writer in areas related to reading and teacher-librarianship. She has presented in these areas both nationally and internationally and was the Children's Book Council of Australia awards judge for Victoria for 2006/7.