

Dreamland by Sarah Dessen

Background and Audience

Published in 2000, *Dreamland* was Sarah Dessen's fourth young adult novel. As of 2016, Dessen has published thirteen novels and novellas, but *Dreamland* stands as the first of her pieces to approach the unfortunate reality of physical and emotional abuse in adolescent relationships. Narrator Caitlin O'Koren is sixteen years old and suffers from an identity crisis when her older sister, Cass, runs away from home to live with her boyfriend. With her parents withdrawing into their grief over Cass abandoning her potential, Caitlin is left feeling alone, forgotten, and inferior—until she meets Rogerson Biscoe, an attractive, wealthy, and charming drug dealer who promises Caitlin affection in exchange for complete control over her life. Dessen's beautiful and heartbreaking descriptions of the miasmatic dreamland Caitlin finds herself in when unable to break away from Rogerson's hold provides an important glimpse into the dangers of domestic abuse.

Like all of Dessen's works, *Dreamland* is classified as a young adult novel, but it contains serious themes and illustrations that, while critical to explore, may not be appropriate for younger audiences. As a result, *Dreamland* is best suited for female and male readers from ages thirteen to eighteen, excellent for when students are transitioning from a middle to high school environment. The newfound responsibilities and burdens stressed upon young high school students reflects well in *Dreamland*, echoic to Caitlin's struggle to identify herself and her uncertainty in new relationships. Additionally, the presence of marijuana, alcohol, and sexual content in *Dreamland* corresponds to the heightened peer pressure in high school to mature quickly and follow the crowd in order to be accepted by others. At the same time, the aforementioned drug use and sexual themes, as well as the critical point of exploring domestic

abuse, are handled well but bluntly, to emphasize the reality of such concerns; thus, readers younger than thirteen would arguably not be able to understand the material until slightly older, in which case *Dreamland* exemplifies a kind of rite of passage for growing teenagers.

Plot Summary

On the morning of her sixteenth birthday, Caitlin wakes up to find her older sister, Cass, has run away from home. Although Cass is just two weeks away from attending Yale, she has decided instead to live with her boyfriend in New York. Caitlin's parents are distraught, angry and heartbroken that Cass has abandoned her great potential, and Caitlin's birthday celebrations are forgotten—and Caitlin feels forgotten herself. Caitlin revered Cass; as the eldest, Cass was ambitious and spirited, taking on extracurricular activities and winning shelves full of awards, and within Cass's shadow, Caitlin was free from parental pressure, because Cass was performing enough for the both of them. With Cass's unexpected leave, Caitlin is left in an unfeeling home, her father dispassionate and her mother living in a daze, and Caitlin must enter her sophomore year of high school without Cass's motivation protecting her, leaving Caitlin with no idea of who she is or what she wishes to do with her life. All that Caitlin has is a gift left behind from Cass: a dream journal titled "Dreamland," with a message lovingly shared between them from childhood: "I'll see you there."

From here, *Dreamland* is divided into three parts: *Cass*, *Rogerson*, and *Me*. Throughout the first part, Caitlin endures the fallout from Cass's departure, watching how others react around her. She recognizes how her mother, so devoted to Cass's education and hobbies, is now at a loss of what to do; meanwhile, her father throws himself into his work as the Dean of Students at the local university, able only to fix the problems posed by nervous faculty and rebellious students when he cannot fix his home life. Caitlin's next door neighbors, Boo and Stewart, also suffer

from Cass's leave, doing their best to cheer up Caitlin even when melancholy themselves; although wildly different from the O'Korens, preferring Zen Buddhism and art and meditation and trips to India over a structured family life, Boo is best friends with Caitlin's mother, with Boo and Stewart acting as Caitlin and Cass's honorary aunt and uncle since they were young. Finally, the only place Caitlin seems to get away from the stagnant force of Cass's absence is when going to school; her best and only friend, Rina, urges Caitlin to try out for the cheerleading squad, arguing that it is one of the few things Cass did not participate in and, thus, is a great opportunity to Caitlin to break out of her shell. Much to Caitlin's surprise, she makes it onto the team and, suddenly, her mother becomes invested in life again, redirecting her focus on Cass to Caitlin as she enthuses over Caitlin's participation. In order to appease her mother and Rina, Caitlin continues acting interested in this new social area she has entered, beginning to go to parties and interacting with the most popular kids from school. During one party, Rina tries to set Caitlin up with Mike, a member of the football team, but instead, Caitlin stumbles upon a dark and handsome guy dealing drugs to partygoers. When this mystery man offers Caitlin a ride in his sleek BMW, Caitlin shocks herself by accepting; herein, she enters the world of Rogerson Biscoe, making out with him before they part, an experience she describes as going "under."

In part two, *Rogerson*, the titular bad boy has completely ambushed Caitlin's emotions. Although she learns more about his troubled history, encountering him again when he is doing community service, Caitlin cannot help but continue to fall for Rogerson's magnetic charms. For their first date, Rogerson introduces Caitlin to marijuana, teaching her how to smoke it and enjoy the high; then, Rogerson presents Caitlin to his parents, only for his abusive father to punch Rogerson for being late for their meeting. As Caitlin tends to Rogerson's wound, she feels compelled to protect him, so when Rogerson asks remorsefully if Caitlin is going to leave him,

she promises instead to stay by his side, and the two officially become a couple. However, Caitlin's dedication to Rogerson—and him constantly reminding her of her promise—quickly devolves Caitlin's life into being nothing but Rogerson; she begins to skip school and cheerleading practice in order to spend time with him, smoking marijuana and making out, and lies to her parents, Boo and Stewart, and Rina about how much time she is spending with him. Through Rogerson, Caitlin meets Corinna, a laidback high school dropout who—like Cass—ran away from home to escape the pressures of her future, but even Corinna warns Caitlin against how much control Rogerson appears to exert over her. Finally, things come to a head between Caitlin and Rogerson when Caitlin runs late to a date with him; when she tries to explain she had stopped to support Rina after a bad breakup, Rogerson lashes out and smacks Caitlin across the cheek. It is so fast and deafening that Caitlin, at first, does not believe it has happened—but then, just a few weeks later, Rogerson catches Caitlin talking to another guy, wishing her a happy holiday, and he punches her, believing she is cheating on him. Caitlin begins to develop excuses to her collection of bruises, more and more developing as she continues to stay with Rogerson. The delicious and dangerous romance she once experienced with him now turns into a trap, and Caitlin is terrified that her actions may upset him, letting him control her every motion in order to avoid his attacks.

Caitlin has been completely absorbed by Rogerson. Her family and friends are finally alerted, trying to prevent her from seeing him; however, because she is petrified of how Rogerson will react if she is not with him, she disobeys and escapes to be with him. All over again, it feels as though Cass has once again abandoned the family—except now, Caitlin is the central focus and she cannot stand how much attention is being thrust upon her, unable to voice the abuse she is enduring but also unable to part from Rogerson's side. She continues

smoking marijuana excessively to stave off the pain of her bruises and, in order to make Rogerson happy, she loses her virginity to him. After months beneath Rogerson's thumb, Rina finally confronts Caitlin and demands she come with her to a party, as the two never spend time with each other anymore; horrified of not being readily available for Rogerson, Caitlin tries to refuse, but Rina will not take no for an answer—and, slowly, Caitlin wonders if doing something without Rogerson can be okay. The climax of the story arrives when Caitlin returns from enjoying herself with Rina only to find Rogerson waiting for her, angry and upset. He begins to beat her in front of her house and, from inside, Caitlin's mother, father, and Boo and Stewart come rushing out, pulling Caitlin into safety. As she is rescued, Caitlin feels freed—but she also reaches out for Rogerson as he is taken away by the police.

In the closing section, *Me*, Caitlin enters the Evergreen Care Center for treatment against drug addiction and to recover from Rogerson's abuse. Instead of everything returning quickly to normal, *Dreamland* painstakingly shows the amount of time it takes to heal—and even come the end of Caitlin's story, she knows she will still need time, still finding herself afraid when she sees a sleek BMW or seizing up when someone touches her or even missing the way Rogerson kissed her. Although *Dreamland* focuses on themes of loss, like when Cass left her planned life or when Caitlin loses herself in Rogerson, it is also clear that happiness can be found again. When Caitlin leaves the Evergreen Care Center, she returns to a welcome home celebration, with her family and friends all waiting to embrace her—as well as Cass.

Teaching Methods

This book should be taught in sections, according to *Dreamland's* format. By following Caitlin's transition from focusing on Cass to Rogerson to herself, the significance of identity can be taught and evaluated. The best learning objectives for *Dreamland* would be to explore the

primary themes of the text and how they correspond with real-world issues, such as domestic abuse in adolescent relationships, miscommunication between family members, drug abuse, and loss of identity due to peer pressure. A critical area of discussion would be how Caitlin responds to Rogerson's abuse: Why does she not tell her parents? Why does she continue to go out with him? Why does she go to great lengths to excuse his behavior? Emphasizing the distinction between *victim* and *survivor* in relation to domestic abuse offers a valuable area of study, especially for students around age sixteen.

Key Themes

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Manipulation
- Stalking
- Bullying
- Hands-off parenting
- Parental hovering
- Romantic relationships
- Fighting in relationships
- Rumors/reputation
- Family dynamics (between siblings, between parents, between children and parents)
- Sexuality/sensuality
- Sexual activity
- Drug use
- Alcohol use

- Peer pressure
- Personal safety
- Personal identity
- Freedom

Reviews

- "Caitlin O'Koren has always had to follow in the footsteps of her perfect older sister, Cassandra (homecoming queen, soccer star, student body president, soup kitchen volunteer). When Cassandra runs away from home, Caitlin finds herself trying to fill the gap Cass's absence creates. Shortly after, when she meets mysterious Rogerson Biscoe (a bad boy of the type Dessen hinted at in *Someone Like You*), Caitlin sees a way to forge a path for herself, away from Cass's shadow and the expectations weighing on her. Rogerson seems vaguely ominous, but Caitlin is taken by surprise when he first gets violent with her. Unwilling to give up the freedom she thinks her relationship gives her, she withdraws from her friends, starts failing in school and drifts into confusion. Her parents, the stereotypically meddling mom and stiff, emotionally distant father, and her close neighbors, two touchy-feely ex-hippies, are so caught up in their own concerns, and particularly in Cassandra's disappearance, that they fail to notice the difference in Caitlin (including what seems to be alarming physical evidence), pushing the limits of plausibility. For all these shortcuts, however, the characterizations have an unmistakable depth; readers may grow impatient with Caitlin and the obliviousness of her nearest and dearest, but they will believe she is real" (*Publisher's Weekly*, 2000).
- "Cass, activist, athlete, and academic success, runs away to work on a TV talk show with her boyfriend. Sixteen-year-old Caitlin, always overshadowed by her older sister, feels

ever more invisible as her parents single-mindedly seek to locate and bring Cass home. Caitlin's best friend convinces her to try out for cheerleading. She makes the squad and discovers that her mother begins to live vicariously through her activities, just as she had done with Cass. Then, Caitlin meets Rogerson Biscoe and falls in love with him. He's not like the jocks at Caitlin's public high school; he's rich, attractive, enigmatic, and wild. She smokes dope supplied by Rogerson, a small-time dealer, and their physical relationship is consummated. Anger drives him, and he controls Caitlin with fear and pain. Shocked and physically hurt, she lies to her parents. Rogerson's beatings escalate, and Caitlin is shattered psychologically as well as physically. Powerfully written and not soon forgotten, *Dreamland* is the secret story of many contemporary teen relationships. Caitlin's dependency on Rogerson is a realistic and finely drawn portrait of a young woman without a strong sense of self-esteem. Characters are well developed; even Cass comes through as a complete person. The high-school milieu is accurately depicted as is a family's reaction to an unpredictable crisis. Compelling reading with contemporary teen appeal" (*School Library Journal*, 2000).

- "A teenager opts for the bad-choice route out of her 'perfect' older sister's shadow in this intense, exhausting tale from the author of *Keeping the Moon* (1999). Caitlin has always felt semi-invisible next to soccer star-senior class president-Homecoming Queen Cass, and that doesn't change in any important way when Cass suddenly takes off with a male friend for New York, leaving their mother Margaret, inconsolably fretful and distracted. When not even a successful bid to make the cheerleading squad earns Caitlin more than fitful parental attention, she plunges into faster waters, hooking up with Rogerson, a fifth-year senior with a police record, a BMW, and a thriving business dealing pot. At first it's

an exciting ride, filled with new friends and experiences, but Caitlin's dream soon twists into nightmare. So dependent does her emotional state become on Rogerson's ups and downs that even when he starts slapping her around, she hides the bruises and retreats into numb isolation, feeling trapped but lacking the will to escape. Dessen's characters are familiar but not entirely typecast, which adds flavor to their interactions-though they are paired off into stable and unstable relationships in a rather deliberate way. Caitlin finally gets the help she needs to break free after Rogerson furiously beats her in public, and piece-by-piece she rebuilds her self-respect in rehab, with the help of a liberating letter from Cass. Her descent and recovery come in believable stages, and though Rogerson is definitely the villain here, the author gives readers reason to spare a dash (a very small dash) of sympathy for him, too" (*Kirkus Reviews*, 2000).

Closing Argument

The significance to reading *Dreamland* is exploring an area of adolescent literature and relationships not commonly discussed in public. Although relationships between teenagers, replete with sexual activity and sexual identity, are a fixture of young adult novels, the serious consequences that can arise from said relationships, such as emotional manipulation and physical abuse, are not always illustrated. This is due in part to wanting to avoid controversy, but *Dreamland* pushes the envelope by confronting these issues directly and even demonstrates the tragedies that occur if domestic abuse is not openly discussed. Caitlin endures months of Rogerson's physical and emotional abuse before the problem is discovered, and only then is it found out by pure chance; the fact that Caitlin was so far beneath Rogerson's control that she could not stand up for herself accurately portrays the silence forced upon survivors of abuse, often completely overlooked by family members and friends. Thus, *Dreamland* should not be

banned due to how it actively faces the dangers of domestic abuse in adolescent relationships without detracting from the literary beauty of Caitlin as a struggling and realistic narrator.

Dreamland does not go out of its way to promote drug or alcohol abuse, despite being present in the novel, and it certainly does not describe sexual activity in a positive manner; such controversial aspects arrive as a direct result of Rogerson's abuse of Caitlin, emphasizing all the more why *Dreamland* should serve as an artistic and heartbreaking cautionary tale.

Awards and Recommendations

- Amazon.com: Editor's Choice, 2000
- New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age, 2001
- Kentucky Blue Grass Award nominee, 2001
- YALSA Best Book for Young Adults, 2001
- Texas Lone Star Master List, 2002
- TAYSHAS High School Reading List, 2002
- New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age, 2002
- Prairie Pasque Award Young Adult Reading Program Reading List, 2002
- TAYSHAS High School Reading List, 2002-2003
- Maryland Library Association Black-Eyed Susan Award Nominee, 2002-2003
- Volunteer State Young Adult Book Award Master List, 2002-2003
- Eliot Rosewater Award Nominee, 2002-2003
- Missouri Gateway Readers' Choice Award for Teens, 2002-2003
- YALSA Popular Paperback for Young Adults, 2003

Alternative Texts

- By Sarah Dessen

- *That Summer* (1996)
- *Someone Like You* (1998)
- *Keeping the Moon* (1999)
- *This Lullaby* (2002)
- *The Truth About Forever* (2004)
- *Just Listen* (2006)
- *Lock and Key* (2008)
- *Along for the Ride* (2009)
- *Infinity* (2010)
- *What Happened to Goodbye* (2011)
- *The Moon and More* (2013)
- *Saint Anything* (2015)
- Similar in themes to *Dreamland*
 - *Crooked* by Laura and Tom Mcneal (1999)
 - *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
 - *Better Than Running at Night* by Hillary Frank (2002)
 - *Zipped* by Laura and Tom Mcneal (2003)
 - *I Can't Tell You* by Hillary Frank (2004)
 - *Honey, Baby, Sweetheart* by Deb Caletti (2005)
 - *Stay With Me* by Garret Freymann-Weyr (2006)
 - *Fault Line* by Janet Tashjian (2006)
 - *After* by Amy Efaw (2009)
 - *Bitter End* by Jennifer Brown (2011)

- *But I Love Him* by Amanda Grace (2011)

References

Dessen, Sarah. *Dreamland*. New York: Penguin Group, 2000. Print.