



Life As We Knew It

Susan Beth Pfeffer

Teacher's Guide

By Laurie Rozakis, Ph.D.

PERMA-BOUND
THE STRONGEST BOOKS YOU CAN BUY

LIVING
LITERATURE
SERIES

A Perma-Bound Production

This guide was prepared using the Harcourt edition ©2006. Other editions may differ.

Synopsis

PART I: SPRING

Chapter One (May 7- May 17)

Miranda Evans's parents are divorced. Her father calls to tell them that his new wife, Lisa, is pregnant. Miranda's father asks her to be the baby's godmother and she accepts. Mrs. Nesbitt, their elderly neighbor, joins sixteen-year-old Miranda, her fourteen-year-old brother Jonny, and her mother Laura for a Mother's Day dinner. Laura is dating Dr. Peter Elliott, a kindly physician. A meteor is supposed to glance off the moon, an event that generates mild excitement. However, Miranda's older brother Matt, a student at Cornell University, is worried. He calls the night before to express his "funny feeling" about the upcoming event.

Chapter Two (May 18)

The Evans family lives in a rural part of Pennsylvania. They gather with their neighbors to watch the meteor hit the moon. The mood is joyous until something goes dreadfully wrong and the moon is badly damaged in the collision with the meteor. People panic. Television and cell phones stop working; Matt finally gets through from a pay phone. Tidal waves buffet the shores and many cities are destroyed.

Chapter Three (May 19)

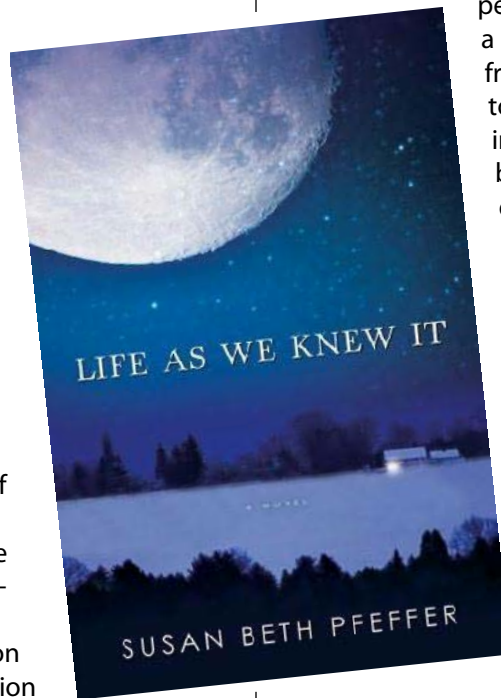
Miranda's father calls to reassure the family that he and Lisa are fine. Miranda is shocked when her mother picks her up from school and takes her to the food store, where they join the m le e in grabbing whatever supplies they can. The weather is stormy and terrifying. They stop at other stores and grab winter clothing, oil lamps, and other supplies. Miranda thinks her mother is overreacting and has no intention of wearing the long-johns she bought.

Chapter Four (May 20-May 31)

The electricity begins to fail. In school, Mrs. Sanchez, the principal, tries to rally the students, but the family is far more cheered when Matt finally arrives home. Since the moon has been pushed off its axis, violent earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions cause widespread death and destruction.

Chapter Five (June 2-June 10)

Food supplies are running out and many people are quickly becoming hungry. As a result, Miranda is surprised when her friend Megan gives half her sandwich to a classmate at lunch. School is ending early for the year, in large part because there is no food for the students and many teachers have left to care for their families. Miranda's family is thrilled when Mrs. Nesbitt brings a rare treat: two fresh eggs. Megan keeps giving away part of her food; Miranda dreams of her friend Becky, who died a year ago. Food, gas, and other necessary supplies are fast running out. Miranda's mother, Laura, normally generous, furiously demands that Miranda think only of their family and preserve their hoard.



PART II: SUMMER

Chapter Six (June 11-June 25)

Dr. Elliott brings increasingly gloomy reports of outbreaks of disease, including West Nile Virus. Miranda is delighted when Dan, a boy whom she admires, swims with her in a local pond and asks her to the prom next year—assuming there is a prom. They kiss. Meanwhile, Laura is delighted that Jonny can go to baseball camp, not only because he is an avid athlete but also because he will get good food at the camp and his absence represents one less mouth to feed. The family is getting along smoothly until Miranda gets off a food line to fetch Dan so that he can get food, too. Furious, Laura once more explains that "family is all that matters" in the post-apocalyptic world.

Chapter Seven (July 2-July 10)

Mom drives Jonny to baseball camp. Miranda visits her friend Megan, who has become a religious fanatic and is starving herself to achieve salvation. Laura reduces the family to two meals a day to conserve their dwindling food supplies; she herself eats only one meal a day. Miranda becomes more aware of the cataclysmic disruptions to the world weather patterns, as the volcanic eruptions intensify and the ash darkens the sky.

Chapter Eight (July 11-August 4)

Matt, a jogger, is forced to stop running because of the poor air quality. Horton the cat vanishes, sending the family in a panic: has he been eaten for food by increasingly desperate neighbors? Sammi, Miranda's other close friend, leaves town with a forty-year-old man that she has just met. Her family figures that she will be better off with him and in a warmer climate, where they plan to resettle, as so many others have done. Horton returns, to the family's relief. Miranda will not be able to spend a month with her father in Springfield as planned, as her father and stepmother are relocating. Soon after, Dad arrives with Lisa, having picked up Jonny on the way. The family has a joyous reunion, made more so by the cartons of supplies that Dad has brought and Lisa's joy at the baby clothes Laura had purchased during her shopping spree the day after the meteor hit the moon. Dad helps Matt and Jonny chop more wood, which they bring inside to prevent it from being stolen. Miranda goes to the hospital, which has become an armed camp. There she meets Dan, who apologizes for not calling, explaining that he plans to relocate to California. Hearing about Dan's hardship, Miranda feels very lucky that her family is doing so well. Dad and Lisa leave.

Chapter Nine (August 6-August 18)

Terrifyingly, the first frost hits on August 11. Around the world, conditions are worsening, as the change in the moon's gravitational pull has caused many dormant volcanoes to erupt, leading to earthquakes and even more epidemics. Laura and Miranda have a fierce quarrel, and Miranda runs to Megan's house. Megan, close to starvation, says goodbye to Miranda.

Chapter Ten (August 22-August 30)

The school board announces its plan to open only two schools in the fall, as teachers have left and the natural gas is almost gone. Thus, the schools will have little supervision, little heat, and no food. Parents and children alike respond with barely controlled panic. The killing frost hits on August 28, destroying Laura's care-

fully tended vegetable garden and her hopes for more food. The world is in total chaos: radio stations have stopped broadcasting and little mail gets through. Miranda sees some gangs stealing wood and tries to alert the police, but the station is deserted. She goes to the hospital, but it has become an armed fortress. Miranda and Jonny decide to go to school.

PART III: FALL

Chapter Eleven (August 31-September 5)

Mrs. Sanchez, the principal, greets the few students who show up, but feeling surrounded by death, Miranda takes armloads of school supplies and textbooks and leaves. She does not study at home, however, feeling dispirited and hopeless.

Chapter Twelve (September 12-September 17)

Laura catches Miranda stuffing herself with a bag of chocolate chips that Laura was saving for Matt's birthday. Laura forces Miranda to eat the entire bag and then denies her food for two days. Miranda feels like a selfish pig. A letter from Dad gets through so the family learns that he and Lisa are in a refugee camp, not allowed to pass through to California.

Chapter Thirteen (September 18-September 29)

Laura hurts her ankle, but the guards at the hospital refuse Miranda's entreaties for assistance. Only when Matt arrives and knows one of the guards is Peter summoned. He comes to the house and discovers the ankle is sprained, not broken, but Laura cannot walk on it for two weeks.

Chapter Fourteen (October 2-October 24)

The natural gas runs out, so the family cooks their meager food and heats water on the woodstove. The air is getting dirtier, blocking both the sun and moon. Megan and her mother have died: Megan starved to death, her mother a suicide. Miranda is shocked when she visits Megan's beloved religious leader, Reverend Marshall, and discovers he is plump, since he is taking food from his starving parishioners. She sees him for what he is, a venial fake. The temperature plummets. Miranda is shocked to meet her hero, the teenaged figure skater Brandon Erlich, on the pond. They skate together through the filthy air.

Chapter Fifteen (October 26-November 1)

Laura reinjures her ankle. Miranda visits Mrs. Nesbitt, their surrogate grandmother, who explains that she will not survive the winter and gives Miranda matter-of-fact instructions for dealing with her body and possessions.

Miranda's world narrows still further when Matt boards up all the windows to conserve heat, using wood that he procured from one of the gangs. The water stops running, the well having gone dry. The family now sleeps together in one room.

Chapter Sixteen (November 7-December 1)

Mrs. Nesbitt dies and Miranda discovers that the elderly lady had been cutting her rations to save food for Miranda's family. Miranda and her brothers take what they can use from her house and dispose of the body as Mrs. Nesbitt had wanted. By now, it is -10 degrees and the air quality is even worse. Everyone but Jonny is down to one meal a day; he is allowed two.

Chapter Seventeen (December 2-December 21)

A blizzard strikes. The family takes turns looking for Matt, who is returning from his stint volunteering at the post office. They shovel and boil the snow to use for water. Realizing that Lisa's baby would have been born by now, Miranda decides it is a girl and names her "Rachel."

PART IV: WINTER

Chapter Eighteen (December 24-January 8)

The family is cheered when the neighbors come by caroling for Christmas and they join in. Nonetheless, people do not band together for survival. The Evans have a veritable feast for Christmas and exchange meaningful gifts that delight everyone. After New Year's, the children decide to learn to cross-country ski so they can escape from the house more quickly if they need to. Mr. Mortensen, a neighbor, comes to their door, begging for help because his wife is very ill. Laura gives him some aspirin, but nothing more.

Chapter Nineteen (January 10-February 7)

Everyone but Miranda has come down with the illness that Mrs. Mortensen has: a deadly strain of the flu. Miranda goes to the hospital to get help and discovers that virtually no one is left. Two women, presumably nurses, tell her that Peter died about a week ago. Miranda uncomplainingly nurses everyone in her family, saving their lives when the stove fills the room with smoke. They all recover, and Miranda gives Laura two pieces of candy that she has saved since Christmas. They are very grateful for even this meager gift.

Chapter Twenty (February 9-March 16)

They eat some tulip bulbs that Laura has saved. On February 22, the electricity briefly comes on, and limited radio broadcasts return soon after. Laura reduces their

food still further.

Chapter Twenty-One (March 17-March 20)

Miranda decides to go to town. Greatly weakened by starvation, she nonetheless manages to make the trip. To her astonishment, City Hall is open and Mr. Danworth and Mayor Ford are handing out food. They drive her home and regular food deliveries commence. On March 20, Miranda turns 17. She is grateful to be alive and have food. It appears that civilization has turned a corner and will survive.

Timeline of Modern Events Impacting Science Fiction

- 1970** liquid crystal watches go on market
- 1971** CAT scan becomes available
- 1972** pocket calculator hits market
- 1973** car airbags introduced
- 1974** barcodes added on supermarket products
- 1975** home computers become available
- 1976** VHS and Betamax introduced
- 1977**
 - first complete genetic structure of an organism found (Great Britain)
 - first flight of the Space Shuttle
 - first commercial flight of supersonic Concorde between New York, Paris, London
 - USA admits testing neutron bomb
 - Trans-Alaska Pipeline starts oil flowing from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez
- 1978** Louise Brown, first baby conceived through vitro fertilization, is born
- 1979** graphical user interface developed
- 1980** Sony Walkman introduced
- 1981** compact disks hit the market
- 1982** video keyhole surgery first accomplished
- 1983** synthetic human insulin approved for sale
- 1984** DNA fingerprinting introduced
- 1985** first dotcom registered
- 1986** laptop computer for sale to consumers
- 1987** Prozac hits the market
- 1988** first Internet virus attack; 10% of online computers disabled
- 1989** toaster becomes first appliance controlled over the Internet
- 1990** first gene therapy accomplished (four-year-old girl with an immune disorder)
- 1991** Internet browser developed (spawns

- World Wide Web)
- 1992** text messaging introduced
- 1993** Global Positioning Satellite introduced
- 1994** genetically modified tomatoes hit market
- 1995** Toy Story, the first entirely computer-generated feature film, is released
- 1996** The Hubble Ultra Deep Field photograph reveals some 10,000 galaxies at a distance between 2.5 billion and 10.5 billion light years from earth
- 1997** Dolly the sheep, first mammal cloned from an adult cell, is born
- 1998** first segment of the International Space Station launched
- 1999** electronic reusable paper invented
- 2000** Y2K panic sweeps the world
- 2001** implanted microchips give sight to three blind men
- 2002** iris (eye) scanners first used for airport security cosmic background radiation revealed to be polarized
- 2003** China becomes the third country to put a human being in orbit
- 2004** Sedna, a large orbiting body, is discovered and revealed to be just one of many new planetoids
- 2005** NASA launches Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter
- 2006** Scientists decide that Pluto is not a true planet
Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter lands
- 2007** NASA's Dawn Mission begins eight-year, 3.2 billion-mile journey to the beginning of the solar system.

Author Sketch

Susan Beth Pfeffer was born in 1948 in New York City, where she grew up. Her father was a lawyer and a professor; her mother, a secretary. The family was affluent and Pfeffer enjoyed a happy childhood. Pfeffer was barely in school when she decided to become a writer, spurred by her father having dedicated a book to her. "I know I defined myself as a writer at least by third grade," she said in an interview in *Contemporary Authors Online*, "because it was in third grade that I used a semicolon in a book report and felt it was an important occasion, my first semicolon." Her early determination paid off: after earning her B.A. from New York University in 1969, Pfeffer published her first book, *Just Morgan*, when she was only twenty years old. The book was well-received, and Pfeffer's career was launched.

A prolific author, Pfeffer writes on a wide variety of topics, and appears to write with great ease. She has turned out entire books in two weeks, spending the rest of her time addressing classes and running seminars for aspiring writers. "I think everybody has a creative mind," she told an interviewer in *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*. "I tell people to start with a situation that appeals to them, and they can get that anywhere—from their favorite novel or TV show or fairy tale or just something that has been eating away at them for a long time. Then you ask, 'Who would be in that situation, what would their ages be, how did they get in this situation,' and so on. That leads in to the plot, what is going to happen. Then I teach people how to outline, which is remarkably easy. What I love best about being a writer," she added, "is that people actually pay me for making up stories."

Selected Other Works by Susan Beth Pfeffer

FOR CHILDREN

- Awful Evelina*, 1979
Twin Surprises, 1991
Twin Troubles, 1992

FOR MIDDLE-GRADE READERS

- Kid Power*, 1977
Just Between Us, 1980
What Do You Do When Your Mouth Won't Open? 1981
Courage, Dana, 1983
Truth or Dare, 1983
Kid Power Strikes Back, 1984
The Friendship Pact, 1986
Rewind to Yesterday, 1988
Dear Dad, Love Laurie, 1989
Future Forward, 1989
April Upstairs, 1990
Darcy Downstairs, 1990
Make Believe, 1992
The Riddle Streak, 1993
Sara Kate, Superkid, 1994
Sara Kate Saves the World, 1995
The Trouble with Wishes, 1996

FOR YOUNG ADULTS

- Just Morgan*, 1970
Better than All Right, 1972
Rainbows and Fireworks, 1973
The Beauty Queen, 1974
Whatever Words You Want to Hear, 1974
Marly the Kid, 1975
Starring Peter and Leigh, 1978
About David, 1980

A Matter of Principle, 1982, reprinted, 2002
Starting with Melodie, 1982
Fantasy Summer, 1984
Paperdolls, 1984
Getting Even, 1986
The Year without Michael, 1987
Turning Thirteen, 1988
Head of the Class, 1989
Most Precious Blood, 1991
Family of Strangers, 1992
The Ring of Truth, 1993
Twice Taken, 1994
Nobody's Daughter, 1995
The Pizza Puzzle, 1996
Justice for Emily, 1997
Devil's Den, 1998
Revenge of the Aztecs, 2000
Life as We Knew It, 2006

"MAKE ME A STAR" NOVEL SERIES

Prime Time, 1985
Take Two and Rolling, 1985
Wanting It All, 1985
On the Move, 1985
Love Scenes, 1986
Hard Times High, 1986

"SEBASTIAN SISTERS" NOVEL SERIES

Evvie at Sixteen, 1988
Thea at Sixteen, 1988
Claire at Sixteen, 1989
Sybil at Sixteen, 1989
Meg at Sixteen, 1990

"PORTRAITS OF LITTLE WOMEN" NOVEL SERIES

Meg's Story, 1997
Jo's Story, 1997
Beth's Story, 1997
Amy's Story, 1997
Meg Makes a Friend, 1998
Jo Makes a Friend, 1998
Christmas Dreams: Four Stories, 1998
Beth Makes a Friend, 1998
Amy Makes a Friend, 1998
A Gift for Meg, 1999
A Gift for Jo, 1999
A Gift for Beth, 1999
A Gift for Amy, 1999
Birthday Wishes: Four Stories, 1999
Ghostly Tales: Four Stories, 2000

OTHER

You Can Write Children's Books in Your Spare Time, 1993
Who Were They Really?: The True Stories behind Famous Characters, 1999
 Contributor of short stories to *Sixteen*, *Visions*, and *Connections*
 Contributor of one-act play to *Center Stage*, edited by Ronald R Gallo, and an essay to *Vital Signs 1*, edited by James L Collins

Critic's Corner

Pfeffer is a justly celebrated author of books for children and young adults. She has won an impressive array of awards, including the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award in 1979 and the Oklahoma Library Association Sequoyah Young Adult Book Award in 1980 for *Kid Power*. *About David* won the South Carolina Library Association Young Adult Book Award in 1983. *Family of Strangers* won a coveted American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults citation and inclusion among 100 Best Books for Young Adults.

In 2007, *Life as We Knew It* won an Andre Norton Award for Best Young-Adult Science Fiction/Fantasy nomination, a Hal Clement Award nomination, a Quill Award nomination, and nominations for five state awards. Not surprisingly, reviews were highly laudatory. Writing in *School Library Journal*, reviewer John Peters concluded that the novel will leave readers "stunned and thoughtful." Critic Ilene Cooper, writing in *Booklist*, said: "Each page is filled with events both wearying and terrifying." The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer noted that Miranda's "undying love for her family and heightened appreciation of simple pleasures will likely provoke discussion and inspire gratitude" for the comforts they enjoy. Jennifer Hubert, reviewing the novel for amazon.com, said: "Veteran author Susan Beth Pfeffer... makes a stunning comeback with this haunting book that documents one adolescent's journey from self-absorbed child to selfless young woman. Teen readers won't soon forget this intimate story of survival and its subtle message about the treasuring the things that matter most—family, friendship, and hope."

Bibliography

BOOKS

Authors and Artists for Young Adults, Volume 12, Thomson Gale (Detroit, MI), 1994.
Children's Literature Review, Volume 11, Thomson

Gale (Detroit, MI), 1986.

Something about the Author, Volume 17, Thomson Gale (Detroit, MI), 1994.

PERIODICALS

Booklist, September 1, 2006, Ilene Cooper, review of *Life as We Knew It*, p. 127.

Children's Book Review Service, July, 1973; August, 1974; October, 1974; October, 1977; August, 1979; May, 1983; winter supplement, 1985.

Horn Book, November-December, 2006, Christine M. Heppermann, review of *Life as We Knew It*, p. 723.

Kirkus Reviews, September 15, 2006, Susan Beth Pfeffer, review of *Life as We Knew It*, p. 963.

Publishers Weekly, October 16, 2006, review of *Life as We Knew It*, p. 53.

School Library Journal, October, 2006, John Peters, review of *Life as We Knew It*, p. 166.

ONLINE

SciFi.com, <http://www.scifi.com/> (March 19, 2007), John Joseph Adams, review of *Life as We Knew It*.

Susan Beth Pfeffer Blog Site, <http://susanbethpfeffer.blogspot.com/> (June 4, 2007).

General Objectives

1. To understand that the novel is an example of science fiction
2. To trace the effects of the meteor colliding with the moon
3. To analyze the characters
4. To appreciate the effect of setting
5. To trace how Miranda changes in the course of the novel
6. To probe the meaning of the novel's title
7. To analyze the symbolism in the novel
8. To recognize the novel's theme
9. To describe the novel's plot
10. To understand the novel's ending

Specific Objectives

1. To understand why the moon has been thrown off course
2. To appreciate Laura Evans's resourcefulness, intelligence, and determination to protect her family
3. To analyze the relationship between Miranda and her mother
4. To determine whether or not Miranda and her

family are typical of others affected by the catastrophe, and if not, why not

5. To analyze how different people respond to the tragedy, such as through religious fanaticism
6. To compare and contrast Miranda and Sammi
7. To understand the author's art and skill as a storyteller, especially how she builds suspense yet keeps most of the explicit violence off stage
8. To explore the symbolism of Miranda's watch, Megan's actions and death, Lisa's pregnancy, chocolate chips, and sports in the novel
9. To determine the author's message about treasuring the things that are most important in life, especially family
10. To consider our own possible responses to tragedy

Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Susan Beth Pfeffer's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

Science fiction: fantasy writing that tells about make-believe events that include science or technology.

Often, science fiction is set in the future, on distant planets, or among alien races. *Life as We Knew It* is an example of science fiction because its inciting incident – a meteor hitting the moon and causing mass disruption on earth—is a make-believe event drawn from science.

Suspense: the feeling of tension or anticipation an author creates in a work. Authors create suspense by unexpected plot twists. This keeps readers interested in the story and makes them want to read on to find out what will happen. *Life as We Knew It* is rich in suspense, as readers press on to discover how the meteor impact with the moon will affect earth. How will the tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes affect everyone? Most of all, of course, we wonder whether Miranda and her family will survive, as their plight evokes our pity and fear.

Symbolism: occurs when an image stands for something other than what was expected. The ocean, for example, may be said to symbolize "eternity" and the phrase "river to the sea" could stand for "life flowing into afterlife." In most instances the symbol does not directly reveal what it stands for; rather, the meaning must be discovered through a close reading of the literary work and an understanding of conventional literary and cultural symbols. For example, we realize that the "stars and stripes" stands for the American flag. We know this

because we are told it is so, for the flag itself in no way looks like the United States. Without cultural agreement, many of the symbols we commonly accept would be meaningless. In *Life as We Knew It*, Mrs. Nesbitt received a diamond necklace from her husband on her fiftieth birthday. Mrs. Nesbitt leaves the necklace to Laura, symbolizing both love and hope for a happier future. Matt's drawing of Miranda figure skating symbolizes the past, which Miranda had considered flawed but now realizes was idyllic, filled with beauty and happiness. Lisa's pregnancy symbolizes hope for the future; the gifts of chocolate symbolize sacrifice and love.

The Importance of Setting

The novel is set in rural Pennsylvania at an indeterminate time that readers can safely assume is the very near future. The setting is unusually important in this novel because it helps ensure the family's survival. Had the family lived in a coastal region of the US, Europe, Asia, or Africa, they would have died immediately in one of the fierce tsunamis that erupted after the meteor hit the moon. Similarly, had the family lived in an urban area anywhere around the world, they would not have had access to wood nor a wood stove in which to burn it. Further, food would be much more difficult to procure, as more people had to be fed. In addition, their stored food would very likely have been plundered by fierce urban mobs. Because the Evans's family lives in an isolated rural part of Pennsylvania, they have sufficient food, wood, heat, and safety to make their survival possible.

<http://www.netstate.com/states/geography/mapcom/images/pa.gif>

Cross-Curricular Sources

Novels

M.T. Anderson, *Feed*
 Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*
 Nancy Farmer, *The House of the Scorpion*
 Ann Halam, *Taylor Five*
 Marilyn Kaye, *Like Father, Like Son*
 Charlotte Kerner, *Blueprint*
 Steven Layne, *This Side of Paradise*
 Kathryn Lasky, *Star Split*
 Lois Lowry, *The Giver*
 George Orwell, *1984*
 L.J. Singleton, *Regeneration: The Search*
 Gloria Skurzynski, *The Clones: The Virtual War Chronologs*

Nonfiction

John Clute, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*
 Vincent Di Fate, *Infinite Worlds: The Fantastic Visions of Science Fiction*
 Frank M. Robinson, *Science Fiction of the 20th Century: An Illustrated History*
 Robert Silverberg, *Reflections and Refractions: Thoughts on Science-Fiction, Science, and Other Matters*

AudioBooks

The Year without Michael, 1998
Life as We Knew It, 2006

DVDs and Videos

The Alien Series
Blade Runner
Biotechnology on Earth
League of Extraordinary Gentlemen
The Matrix Series
The Mighty
Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow
War of the Worlds
Waterworld

Internet

Susan Beth Pfeffer's Blog,
susanbethpfeffer.blogspot.com/
 Biographical Information,
www.randomhouse.com/author/results.pperl?authorid=23830 -
 Biographical Information,
www.bookbrowse.com/biographies/index.cfm?author_number=
 Biographical Information,
www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/p/susan-beth-pfeffer/
 Biographical Information,
www2.scholastic.com/browse/contributor.jsp?id=1857

Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Susan Beth Pfeffer's *Life as We Knew It* should include these aspects:

Themes

- death and disease
- family
- friendship
- love

- maturity
- selflessness
- survival
- the potential end of the world
- religious fanaticism
- violence

Motifs

- Showing courage in the face of extreme hardship
- Working together as a family
- Growing up quickly, before your time
- Sacrificing for the sake of others
- Setting aside personal differences for the good of the group
- Embracing religious fanaticism
- Thinking quickly and being resourceful
- Surviving in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds
- Dealing with disappointment
- Facing a radically new world

Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each. Page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. Lisa is pregnant. (p. 1)
(This is an odd opening for a book about a post-apocalyptic future, especially when we consider that Lisa has an extremely minor role in the book—she only appears once—and we never learn whether or not she survives or has her child. Further, we learn about her pregnancy on May 7, which is in the middle of spring. These facts suggest that Lisa’s pregnancy is highly symbolic. The pregnancy and the fact that it takes place in spring symbolize hope and rebirth. The pregnancy and spring foreshadow the novel’s happy ending, the fact that the Earth will recover from the cataclysmic events and although battered and bruised, the Evans family and other survivors will endure.)
2. He paused for a moment. “I have a funny feeling,” he said. “I guess it’s this moon business.” (p. 14)
(Everyone is excited about the meteor striking the moon, regarding it as little more than a pleasant diversion. Only Matt, Miranda’s older brother, regards the event with trepidation. His uneasiness foreshadows the tragedy to follow, as the collision causes fatal tsunamis, earthquakes, and tornadoes. Millions and millions of

people will die and untold numbers will suffer unimaginable horrors.)

3. But the moon wasn’t a half moon anymore. It was tilted and wrong and a three-quarter moon and it got larger, way larger, large like a moon rising on the horizon, only it wasn’t rising. (p. 19)
(Here, Miranda describes the effect of the meteor colliding with the moon. Astronomers had predicted a very minor event; instead, the moon is badly damaged in the collision, and everyone suddenly realizes that events have gone dreadfully awry.)
4. One thing Matt did say to me was that no matter what the future is, we’re living through a very special time in history. He said that history makes us who we are, but we can make history, also, and that anyone can be a hero, if they choose to be. (p. 57)
(This is one of the novel’s themes: the importance of being proactive and taking control of your destiny. We see this in several of the main characters, especially Laura. When the first fierce storm hits, the day after the collision, Laura springs into action, buying food and supplies for her family and Mrs. Nesbitt. Laura’s quick thinking here goes a long way to ensuring her family’s survival. Matt and Peter are also very heroic, Matt immediately coming home and working as hard as he can to help save his family and Peter working himself to death in the hospital for the sake of his patients. Miranda, too, chooses to grow up quickly rather than sink into religious fanaticism like Megan, become lawless, or run away, as many others did.)
5. “How often do I have to explain this to you?” Mom asked. “Family is all that matters.” (p. 100)
(This is another major theme in the novel. Prior to the meteor collision, Laura had been generous to others, which her children had noticed and emulated. Now, however, Laura refuses to help others because she realizes that even the smallest loss of food or medicine can affect her own family’s chance of surviving. In extreme situations, the author suggests, we must change our way of thinking if we are to survive.)
6. “You could be happy, too, if only you embraced God,” she said. (p. 112)
(Megan, one of Miranda’s best friends, has become a religious fanatic. She chooses to starve herself to achieve salvation. Her religious leader, the Reverend Marshall, is a total fraud,

taking food from his starving parishioners. Megan symbolizes another way that people react under extreme stress, by turning to religious fanaticism. Megan's death serves to demonstrate the futility of this response to tragedy and reinforces the author's message about taking positive action to ensure your own survival and the survival of your family.)

7. Megan's right about my being a sinner. But she's wrong about hell. You don't have to wait until you're dead to get there. (p.196)
(The family suffers from starvation, isolation, fear, loss of privacy, and other enormous hardships. Through her experiences, Miranda matures and comes to realize that there is a great deal more to life than she had ever imagined, especially its dark side.)
8. We have each other. As long as we have each other, we'll be all right. (p. 217)
(Miranda has internalized her mother's message about the importance of family and sticking together as a unit. She has learned to transcend self for the sake of others, the key step in maturity.)
9. "It could be worse," he said. "We may look back on this as the good time." (p. 272)
(The family is digging out from a fierce blizzard. They are cold, hungry, and dirty. Nonetheless, Matt realizes that they are still alive and all together. Miranda must constantly readjust her mind-set to realize that she has no idea how bad things can really get. As she adjusts, we see her maturing.)
10. "Come here to sign up for your food?" Mayor Ford asked. (p. 333)
(Miranda is shocked when she finds that not only is City Hall open but also that the mayor and an assistant are handing out bags of food. We realize that government has been restored and with order will come normalcy. The earth and humanity will survive.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. When and where does the story take place?
(The story takes place in a rural part of Pennsylvania sometime in the immediate future.)

2. What happens to the moon?
(A meteor hits the moon, causing enormous disruption on earth: fierce tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and weather disturbances.)
3. What does Laura do the day after the event with the moon?
(She pulls her children out of school so they can help her load up with food and supplies. Armed with cash, she buys as much as she can. Her quick, courageous actions help ensure their survival.)
4. What objects does Mrs. Nesbitt leave to the Evans family?
(She leaves everything she owned, the entire contents of her house, including her jewelry, clothing, furniture, and the food she has carefully saved.)
5. What happens to Megan?
(She starves herself to death in an example of religious extremism.)

Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. Why does Laura force Miranda to eat an entire bag of chocolate chips?
(Laura must teach Miranda self-control, as their very survival depends on it. She wants Miranda to understand the full extent of her selfishness.)
7. What does Megan symbolize?
(Megan symbolizes the religious fanatics, those who would give their allegiance to corrupt religious leaders—here, Reverend Marshall—in times of extreme strife.)
8. How does Miranda change by the end of the novel?
(She goes from being a self-absorbed child in the beginning of the novel to a selfless young woman at the end of it.)

Questions 9-10 (Critical Level)

9. Do you agree with Laura's belief that family should come first? Why or why not?
(In this situation, it seems entirely justified, but some students may argue that civilization and order would have been restored more quickly if people had worked together for the greater good.)
10. Did you find the novel's ending believable? Why or why not?
(The ending may seem too pat to many readers, with order being restored just in time. It is unlikely that the Evans family, symbolic of the other survivors, could have held on much longer.)

Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Make some New Year's resolutions, as the characters in the novel do. Your resolutions, however, should apply to your own life.
12. Working with a partner, role-play a scene in which Miranda and Dan get together five years after the end of the novel.

Across the Curriculum

Art/Music

1. Early on in the book, a newscaster reports that the Statue of Liberty is washed out into the sea. Make a scale replica of the statue. Include a brief history of this iconic monument to display with your model.
2. Choose background music for an especially dramatic scene. Read the scene to a group of classmates as you play the music in the background.
3. Draw a new cover for the novel. Be sure that it entices people to read the book.
4. The novel takes place in Pennsylvania, a popular tourist destination. Make a travel brochure for this beautiful state.
5. Construct a three-dimensional model of the Evans's home. Use details from the novel to guide you.
6. People spontaneously break into "The Star Spangled Banner" at one point in the novel. Perform our national anthem at a school sporting event or for a small group of your classmates.

Language Arts

1. The novel is purported to be Miranda's journal. Keep a journal of your own for at least two weeks. Report events that have meaning in your life, as Miranda did in her life.
2. *Life as We Knew It* is part of a long line of novels that trace the possible end of the world. Read another book with the same topic, such as Neville Shute's *On the Beach*. In an essay, explain how the novels are similar and different.
3. Write the novel's back story: what was life like for Miranda and her family long before the moon was damaged? Include information about her parents' divorce, for instance.
4. The moon has inspired many legends, myths, and even words, such as "lunatic," someone driven crazy by the moon. Write your own legend about the moon.
5. The principal and a handful of teachers attempt

to keep school in session. Imagine that you were an English teacher in Miranda's school, someone like Mr. Clifford from the novel. Plan a lesson that you would teach, a lesson relevant to your students' life after the moon was damaged.

History/Social Studies

1. Miranda's older brother Matt is a student at Cornell University, a school in the Ivy League. Make a map showing the schools in the Ivy League and their dates of founding.
2. Before the meteor hits the moon, Miranda thinks about getting her learner's permit so she can get a driver's license. Make a pamphlet showing the rules for getting a driver's license in your county or state.
3. Report on great epidemics of the past, including the Black Death of the Middle Ages and the Great Flu epidemic of 1918.
4. Explain the allusion on page 162: "Except for that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you like the play?"
5. Choose any two baseball stadiums and trace their history.

Speech/Drama

1. Imagine that you were in Miranda's situation. Which items would you buy from the food store and why? List at least ten items you would grab. In a speech, justify the inclusion of each one.
2. Miranda's mother, a writer, argues that fiction can have more power than reality. Working with some classmates, debate this issue.
3. With a partner, act out a scene between Miranda and Dan, her almost-boyfriend, in which they discuss their feelings for each other.
4. In a group, debate whether or not the novel's ending is realistic. Provide specific examples to make your point.
5. In a roundtable discussion, explore how everyone would react to being in Miranda's situation. What would be the most difficult part of her life?

Science/Math

1. Could a meteor really hit the earth? Find out if this is possible, and if so, if events would unfold as they do in the novel.
2. The Evans' family goes on a strictly limited diet to stretch their food. How many calories does an average teenager need to maintain opti-

mal health? Show the results on a chart or graph.

3. Miranda likens the meteor to Halley's Comet. Report on the history of the comet and explain how it does or does not parallel events in the novel.
4. Explain the causes and effects of a tsunami, using diagrams to make your explanation clear.
5. A flu epidemic decimates the already weakened world. Report on the flu, including its causes and treatments. Be sure to include information on ways to protect yourself from the flu.

Alternate Assessment

1. Write and deliver a eulogy for Mrs. Nesbitt.
2. Draw or paint a mural showing the main events in the plot
3. Make a disaster plan for your family. Include escape routes, specific places to meet in case of an emergency, and supplies to have on hand.
4. Write a critical review of the novel for publication in the school newspaper.
5. Working with some classmates, create a scene in which Miranda, her mother, and her brothers are reunited with Lisa and Dad. The scene should explain the fate of each character, especially Lisa, Dad, and their baby.

Vocabulary Test

Complete the following sentences with these words from *Life as We Knew It*.

cusp	dingy
chaos	covet
benign	weary
tsunami	invalid
hoax	decimated

1. They were on the _____ of a major change in their lives.
2. After the disaster, there was utter _____ for a while.
3. After the harsh conditions of winter, spring brought a mood that was more _____.
4. The undersea earthquakes caused a devastating _____ to hit the seacoast.
5. Reports of free food turned out to be a cruel _____.
6. Tired of her _____ surroundings, she longed for sunlight and bright colors.
7. The townspeople _____ the newcomers' food and warm clothing.
8. The family was _____ with hard work and worry.
9. The injury had turned him into an _____.
10. A meteor _____ homes and buildings.

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blanks provided.

- | | |
|------------------|------------|
| A. Mrs. Nesbitt | F. Miranda |
| B. Peter Elliott | G. Laura |
| C. Horton | H. Lisa |
| D. Jonny | I. Rachel |
| E. Sammi | J. Matt |

- _____ 1. Miranda's younger brother; he wants to be a baseball player
- _____ 2. a writer; Miranda's mother
- _____ 3. Miranda's older brother
- _____ 4. Dad's new wife
- _____ 5. the novel's narrator
- _____ 6. a generous, selfless doctor
- _____ 7. the teenager who goes off with a 40-year-old man
- _____ 8. the woman who functions as a surrogate grandmother to the Evans family
- _____ 9. the name Miranda gives to her father's new child
- _____ 10. the family's cat

Part II: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if any part is false.

- _____ 1. At first, no one is especially worried about a meteor hitting the moon; in fact, they think the event will be fun.
- _____ 2. Immediately after the meteor hits the moon, the weather turns surprisingly mild and beautiful, what Miranda's mother calls "Indian Summer."
- _____ 3. Miranda's mother is generous and shares her food, candles, and matches with all the neighbors, especially Miranda's friends.
- _____ 4. Miranda's friend Megan has become a religious fanatic and is starving herself to achieve salvation.
- _____ 5. Miranda will not be able to spend a month with her father in Springfield as planned, because her father and step-mother have died of West Nile Virus.
- _____ 6. The children give Laura a photograph of herself as an infant for a Christmas gift.
- _____ 7. Miranda gives Matt some colored pencils that she found at Mrs. Nesbitt's house.
- _____ 8. Miranda sees some gangs stealing wood, and she is happy when the police arrest the boys and send them to the local jail.
- _____ 9. Miranda hurts her ankle and cannot walk on it for two weeks. Her mother takes over all the chores, especially chopping wood.
- _____ 10. At the end of the novel, Miranda gets some food from town and it appears that civilization has turned a corner and will survive.

Part III: Quote Identification (30 points)

Briefly explain why each quote is important in the novel.

1. He paused for a moment. "I have a funny feeling," he said. "I guess it's this moon business."

2. But the moon wasn't a half moon anymore. It was tilted and wrong and a three-quarter moon and it got larger, way larger, large like a moon rising on the horizon, only it wasn't rising.

3. "How often do I have to explain this to do?" Mom asked. "Family is all that matters."

4. Megan's right about my being a sinner. But she's wrong about hell. You don't have to wait until you're dead to get there.

5. "Come here to sign up for your food?" Mayor Ford asked.

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. One critic noted that the novel shows how Miranda journeys from self-absorbed child to selfless young woman. Explain how Miranda changes.
2. Argue that the novel's ending is or is not realistic.
3. Explain the meaning of at least three of the following symbols from the novel: the diamond necklace, drawing pencils, chocolate, Matt's drawing of Miranda, Lisa's pregnancy, ice-skating, and swimming.
4. What function does Mrs. Nesbitt serve in the novel?

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Sentence Completion (20 points)

Write the word or phrase that best completes each of the following statements.

1. The Evans live in a rural part of the state of _____.
2. School ends early, in large part because there is no food for the students. Therefore, Miranda's family is thrilled when Mrs. Nesbitt brings a rare treat: _____.
3. Miranda becomes more aware of the cataclysmic disruptions to the world weather patterns, as the _____ intensify and the resulting ash darkens the sky.
4. The killing frost hits in the month of _____, destroying the family's carefully-tended garden.
5. Laura catches Miranda stuffing herself with _____ that Laura was saving for Matt's birthday.
6. Miranda is shocked to meet her hero, the figure skater _____, on the pond. They skate together through the filthy air.
7. Realizing that Lisa's baby would have been born by now, Miranda decides it is a girl and names her _____.
8. The family fears that Matt has gotten lost and died in a fierce _____.
9. Mr. Mortensen, a neighbor, comes to their door, begging for help because his wife is very ill. Laura gives him some _____ but nothing more.
10. Everyone but Miranda comes down with the illness that Mrs. Mortensen has: _____.

Part II: Matching (30 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blanks provided.

- | | |
|--|-------------------|
| _____ 1. Miranda's sexually promiscuous friend | A. Dan |
| _____ 2. Miranda's younger brother | B. Mrs. Hammish |
| _____ 3. the novel's narrator | C. Jonny |
| _____ 4. the boy Miranda kisses | D. Mrs. Nesbitt |
| _____ 5. the family's elderly neighbor | E. Mrs. Sanchez |
| _____ 6. the history teacher | F. Miranda |
| _____ 7. Miranda's mother, a writer | G. Laura |
| _____ 8. the figure skater that Miranda idolizes | H. Matt |
| _____ 9. Miranda's older brother | I. Brandon Erlich |
| _____ 10. the high school principal | J. Sammi |

Part III: Identification (20 points)

Explain why each is important in the novel.

1. Miranda's watch

2. Meghan

3. Miranda's name

4. chocolate chips

5. drawing pencils

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Compare and contrast Miranda's life before and after the catastrophe. Include at least three points.
2. Trace the novel's plot. Include the rising action, climax, and resolution.
3. According to a Publishers Weekly reviewer, Pfeffer's body of work shows her to be "a natural storyteller with an acute ear." Agree or disagree with this statement, using specific examples from *Life As We Knew It*.
4. What role does the novel's setting play in the story? Why is the setting so important in this novel?

Answer Key

VOCABULARY TEST

1. cusp
2. chaos
3. benign
4. tsunami
5. hoax
6. dingy
7. covet
8. weary
9. invalid
10. decimated

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. D | 6. B |
| 2. G | 7. E |
| 3. J | 8. A |
| 4. H | 9. I |
| 5. F | 10. C |

Part II: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. T |
| 2. F | 7. T |
| 3. F | 8. F |
| 4. T | 9. F |
| 5. F | 10. T |

Part III: Quote Identification (30 points)

1. Matt's comment foreshadows the tragedy to follow, as the collision causes fatal tsunamis, earthquakes, and tornadoes. Millions and millions of people will die and untold numbers will suffer unimaginable horrors.
2. Astronomers had predicted a very minor event; instead, the moon is badly damaged in the collision, and everyone suddenly realizes that events have gone dreadfully awry.
3. This is a major theme in the novel. In extreme situations, the author suggests, we must change our way of thinking if we are to survive.
4. Through her experiences, Miranda matures and comes to realize that there is a great deal more to life than she had ever imagined, especially its dark side.
5. This scene in the end of the novel shows that government has been restored and with order will come normalcy. The earth and humanity will survive.

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Sentence Completion (20 points)

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Pennsylvania. | 6. Brandon Erlich |
| 2. two fresh eggs | 7. Rachel |
| 3. volcanic eruptions | 8. blizzard |
| 4. August | 9. aspirin |
| 5. chocolate | 10. flu |

Part II: Matching (30 points)

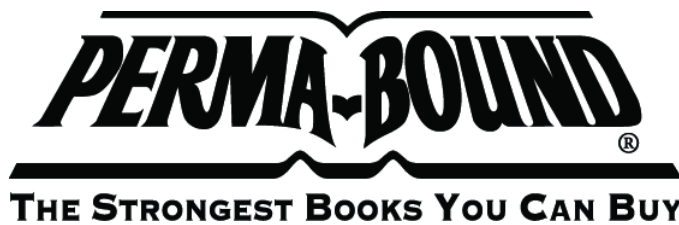
- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. J | 6. B |
| 2. C | 7. G |
| 3. F | 8. I |
| 4. A | 9. H |
| 5. D | 10. E |

Part III: Identification (20 points)

1. The battery on Miranda's watch stops, symbolizing how time seems to stop for the family, trapped in what seems to be an endless winter.
2. Meghan represents the religious fanatics, those who would give their allegiance to corrupt religious leaders (here, Reverend Marshall) in times of extreme strife.
3. Miranda's name is an allusion to a character in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. Miranda Evans, as with Miranda in the play, comes to live in a "brave new world," a world different from her wildest imagination.
4. Miranda gorges on a bag of chocolate chips that Laura was saving for Matt's birthday. Mom forces Miranda to eat the entire bag and then denies her food for two days. This is an important step in Miranda's maturation and growing selflessness.
5. Miranda gives Matt some drawing pencils for Christmas. As she has recorded events in words, now he can record them in pictures.

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.



PERMA-BOUND

617 East Vandalia Road • Jacksonville, Illinois 62650
Toll Free 1-800-637-6581 • Fax 1-800-551-1169
E-Mail: books@perma-bound.com

PERMA-BOUND CANADA

Box 868, Station Main • Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7A2
Toll Free 1-800-461-1999 • Fax 1-888-250-3811
E-Mail: perma-bound.ca@sympatico.ca

Visit us online at www.perma-bound.com