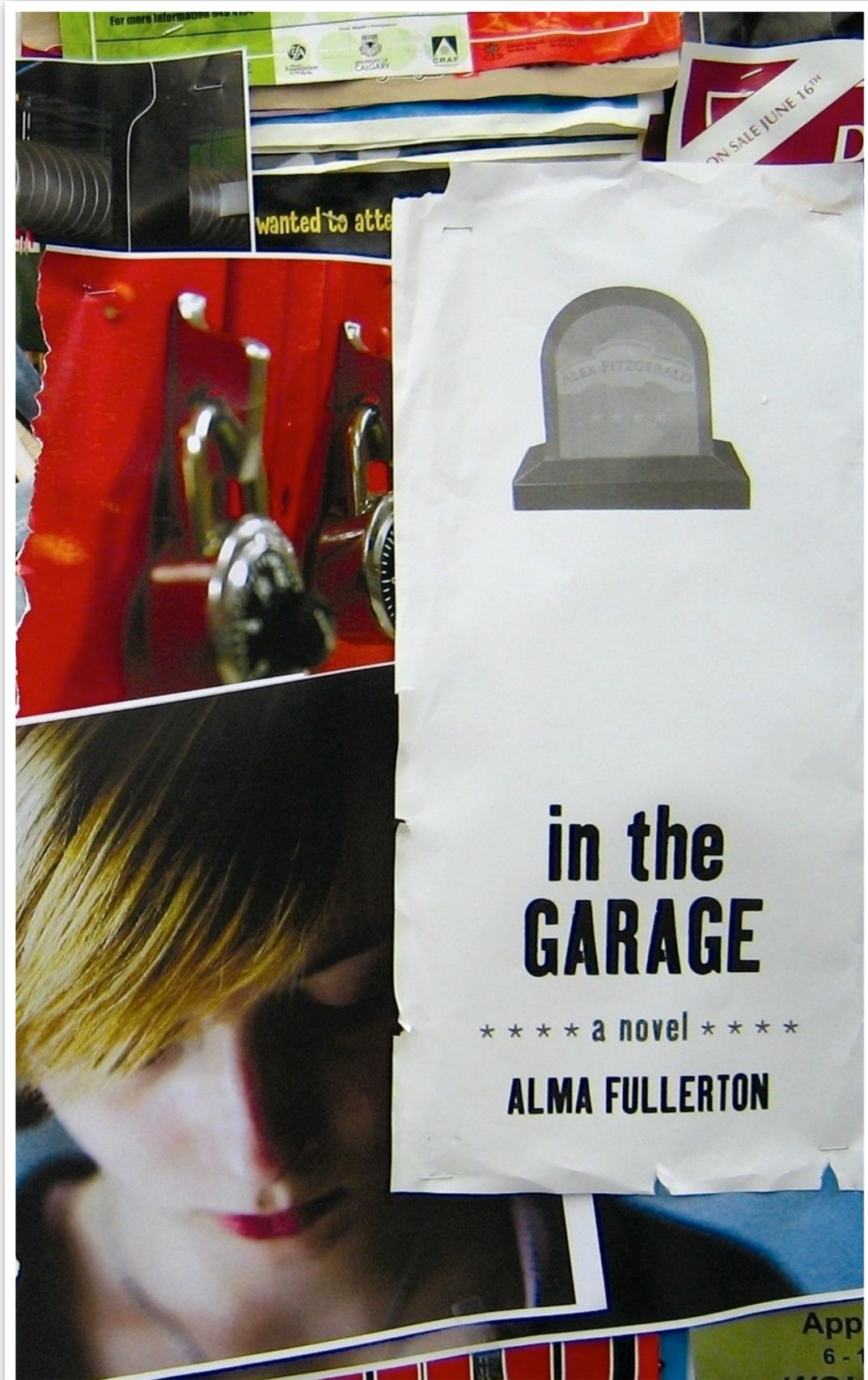


IN The Garage – Teacher's Guide



# IN THE GARAGE

By Alma Fullerton

*Teacher’s Guide created by Cassandra Reigel Whetstone*

**Book Description:** BJ, a girl who was born with a large birthmark on her face, and Alex, her long time best friend are dual narrators in this story about their friendship. BJ betrays Alex and has to come to terms with her own desire to be accepted by her peers. BJ’s betrayal exposes Alex to an angry mob. Alex is attacked and killed in his garage while BJ tries to stop the mob. The story ends with BJ’s eulogy for Alex.

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## **Pre-reading Activity: Identifying Pressures**

**Materials:** Sheet of blank paper per student, pencil

**Preparation:** None

**Note:** If appropriate, facilitators may choose to have students use themselves as the central figure of this activity, or may prefer to have students use a more distant “any young person” as stated in the directions.

### **Directions:**

1. Pass out blank paper to students. Ask them to draw a picture of a teen or young person.
2. Tell students to close their eyes and think about this person that they’ve drawn. Say, *Think about what pressures this person faces throughout the day at school, at home, with friends, with family. Think about the social pressures, the academic pressures, the home pressures that this person experiences. Imagine the pressures that this person is under in living day to day and in preparing for the future.*
3. Give students a few moments to think about these questions then have them open their eyes. Ask them to list the different types of pressures around the picture and to draw arrows from the words to the person.
4. Ask volunteers to share out some of the different types of pressures young people might experience.

**Extension:** Make a list of the different types of pressures students identified and how many students wrote down each idea. Graph the data or create a frequency table and discuss the results.

## **Discussion Questions**

- *Tell students that Jean Toomer was an American poet and novelist who was part of the Harlem Renaissance. What might Jean Toomer mean when he refers to standards? What does it mean to have your own standards? What would it mean to not have your own standards? page 7*

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- Alex writes that “Surrounded by friends/ I feel / Alone.” How can someone be surrounded by friends and be alone at the same time? Have you ever had an experience like that? *page 13*
- Why do you think BJ’s mother left? If BJ had been born without the birthmark would it have made a difference for her mother? Do you think she will come back? *pages 14-19*
- What does Alex mean when he says that it’s better to be flawed on the outside so that you know what to expect from people? *page 20*
- Alex says that BJ gave him his “escape” when she gave him a guitar. How does the guitar help Alex escape? Why is it important for people to have moments to get a break from situations that are stressful or painful? What other things to people use to help them escape? Discuss methods of escape that are healthy (music, dance, art, reading, sports, journaling, hobbies,) and those that are unhealthy (alcohol, drugs, food binges, smoking). *page 25*
- How would you describe Alex’s relationship with Jacob? *page 38*
- The author writes, “It’s easy to be swayed into believing something when you need to be true.” What are some examples of needing something to be true? What are your feelings towards Rachel and Victoria in this chapter? *pages 76-78*
- What does it mean to have your entire existence hang off a text message? Have you ever felt like that? How often do you think you check your texts when you are waiting for a response from someone? What is a reasonable length of time to wait for a text from a friend? Is there a time that is considered too long? How do you feel when you have to wait “too long?” *page 80* *If cell phones are allowed in class have the class come up with a question to ask a classmate. Have one student text the answer to a second student. Have the second student leave the phone on his or her desk. Time how long the class can wait before checking to see the answer. Discuss the emotions they experience while waiting.*
- What does Dad mean by “Social Suicide”? What do you think about Dad’s relationship with Alex? *pages 87-88*
- What is the purpose of the Suicide-Contract? Do you think that this is an effective tool for the hospital to use with BJ? Why or why not? *pages 126-127*
- Were you surprised when you learned what happened to Amanda on page 137? Do you think there is something somebody could have done to prevent her suicide? *Pages 136-137* *\*Suicide prevention resources are listed at the end of this guide. Discuss warning signs listed in resources and offer prevention hotline information to students as appropriate.*
- Reread the scene with Dr. West. Why is it so important for BJ to be “seen” by Dr. West? What does it mean to be “seen,” in that way? *pages 142-143*
- BJ says that she hears Nan and Dad arguing and says that they are worried about her. What do you think they are arguing about? How might it feel to be the parent or grandparent of someone like BJ, who is obviously in emotional pain? What could they do to help her? *pages 144-145*
- Why did Alex’s dad leave the basketball game so abruptly? *pages 168-169*

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- Who do you think that Alex was going to call? Is he correct in thinking that only one person will accept him? Why or why not? *pages 174*
- Do you think Alex’s death will change the characters in the story? Who might change and in what way? Is there anyone who you don’t think will change? *pages 180-181*
- What do you think BJ will be doing 5 years from the end of this book? What about Jacob?

### **Moving from Childhood to Adolescence (Venn Diagrams, Dual Narrators, Prose vs. Verse)**

**Materials:** Drawing paper or blank paper, pencil, colored pencils, circle compass (optional)

**Preparation:** None

**Directions:**

#### **Session One**

1. Ask, “How old is a child? What about an adolescent? Does everyone become an adolescent when they reach a similar chronological age or can it vary?”
2. Reread the poem, “Invisible Shields” on page 50. Ask, “What does Alex mean by ‘the invisible shield of childhood’?”
3. Reread the quote from page 64, “When you’re little you think dandelions are flowers; it’s not until you’re grown up that you think they’re weeds. The dandelions never changed. Your standards did.” Discuss how standards and expectations change as people move from childhood to adolescence. Ask students to share what is hard and what is exciting about moving into adolescence.
4. Give students paper. Have them draw a Venn diagram with two large circles (use circle compasses if available.)
5. Instruct students to label one circle, “Childhood” and the second circle, “Adolescence.” Have them draw a picture of Jacob in the first circle and BJ and Alex in the second circle.
6. Tell students to draw words or pictures that are a part of childhood in the first circle, adolescence in the second circle, and things that are shared by both groups in the overlapping portion.

#### **Session Two**

1. Ask students how many narrators are in *IN THE GARAGE*. Tell students that having two narrators is called having “dual narrators.”
2. Ask, “What are the different styles of writing that the author used in the book?”
3. Read the poem on page 32. Tell students Alex’s entries were written as free verse, which is a form of poetry that doesn’t use consistent rhyme or meter. Ask, “How does this style of writing fit with Alex’s character?”
4. Read page 101. Tell students that BJ’s entries were written as prose, which is defined as “ordinary language” without meter or rhyme. Ask, “Why do you think the author chose to use prose for BJ?”

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5. Have students review the Venn diagrams from the previous session. Tell them that they are going to write about the journey from childhood to adolescence in one of the two styles used in the book.
6. Tell students to select either free verse or prose and have them write either a poem or a paragraph in response to, “Moving from Childhood to Adolescence.”

**Closure:** Have students share their writings with the class.

**Extension:** Step 6 can be extended to a full essay or collection of free verse poems that should include a beginning/middle/end arc.

### Using Figurative Language (Writing)

**Materials:** Paper, pencils, board, chart paper

**Preparation:** Prepare piece of chart paper with the title, “Found Similes”

**Directions:**

1. Read the following quote from page 30: “That note flattens me like a frog that has been left in a glass container for two weeks without water.” Ask students to identify the literary technique the author used with that line. (simile)
2. Discuss how figurative language like similes make writing strong and interesting.
3. Write the following sentence on the board: “But seeing all those girls holding on to their dance partners made me feel like I was unwanted and didn’t belong there.” Ask for suggestions on improving that sentence. Discuss different ideas and write on board. Finally, share what that author wrote on page 69: “But seeing all those girls with their arms wrapped around their dance partners like morning glories hold a fence just makes me feel like a weed in their gardens.” Ask students how the similes in this sentence helped to convey the character’s emotion to the reader.
4. Distribute. Ask students to write a simple feeling sentence, such as “He was sad when his dog died.” Have students rewrite sentence several times using different similes. Ask students to share their favorite similes.
5. Explain that figurative language is usually most successful when used with some restraint and very often sparse and carefully selected words can often be the most effective way to express ideas and emotions. Share one of Alex’s verses from page 171: “In the garage/ my father/ stands, /alone.” Ask how using a simile, such as “my father stands alone, like a cactus in the desert” might change the pacing of that poem. Would it make it better or worse?

**Closure:** Challenge students to find examples of similes in other readings and write on “Found Similes” chart paper. Add to chart throughout the year.

### Create a Friendship Code (Writing, Teamwork)

**Materials:** Chart paper and markers per group, tape, writing paper

**Preparation:** Assign students to cooperative groups of 3-4 students per group

**Directions:**

1. Reread pages 57-58.

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2. Discuss the lines, “I’m afraid to stay and want to bolt to make sure I’m the first one to leave. But instead of running, I look up to listen, because that’s what best friends do.” What do these lines tell you about BJ’s friendship with Alex?
3. Discuss the lines, “His lips open but nothing comes out. “Never mind,” he goes. “Let’s just get out of here.” What do you think he wanted to tell BJ? Why didn’t he tell her?
4. Ask, “What are the rules or guidelines for being a good friend?”
5. Tell students that they are going to create a friendship code. Give each group a piece of chart paper and markers. Have them write the title, “FRIENDSHIP CODE” on the top of the page.
6. Ask them to brainstorm and write down the unwritten rules that good friends should follow in order to maintain their friendships.
7. Have groups share their codes and hang them around the room. Discuss when it’s important to follow the code and when it might be appropriate to break their code. Ask, “Are there ever situations when you need to break a friendship?”

**Closure:** Ask students to write a response to this prompt, “What makes a good friend?”

### **Teen Suicide (Resources)**

Familiarize yourself with current suicide prevention resources and share information with students as appropriate.

The Trevor Project: <http://www.thetrevorproject.org>

Association for Suicide Prevention (Canada): <http://www.casp-acps.ca/home.asp>

Suicide Prevention (U.S.): <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Suicide Prevention Resource Center Materials for Teens: [http://www.sprc.org/featured\\_resources/customized/teens.asp](http://www.sprc.org/featured_resources/customized/teens.asp)