

Q & A + Book Review - By: Adrienne Keiner
of
"Secrets, Lies, and Algebra"
By: Wendy Lichtman

Q & A: In progress... (I am still trying to contact author)

Q & A Complete: 45 minute SKYPE session with 16-22 6th grade students. Not all questions were answered because of a time constraint.

Example Questions: (From me)

- 1) Why did you become as teacher? **Always loved math and knew she wanted others to love it too.**
- 2) Why did you become a math teacher, specifically?
- 3) Was perseverance the main objective of this story/character? **No, showing that math is interwoven into every aspect of our lives was the main object. Also, to show how math can help solve real life issues and help better understand the world or people around us.**
- 4) How did your math and reading teachers in middle school or high school influence you as a learner and/or as a teacher?
- 5) Why write a book? What was the driving force behind your writing? **Personal connections. Wrote in journal all the time and created a story through them. Had someone commit suicide and she wondered why they never called the police or called it a murder.**
- 6) Why relate it to math? Why not another subject? **She loves math and wanted to incorporate her own experiences with math to her own life and the lives of her students.**
- 7) Was the main character based on a student or person you knew? **Yes, I observe many math classes and I choose characteristics from several students to make a character for the stories.**
- 8) What about the other characters? **All characters were based on someone she had interacted with or a personality she had seen.**
- 9) Will you write more books off these same characters or different? Maybe related to science? History? **Will stick to math fiction but will include other subjects in the books through teacher and student characters.**
- 10) What did you want students to get out of this book? Besides perseverance and a love for math? **That not all things can be explained (referring to suicide). That math is everywhere.**

Example Questions: (From selected students I gave a copy of the book to)

- 1) Do you make your math class read your book? (Loved this one!)
- 2) Did someone help you write your books? or How long did it take you to write this book? **The editors helped make the final versions of the book. A friend helped with the title and many people influenced me on the characters.**
- 3) Did you like your teachers? **Yes. My favorite class was math.**
- 4) Why do we need algebra? (He has not read the book yet.)
- 5) Are you going to write more books? or Can you make your books into graphic novels?

The above questions I would love to ask, but have not had a chance to, hopefully in the future I will be able to do so once contact has been established. stalking of Wendy Lichtman has commenced.

Wendy Lichtman was fantastic to SKYPE with she was so calm and engaging. She did an activity with the class about choosing a math symbol that reflects personal metaphors. Almost all students stated their symbol and why they chose it. They really thought about it! Wendy also talked about the suicide at the beginning of the story and how it was never solved. She really went into the characters, how they were chosen, why they did certain things, and their personal symbols that expresses personalities and character traits.

It took awhile to bring this all together because Mrs. Lichtman's website was under construction and could not be accessed. But once we connected things moved and two weeks later my class was SKYPING with her all the way from California. Wendy started off pretty funny by stating that Chicago was very cold this time of year and that she just got done from swimming at an outdoor pool. The students immediately bonded with her. Not only did I enjoy her book, I enjoyed talking with her before in emails, during our SKYPE sessions, and afterwards via emails. I hope to stay in touch with Mrs. Lichtman to keep students interested in math being all around us.

Book Review:

Wow! Love it, read it, tell everyone in middle school and high school to read it as well! Why? Because of so many reasons, but to answer I have to embody two different identities. One as a teacher of mathematics and one as a learner of all subjects.

As a teacher of mathematics I see a disconnect with my students every day regarding why they have to learn “all this stupid math!”. Yes, I have students tell me this and I love their honesty because I remember feeling that same way about math. “Secrets, Lies, and Algebra” hits the nail on the head by connecting teen angst with mathematical concepts. Why didn’t I think of this before!?!? The teenage and pre-teen years are identical to algebraic concepts, subjective, as are first loves, first friendships, and first dramatic life changes called puberty. I am always answering the question, “who cares, I won’t ever use this again!” and I have always answered with, “You learned how to sing the alphabet right? You don’t sing the alphabet everyday to spell words or read a book? Or do you? Maybe your brain does and you don’t even know it.” An answer like that doesn’t always win over the class, but it does make them think about what they’ve learned in the past as tools for the future.

In “Secrets, Lies, and Algebra” Ms Litchman relates mathematics to the teenage thinking today, in that second, not the future or past, which is what I like most. I am an adult and cannot always fathom why students do what they do. But, Ms. Lichtman’s book keeps math concepts at students’ levels, that most adults don’t remember. She did this by using the math vocabulary that most people do not use if they are not in a math driven career. I, as a teacher, saw vocabulary in a different light. Students need to see the same vocabulary used in everyday experiences so they don’t make the assumption that it can be forgotten when not in a math environment. Remembering that students separate subjects vocabulary and concepts will help me teach math concepts and vocabulary so students come to the realization that everything is related and can be used outside of the learning environment and in their ‘real’ world.

The other reason I recommend reading this book are the home situations. As a teacher I always have to remember students go home to many different, and not always ideal, home situations. Such home situations may interfere with remembering and connecting with the days lessons and learnings. In “Secrets, Lies, and Algebra” the main character holds onto her teachings and connects them to after school experiences and then questions peoples actions from such connects. Wow! I usually see students as self absorbed bystanders that don’t always see how life directly affects their own. Reading Ms. Lichtman’s book has made me, as a teacher, look at students differently. She has also made me look at my own lessons using the question, “How will students take these math concepts and use it in their own life TODAY?”. “Secrets, Lies, and

Algebra” has shown me that if students can relate and use it personally in real time that they will own it and use it forever.

As a learner I related the story directly to my own life experiences during that age and time. Mostly the drama. I wish a story like “Secrets, Lies and Algebra” existed when I was in middle school. I would have seen and identified with many things differently, maybe not all things because that comes with age and experiences. But, I would have noticed how math connects or relates to everyday life, like a movie you’ve seen before, noticing specific details or things I had brushed over but now see through mathematical lenses. Maybe I would’ve made different choices, hindsight’s 20/20, right? But as a consistent learner I can use such teen drama to drive my own thoughts today as an adult.

As I’ve said before most adults see teenagers as self absorbed bystanders but shouldn’t because they too have something to teach. As a learner, kids at different ages can teach me things that I have never experienced or have forgotten existed. “Secrets, Lies, and Algebra” reminded me of instances I need to keep at the forefront of brain daily so as to better the people I interact with throughout life.

I am not sure if the main objective of “Secrets, Lies, and Algebra” was perseverance (I hope to ask the author one day) but that is what I took from its entirety. As a learner, completing everyday tasks came with becoming an adult. But, larger ideas and projects were harder for me to follow through on and I have always had to push myself to complete what I start. I see such follow through issues all the time, not just in education, like finishing laundry! As I read Ms. Litchman’s story every chapter had some sort of comment or underlining conflict on perseverance. Ms. Litchman referred to perseverance directly through mathematical problems but also in the main characters, Tess’s daily drama. I loved this clever occurrence.

I absolutely love this book and recommend it to everyone. I have many questions for the author which would lead me to more personal ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’ discoveries hidden in “Secrets, Lies and Algebra”, hopefully they will be answered soon. I invite all to read, connect and persevere through Ms. Wendy Litchman’s dramatic, mathematical adventure.