



STRONGER AT THE SEAMS

SHANNON STOCKER

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE FOR YOUNG ADULTS, AGES 12 AND UP
CREATED BY JENNIFER GUYOR JOWETT

“You might never know why you’re upside down. The important thing is that you stretch your neck out and try to flip yourself back over” (256).

SUMMARY:

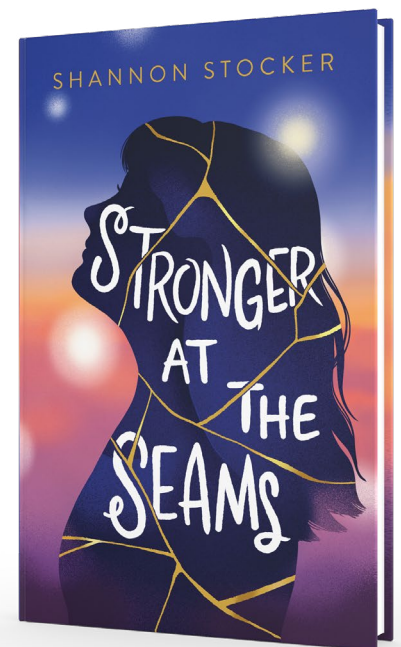
Twyla is playing in a field hockey tournament, preparing to start high school, and dreaming of making varsity when the nausea begins. At first, she blames dehydration. But once school starts, her symptoms worsen. A lot.

When Twyla asks her dad about her late mother’s medical history, he shuts down the conversation. Then her best friends become weirdly cagey after she gets sick, ghosting her outside of school and whispering when she’s around. She definitely doesn’t want to tell her neighbor and lab partner what’s going on, as he’s suddenly giving her butterflies. But worst of all, doctors won’t listen—they’re convinced it’s a minor digestive issue or stress. Frustrated but determined, Twyla sets off to find answers on her own.

When Twyla discovers a potential diagnosis in her mom’s records, she feels a twinge of hope. Maybe she can find her own reasons. But can she do it before everything in her life shatters...including Twyla herself?

Stronger at the Seams:

- Is a contemporary fiction novel for readers 12 and up and adult fans of YA
- Comes from Shannon Stocker, the winner of the 2023 Schneider Award for *Listen: How Evelyn Glennie, a Deaf Girl, Changed Percussion* and an advocate for children with disabilities and chronic disease
- Is a powerful coming-of-age story about family, friendship, and self-advocacy





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PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

These pre-reading activities allow students to draw from pre-existing knowledge so that they are better able to make connections within the novel.

1. Have students consider the title *Stronger at the Seams* and make predictions about the book. They may share their answers with partners and with the whole group. Consider asking students to look for connections within their responses (what similarities do you notice in classmates' answers?).
2. Place students into small groups. Tell them that one member of their group has a broken wrist and it's up to them to figure out how to set the injury with the few supplies available to them. Give them this list of items and have them explain how best to utilize them after discussing with their group: newspaper, towel, backpack, phone charger, T-shirt, duct tape. After they finish discussing, have them research "treating broken bones in the wild" or "makeshift splint" to see how workable their choices were.
3. Take a temperature gauge by having students stand on a line that marks their agreement/disagreement with this Michael Jordan quote: "Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships" (4). Discuss their reasoning. Ask students to place themselves on the line again after discussing (and again after reading), noting changes.

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe everything happens for a reason? If yes, describe an example of when this happened in your life. If no, describe your arguments against this motto.
2. When you are feeling worried about something, how do you handle it? What techniques do you use to cope?
3. How do you feel about superstitions? Do you believe in them? Why or why not?
4. "Journaling helps you process hard feelings" (17). Write about some hard feelings you have.
5. If you were faced with a difficulty, such as a physical illness, and then had to deal with an important challenge, would you power through or allow your body time to recover? Explain your choice.
6. Rank these situations in terms of most challenging to least challenging: the loss of friends, the loss of a family member, an unexplained illness, navigating high school, dealing with bullying behavior, an annoying sibling. Be prepared to discuss your responses.



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DURING READING

OBSERVATIONS

Angela's appearance marks a change for Twyla. She offers something Twyla's friends Emilia and Anna suddenly do not. Make observations about Angela's character and her interaction with Twyla that you think are significant. What details do you learn about her? How does the author guide your perception of her? What else do you notice? Add your thoughts and quotes to support your conclusions below.

OBSERVATIONS	QUOTE/(PAGE NUMBER)

SYMBOLISM

Symbolism is a literary device that takes an object and uses it to represent a concept or abstract idea. The author places several objects within the book. Select one—turtles, geodes, snow globe, or another of your choosing—and explain its symbolism. Be sure to explain why it's significant to Twyla's story.

[CCSS.ELA-RL.7.1, 8.1; 9-10.1, 11-12.1; CCSS.ELA-RL.7.3, 8.3, 9-10.3, 11-12.3; CCSS.ELA-W.7.10, 8.10, 9-10.10, 11-12.10; CCSS.ELA-SL.7.1.A, 8.1.A, 9-10.1, 11-12.1]



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POST-READING QUESTIONS FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION

1. Read the dedication at the front of the book. What is your takeaway from these words? Why do you feel this way?
2. Each of the characters described in the first two chapters has a mother who has strong healing properties (Twyla's mother was an exotic vet, Emilia's mother is a spiritual healer, Anna's mother is a doctor). Why do you think the author made this choice? What does this tell you about the role of mothers? Now compare these mothers to Lindy's.
3. Twyla's family chose to plant a willow tree along with her mother's ashes. The author explains the significance of their choice by mentioning what willow means (17). What type of tree would you choose?
4. Why is it important that Wolfie claims Twyla always needs a reason for things to happen and that sometimes things just happen? (25)
5. Do you feel Twyla was more upset about the team's loss or her physical symptoms? (45) Explain your answer using justification from the text.
6. Why do you think Twyla doesn't want to go to the ER? (50)
7. At the end of chapter 8, Twyla thinks, "We were going to figure this out. We had to" (51). What is the strongest emotion she is feeling when she says this? What makes you think that?
8. Why doesn't Twyla trust the doctor's analysis of her illness? (55)
9. Both Wolfie's and Twyla's first day of school are described in chapter 10. What do the details tell you about the characters? Be sure to use examples from the text to support your answer.
10. Explain Twyla's reaction to the tongue-rolling experiment in class. What do you think caused this reaction? (68)
11. Twyla has an emotional reaction to her friends' movie suggestions (72). What do you notice about the way the girls converse after she returns from the bathroom? Why is this significant?
12. Why do you believe Twyla's father reacts as he does when she suggests she might have had food poisoning? (81)
13. What causes Twyla's friends to respond the way they do to her text about coming over to talk about her health? Do you think this is fair? (106)
14. What is behind Twyla's frustration with her father (113)? How similar is this to the frustration she feels with her friends?



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15. What is your response to Twyla's relationship with her friends in chapter 21? Does she have reason to be worried?
16. Why do you think Angela is more accepting of Twyla? (Chapter 24)
17. Twyla states that Angela had been her safe space (159), which is why she hadn't mentioned her to Emilia and Anna. What other reasons might there be for her not to mention her new friend?
18. What do you think is the most important detail Twyla is not telling the doctor? Why do you think she isn't letting him know? (Chapter 29)
19. Is Twyla's claim that no one is listening to her a fair one to make (182)? Explain your answer.
20. Why does Twyla feel it's necessary to fix things on her own? (188)
21. How does Twyla's belief that everything happens for a reason affect how she is responding to all that is happening around her? (195)
22. By chapter 37, Twyla feels as if everything is going against her. Is she right to feel this way? What contributes to this feeling? Justify your answer with evidence from the text.
23. Twyla wonders what else she might be getting wrong after learning about Elliot's feelings for Lindy. What are the things you think she has gotten wrong? Why do you think that? (216)
24. What is your reaction to the news Twyla receives from Mama Rose at the hospital? What parts feel the most realistic to you? Why do you think her father isn't the one to tell her? (Chapter 41)
25. Compare Twyla's friends' interactions with her in chapters 43 and 44. What observations can you make? Do they hold equal weight in her emotional healing process? Explain your reasoning.
26. Why is it important that Twyla and Lindy come to an understanding? (Chapter 45)
27. What is the most significant connection that Twyla and her father make in chapter 47? Why do you believe this?
28. Twyla tells Wolfie, "Maybe we're supposed to figure it out together" (262). How is this an important realization for healing?
29. Do you agree with the statement, "Maybe it was enough just to go with the flow," and what makes you feel this way? (269)
30. After completing the final chapter, go back and re-read the dedication at the beginning of the book. How do these words feel different knowing what you know now?

[CCSS.ELA-RL.7.1,8.1, 9-10.1, 11-12.1; CCSS.ELA-W.7.1.A, 8.1.A, 9-10.1.A, 11-12.1.A; CCSS.ELA-W.7.1.B, 8.1.B; CCSS.ELA.W.7.10, 8.10, 9-10.10, 11-12.10; CCSS.ELA-SL.7.1., 8.1., 9-10.1, 11-12.1: CCSS.ELA-SL.7.1.A, 8.1.A, 9-10.1.A, 11-12.1.A]



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POST-READING ACTIVITIES

MOTTO ESSAY

To what extent do you agree with the following mottos? Choose one and write an essay arguing your answer.

- Everything happens for a reason.
- Be yourself—everyone else is already taken.
- Don't sweat the small stuff.

KINTSUGI ART

Angela brings up the art form of kintsugi in reference to the maple leaf (142). Spend some time exploring this Japanese art form, which means “join with gold” and honors the idea that beauty can be found in imperfection. Think about its significance as a metaphor. Create a form of art that celebrates making something that was broken more beautiful. You might consider a poem form (like a found poem), a collage, or a painting, or any form of your choosing.

SYMBOLISM COLLAGE

Shannon Stocker uses symbolic objects throughout the novel—trees (chapter 3), snow globes, and rocks (chapter 4) are just a few. Create a mood board showcasing symbols for your own life or symbols found throughout the novel. Write a paragraph explaining the importance of each symbol.

UNUSUAL FACTS INFOGRAPHIC

Throughout the book, readers learn that Wolfie likes unusual and interesting facts, such as the one about the Chinese softshell turtle (40). Select a theme (animals, for example) and create an infographic filled with unusual facts. Present your information.

GENETICS EXPERIMENT

In chapter 11, Ms. Givens has the class conduct an experiment to determine the possible genotypes of their classmates. Create your own experiment for either tongue rolling or another genetic quality. Showcase your findings in a presentation type of your choosing. As an alternative, you could re-create the jellybean experiment from chapter 15 with a group of people and record your findings in a presentation style of your choosing.

[CCSS.ELA-RL.7.1, 8.1, 9-10.1, 11-12.1; CCSS.ELA-W.7.1.A, 8.1.A, 9-10.1.A, 11-12.1.A; CCSS.ELA-W.7.1.B, 8.1.B, 9-10.1.B, 11-12.1.B; CCSS.ELA-W.7.1.E, 8.1.E; CCSS.ELA-W.7.7, 8.7, 9-10.7, 11-12.7; CCSS.ELA-W.7.4, 8.4, 9-10.4, 11-12.4]



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As the mother of one child with brain cancer and another with ADHD, **Shannon Stocker** is passionate about advocating for children with disabilities. She's authored picture books such as the 2023 ALA Schneider Family Book Award winner *Listen: How Evelyn Glennie, a Deaf Girl, Changed Percussion* and *Warrior: A Patient's Courageous Quest*, among others. Although Shannon completed medical school, her own disability (RSD/CRPS) prevented her from doing a residency—a plot twist for which she is now grateful. She believes that whether or not everything happens for a reason, we all feel broken sometimes ... but it is also possible to become stronger at the seams. Shannon lives in Louisville, KY with her husband Greg, her children Cassidy and Tye, way too many critters, and a hidden stash of dark chocolate. *Stronger at the Seams* is her debut YA novel.

Educator's Guide created by Jennifer Guyor Jowett. Jennifer is a middle grade English and Literature teacher. She is the author of *Into the Shadows*, a historical fiction based on true events from WWII. She is a contributor to *Words That Mend*, a book for teacher-poets about the transformative healing found in using poetry in the classroom. Her poetry can be found at Ethical ELA's Open Write, and #VerseLove. She enjoys reading, writing, traveling, dogs, and chocolate (in any order).