

## Questions for Discussion

- While Charlie's mother is not abusive, she allows Charlie to be abused by his father. Why doesn't she stop him? How could she have saved Charlie from his father?
- When Charlie is in the hospital, he sees an ominous spider intent on harming him, and after he leaves the hospital, he "hears" the spider. What or who does the spider represent? Why does this hallucination finally disappear? When does the voice of the spider subside?
- After the abuse he has suffered at the hands of his parents, why does Charlie want to go home with them? Why does he finally realize he is better off with Mrs. H?
- Charlie lives in fear of everything. How does he overcome his fear? What role do Mrs. H. and Ambrose play? How does Dr. Leidy help him to understand reality? Why is Charlie afraid to hope?
- Why does Charlie continue to ask questions, even though he knows the answers will reveal painful truths, uncomfortable reality, and unwelcome insights? Many times children are mean to one another, so why do Aaron and Ambrose patiently answer Charlie's questions?

## Questions for Discussion

- Tracy thinks everyone looks at her with pity; she hates it, and she can't accept the sincerity of their concern. Why is this so difficult for her? How does her perception of what others think differ from reality?
- Tracy assures her father and Mr. Thurston that she is fine, but she has an emotional breakdown in Mr. Thurston's office. Why does Tracy refuse to admit that she is struggling with feelings of insecurity and fear? Why does she refuse to acknowledge that she was raped?
- When Tracy finds the poem in the doctor's office, she thinks, "This poem—it said it all. I had to have it" (page 39). What about the poem resonates with Tracy's feelings about her mother? Why is it so important for her to have it? How does this poem help Tracy?
- As Tracy does her best to work things out in her own head, she convinces herself to break her ties with Caroline. Why is her refusal to talk to a therapist so detrimental to her? What does it cost her emotionally to keep her feelings bottled-up inside?

## HOW TO START YOUR OWN READING GROUP

Think it would be hard to start your own reading group?

All you need is a little bit of organization and some friends who are as excited about the books they read as you are.

*Here are a few tips to get you started:*

- The best way to find people to be in your reading group is to ask your friends.

*Think of all the people you know who like to read, and ask them to join. If you still don't feel like you have enough people, ask each of your friends to bring someone else. You can usually get a good discussion going with 6-8 people, but any number that is comfortable for you will work. If you're having trouble finding enough cool people to form your reading group, check with your local library or bookstore to see if there's a group that you can join.*

- Figure out when and where you want to meet.

*Some groups meet once a month, some meet every other month. You could get together at someone's house, in a park, or on the beach. If it sounds too official and overwhelming to decide all the "wheres" and "whens" right now, don't worry! It's YOUR group and so YOU get to make all the decisions. All you have to do is get together once, and you can work out the rest of the details later.*

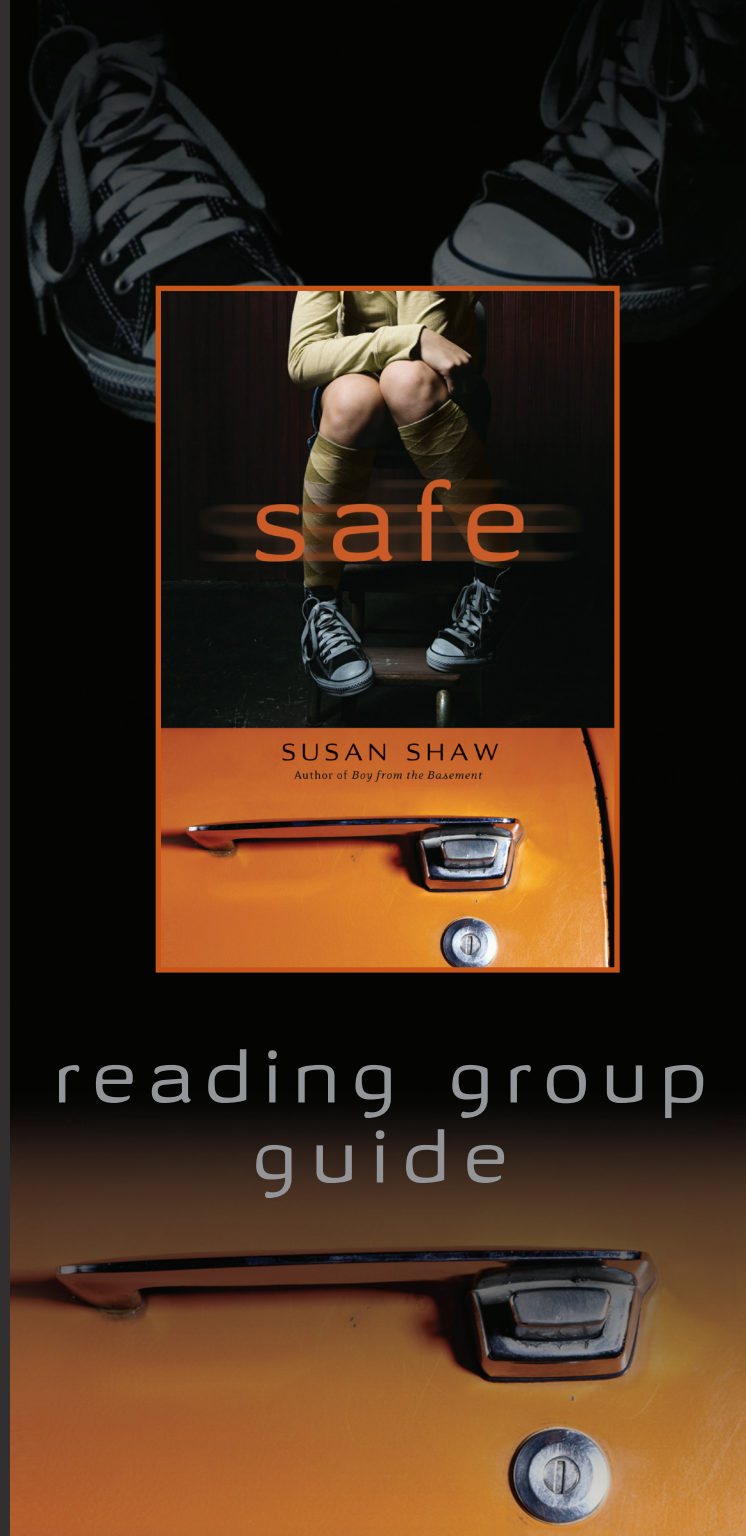
- Decide how you will choose books, and how the discussions will be run.

*This is another one that sounds a little scary but totally isn't. Maybe you have a favorite author that you and your friends would like to focus on. Or maybe you want to take turns picking your favorite book. Maybe one person likes to talk and would like to lead the discussion, or maybe you would rather just get together and talk about the books you are reading. If you get stuck, you can often find discussion questions online (try the publisher's website) or at your local library or bookstore.*

*But the most important thing to remember is that there's no right or wrong way to have a reading group. Do what you're comfortable with and always have fun, and your group will be a success!*

For more information visit [www.penguin.com/teen](http://www.penguin.com/teen)

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reading group  
guide

# Author Q&A

## Getting to Know Susan Shaw

*You write about a child's innocence being taken from him or her in both **Safe** and **The Boy from the Basement**. Why does this theme resonate with you?*

In all of my published novels, I write about children who have been traumatized by adults. There is something in me that is so outraged by such a thing, that I want to speak out for the victim. **SPEAK UP!** I want to shout to him or her. Tell someone, get help. Until the last breath, there is always hope and help out there. And to those adults who like to say to the child who does speak up, oh, you don't mean that, I say listen better. Who else are the children going to go to? Who else can they trust?

*All of the characters in your books are so realistic. Are they based on people you know or knew when you were younger?*

I don't intentionally base my characters on anybody, but after I've written a story, I can see parallels sometimes between certain people in my life and my characters. Certainly, I show up in all of my characters, both good and bad. Also, my husband often shows up as one or more of the good guys –Gabe and Peter in **Safe**, for instance. Charlie and Ambrose, in **The Boy from the Basement**, have a relationship that sometimes echoes the silliness and warmth my two sons have always shown each other.

*Which ideas in your books come from your real-life experiences or from the experiences of other people you know?*

When I start a new writing project, I don't know what the story will be about. I write and write until a sentence or two resonates with me. Then I go with the idea and the atmosphere of those sentences and just keep writing. I find as I write, that the story always has grown from an experience in my past. However, I don't know what that will be until I uncover it. If I were to tell you exactly what the start of the idea was, you might not see the connection because my long-ago experience and the issues of the story might not resemble each other to anyone except me because in the telling, there is a lot of change.

*Share a little bit about your writing process. Do you write every day on a schedule? Where do you write?*

I consider writing my full-time job, so I do write every day. I take breaks for meals, so I don't eat while I write, but I do tend to have water or tea within reach. Lately, I've been writing in my living room as opposed to the bedroom I've taken over as a studio. A Christmas gift of a laptop gave me that option. The living room is warmer, with a woodstove, and that was a pretty good draw throughout the winter. But when family will be around more during the warm months, I expect to be back in the studio when I'm writing.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

# SAFE

- After the attack, Tracy dedicates herself to playing and practicing the piano as a means of escape and a way to bring inner peace. What solace does playing bring her? Why is Mrs. Lawrence allowed in Tracy's "solo circle?" How does Tracy's dedication to the piano help her heal? How does the piano help her escape from life?

- Tracy cannot shower long enough, often enough, or in water hot enough to make herself feel clean. How do her feelings of being "dirty and ugly and wrong" (page 74) affect her relationships?

- Caroline proves herself to be a true friend. What actions and words show that her friendship and concern are pure? Why can't Tracy accept Caroline's friendship? Why is Tracy willing to end their friendship? What could Caroline have done differently?

- Tracy tells Caroline that she won't leave the house because "I feel like he is waiting around every corner to catch me" (page 65). Is Burgess the only person she fears? Why does Tracy allow this irrational obsession to keep her prisoner in her home? What does this fear ultimately cost her?

- Tracy is referring to more than music when she says, "Memorization's only half of it, a quarter of it. The part where it's in you—in your heart and soul—that's the part that makes it real" (page 82). To what is she really referring? What ideas are in her heart and soul that have become real to her? Why does she refuse to talk about them?

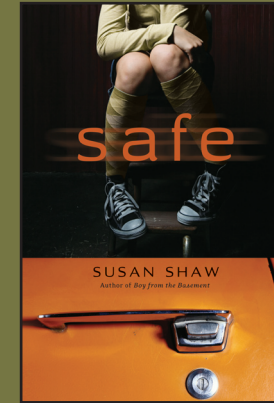
- Tracy justifies her attitude of silence; she compares her response to the attack to the healing of a sore. "Sores get better if you leave them alone, don't they" (page 95)? What is the fallacy in this analogy? Why is Tracy finally willing to touch her "sore?" How does talking about what happened make her feel better?

- Tracy's father supports her emotionally and with his physical presence every step on her way to healing. How does he play a role in her healing process? What could he have done differently that might have prevented Tracy's breakdown on Monkey Rock?

- The title of the book, *Safe*, could have several connotations. How does the word safe apply to Tracy and the journey she has taken since her mother's death?

- Tracy's new therapist tells Tracy she needs to grieve for what she has lost. What did Tracy lose? How does she overcome her loss?

(For more discussion questions, see attached bookmark)  
Guide prepared by Susan Geye, Library Media Specialist; Ft. Worth, TX

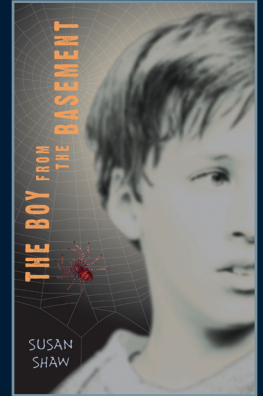


## Safe

HC • 978-0-525-47223-0 • \$16.99

Something unspeakable happens to Tracy on her way home from school – the day life is no longer safe. She retreats into a self-imposed solo circle to protect herself. Only her Pa and her house are safe, the house where she can play her piano to drive away the quiet. Struggling to maintain, she drives away her friends, she won't attend basketball camp, and she can't hike to Monkey Rock. Outwardly, Tracy holds it together... until she loses everything, and finally must begin the healing process.

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## The Boy from the Basement

PB • 978-0-14-240546-8 \$5.99  
HC • 978-0-525-47223-0 \$16.99

As punishment, Charlie's father has banished him to the basement where he is held as prisoner without adequate food, clothing. Charlie is not allowed to attend school, he has never seen television; he spends his days alone – locked in the basement. Each night, Charlie temporarily escapes his prison and sneaks out on the back porch, but one night the door accidentally locks behind him. When he falls asleep there, he wakes up in a hospital, quite ill from dehydration and malnutrition. As the hospital personnel uncover the truth about Charlie's home life, they finally set him on a course of recovery from abuse and neglect.

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