

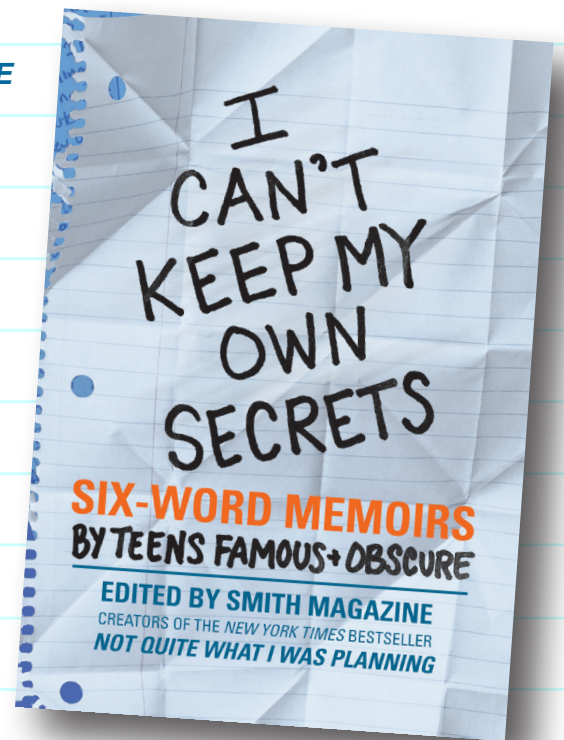
I CAN'T KEEP MY OWN SECRETS

SIX-WORD MEMOIRS BY TEENS FAMOUS AND OBSCURE

TEACHING GUIDE

NOTE TO TEACHERS

Legend has it that when Ernest Hemingway was challenged to write a six-word story, he came up with “For Sale: baby shoes, never worn.” Inspired by Hemingway’s short, short story, SMITH magazine, launched online in 2006, challenged readers and famous writers alike to submit their own six-word memoirs. True tales of love, loss, good friends, and bad hair days filled *Not Quite What I Was Planning*, the international phenomenon and the *New York Times* bestselling first book in the Six-Word Memoir series. Some of the very best memoirs were by teens, so the editors decided to create a book written entirely by those bold, brash truth-tellers. From cancer to creativity, prom dates to promiscuity, and breaking hearts to breaking laws, the memoirs in *I Can’t Keep My Own Secrets* reveal that often the youngest writers have the most fascinating stories to tell.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After reading all the six-word memoirs, what surprises you about this form? What can you learn from it to take to other types of writing?
2. What’s the difference between a story and a memoir? Why do we tell stories? Why is storytelling important? How often can your story change? Who knows your story best?
3. In your mind (and without looking at the index), what were the most common themes in the collection? Write them down as a class. Why do you think these themes stood out to you in particular? Why do you think they stood out to the class?
4. How is it both possible and impossible to distill the essence of who you are into six words? Which author in the collection do you think does the best job of it and why?
5. Pick one of the memoirs that you do not understand and discuss what it might mean with your classmates.
6. Which of these memoirs is the most poignant to you and why? Which is the most tragic and why? Which is the funniest and why?
7. Jocelyn P. defines herself by numbers: age, weight, and SAT score (p. 50). Which other numbers might be added to this list? Do you feel defined (or confined) by numbers?
8. What stereotype is Shane G. reacting to in his memoir (p. 52)? How do stereotypes affect the way people view themselves? What can you do to discredit stereotypes?
9. What do you think the significance of the word “still” is in Kerry H.’s memoir (p. 64)?
10. Who might the “boy wizard” be in Rebecca G.’s memoir (p. 85)? Do you think this memoir is literal or figurative?

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

11. The memoirs for Camila G. and Stephen B. are identical until the final two words (p. 117). How do those words change the direction of each memoir? Is one more hopeful than the other? Even with the different words, could these memoirs be interpreted in the same way?
12. What is Mia W. implying with her memoir (p. 154)? Why might you think that Mia W. is not American?
13. Which literary works do Brittany F. (p. 158) and Annikka T. (p. 160) invoke in their memoirs? What do you think each of these memoirs means?
14. How do you interpret the memoirs that speak of the collective instead of the individual, such as Kristin S.'s (p. 124) and Steven M.'s (p. 135)? What might these types of memoirs denote about their authors?
15. Ju P. cites *One Tree Hill* (p. 22), Adrianna B. references Edward Cullen (p. 66), Lacy F. talks about Guitar Hero (p. 170), and Danielle C. remarks on Facebook (p. 176). What do these pop culture–infused memoirs suggest about your generation's predominant influences? Based on the other memoirs in the book, what things besides pop culture phenomena are affecting the lives of you and your peers?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. “For Sale: baby shoes, never worn.” The success of Ernest Hemingway’s story lies in the multiple questions and possible meanings that lie between the lines. For example: Why is the narrator selling the shoes? Is the baby grown? Did she die? Did she simply go barefoot or was she never able to walk? Is the narrator the mother? The father? The sibling? The former baby? Is the story about the end of childhood? The end of parenthood? The end of innocence or justice or happiness or all of the above? The questions are endless and the possible meanings are many. Try to write your own six-word story with multiple meanings. How difficult is this? What questions does your story leave the reader?
2. Pick one of the six-word memoirs that really speaks to your life so far—the one that might be closest to your own six-word memoir. Write it at the top of a page and expand it into a short essay that includes the pertinent details of your life and what matters most to you.
3. Choose a memoir that especially intrigues you and write a short story in which you imagine a narrative based on those six words. Make your selected memoir the final six words of the story.
4. Go to www.SMITHteens.com and submit your own six-word memoir!

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