

SWEEPING UP THE HEART

by Kevin Henkes

★ “Spare,
luminous, lovely.”

—*The Horn Book* (starred review)

Grades 3–7

Themes: Friendship, Grief, First Love, Family Dynamics

About the Book

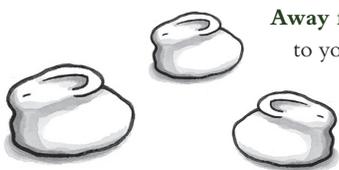
Amelia dreams about going to Florida for spring break like everyone else in her class, but instead is stuck at home with her cranky and conservative English professor father and her babysitter, the beloved Mrs. O’Brien. The week ahead promises to be boring until Amelia meets Casey, a fellow spring break refugee, at her local art studio. Amelia has never been friends with a boy before, and the experience is both fraught and thrilling. When Casey claims to see the spirit of Amelia’s mother (who died ten years ago) crossing the street, the pair embark on a different sort of journey.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe Amelia’s feelings in the first chapter. Why is she upset with her father? How does she feel about the week of spring break ahead of her?
2. Discuss the role of Mrs. O’Brien in Amelia’s life. What does the author mean when he says that Amelia “wore Mrs. O’Brien’s loving watchfulness like a protective cloak” (p. 9)? How has Mrs. O’Brien made life better for her since her mother died?
3. How do Amelia and Casey become friends? What are the circumstances for each of them that make their friendship possible? How do they break the ice with each other to begin their friendship? Why is Amelia so startled when Casey asks her “Do you ever get signs from her,” meaning Amelia’s mother (p. 31)?
4. Discuss the Emily Dickinson poem on p. 50 that Amelia finds in Mrs. O’Brien’s book. What effect does the poem have on Amelia? What effect does it have on you when you read it? Why do you think the author chose the line “Sweeping up the Heart” for the title of the book? Consider how many ways that phrase describes different parts of the story.
5. Why is it so important to Amelia that Louise appreciates her rabbit sculptures? What meaning do the rabbits have for her? Discuss Louise’s comment: “I didn’t know they were rabbits at first. That’s what makes them interesting” (p. 59). How does Amelia feel when she brings her father to see the rabbits later in the week?
6. Why does Casey think the woman they see through the coffee shop window is connected to Amelia? What does he mean by calling her “an impression,” “a symbol,” and “a sighting” (p. 68)? What is the meaning of the word “epiphany”? Why does Amelia choose that as their made-up name for the woman?
7. What is the effect on Amelia of her fantasies about “Epiphany”? What does she mean when she says she feels “imprisoned by the uncertainty” (p. 101)? Why do you think Amelia’s father never talked to her about Hannah Barnes? Would it have been better for Amelia if he had told her from the beginning? Was he more concerned about changes in Amelia’s life or changes in his own?
8. Why does Casey destroy the sculptures he has been making? How are his reactions to the changes in his life different from Amelia’s? How are they the same? Can you predict what Amelia and Casey’s lives will be like in the future and how they will each cope with changes in their families?
9. What does Amelia mean when she thinks about her father, “Maybe ... I’m more like him than I admit” (p. 173)? In what way is Amelia like her father? In what ways is she different?
10. Discuss the epigraph at the beginning of the book, just before Chapter 1: “The whole secret is something very few people ever discover.” How does that idea relate to the events in the story? What did it mean to you at the beginning? Did it have more meaning to you after you read the story?

Extension Activities

Who Am I... and Who Are You? Casey creates a quiz for his parents to find out how much they really know about him. Casey tells Amelia what one of his questions is—what else do you think he put in his quiz? Create a quiz for your family or friends about yourself. What questions would you ask that you want them to be able to answer? What questions would you ask to learn more about their thoughts and feelings?



Away from Home. Amelia thinks of the clay studio as her “second home.” What does that phrase mean to you? What makes a place feel like another “home” to a person? Are there places in your life that you could call a “second home”? Write a short paragraph describing such a place and what makes it feel comfortable and familiar to you.

