

PAMELA LOWELL

## ***SPOTTING FOR NELLIE*** **A TEACHER'S GUIDE**

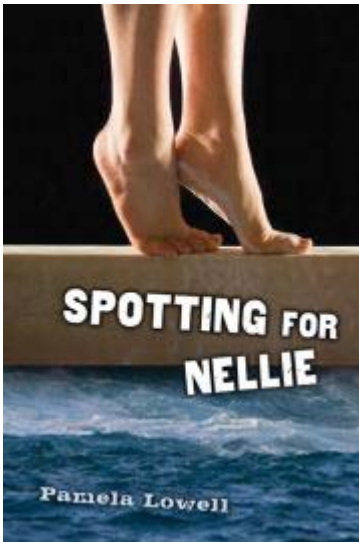
### **EARLY REVIEWS**

“Top-level gymnastics and the teenage years come across as comparably challenging and perilous in Lowell’s second YA novel...the book offers up a compelling picture of high-school kids in a coastal Rhode Island town. Told in short chapters from different points of view, the story focuses on two sisters, Claire and Nellie, and the fallout from a terrible car accident related to underage drinking. In a nice twist, one of the viewpoints is that of ‘Nellie’s brain,’ who narrates from the comatose state and as Nellie relearns motor skills, communication, and self-control. A clinical social worker, Lowell nicely captures the way teens talk, think, and contend with multiple pressures. . . . the main characters prove very appealing and the story’s moral clarity may actually help young readers make better decisions.” —*Booklist*

“I enjoyed your book. I really did! I thought it was very interesting too, like how it showed perspective from Nellie’s brain. I thought that was really cool. I also liked how you hit upon some heavy topics, like teen drinking and accidents and peer pressure. It was definitely one of the best books I’ve read this year! I hope that you come out with another book soon!”

—Lilia, teen reader

### **Introduction**



Claire Perry knows a split second can change everything. It can be the difference between sticking a perfect landing or falling off the beam. It can be the difference between a really fun party or a totally messed up one. Or sometimes, as Claire finds out, it can even be the difference between life . . . or death. For Claire’s younger sister, Nellie,

an elite gymnast who is “destined for gold,” things have always come easy. A split second is usually all it takes to capture the attention of a boy at a party, and the judges at a meet, or their critical father—everyone. Then one night, one decision, one split second—changes their world forever. The two sisters get into a car accident that leaves one of them with a traumatic brain injury. Now, the sisters will have to figure out what’s worth fighting for and what are the limits of guilt, forgiveness, and sisterhood. Memories will come crashing back and secrets will come to light—whether they’re ready for them . . . or not.

*“Red and green flashing lights, a computer monitor, and dozens of wires are coiled and twisted around one another like the overlapping tracks of a roller coaster ride.*

*Except this is one ride you’d never want to take.*

*I’m so scared. My mind keeps repeating the words too horrible to say aloud:  
Please don’t die. Please don’t die.  
Please don’t die.*

*Nellie doesn’t answer, of course. But for some reason it feels like I can hear her, through the glass, through the bandages, inside her head.*

*Where am I, Claire? Where are you?  
Why can’t you help me get out?”*

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When the novel begins, we find Claire and her younger sister, Nellie, in their mother’s car on the way to a keg party on the beach. Claire’s boyfriend, Nick, is the party host, and Claire is upset when she sees the way he and some other boys are getting high and ogling her sister. A series of events leads to Nellie becoming drunk, a fight between two boys, and an irritated Claire passing one of the boy’s cars on the way home.

Sid, Claire’s best friend, struggles with the fact that she couldn’t stop the accident from occurring. Claire is suffering from guilt and remorse for passing the car and for being jealous of her sister. And Adam, the boy who brought the keg to the party, is in turmoil about the part he played, his crush on Claire, and whether or not he should turn in Nick who hosted the party in the first place.

As the novel progresses, we see the four friends separate and then come together again in an effort to help each other heal—not an easy task for four teenagers who will be forever changed by one split-second decision on a fateful summer’s night.

### **Teaching Ideas**

*Spotting for Nellie* is about several connecting themes: one traces Claire and her friends as they grapple with varying degrees of guilt over Nellie’s accident. Another chronicles Nellie’s brain as it tries to recover from a serious and traumatic brain

injury. Morals and good decision making are all important concepts in the language arts and health curriculum. Teaching Units can tie in with safe driving, prevention of substance abuse, and what it means to be a good friend.

### **PRE-READING ACTIVITY**

Car crashes are the number one cause of death for US teenagers, and about 6,000 young drivers die on the roads each year. Nearly 375,000 are injured. Have your class research car accidents involving teenagers and substances (alcohol and marijuana) in their state and have them develop a safe driving contract with their friends/family.

Brain development in teens is a very exciting area of scientific research. Have students research how the teen brain is different from the adult brain. Define the “use it or lose it” theory. What are three things that can affect brain development in a negative way?

### **VOCABULARY**

Have students find the following terms and try to define them from context clues: traumatic brain injury (p.51), muscle atrophy (p.72), dry shoal (p.88), persistent vegetative state (p.94), pivot turn (p. 124), modulation of emotions (p.166), and re-up (p. 199)

### **THEMATIC CONNECTIONS**

Claire is a teen who is jealous of her younger sister’s success and feels guilty for her part in the car accident. How does she reconcile her feelings of guilt? What must she give up to begin the process of healing? How do gymnastics play a role in her learning how to forgive herself?

#### **Sense of Self**

Have you ever thought about your teen brain? Adolescence is one of the greatest periods of brain development. The brain is in a process of exponential growth and also pruning itself—that which isn’t being used is pruned away. What are students doing to help facilitate or hurt their own brain development?

Nellie had an identity as an elite gymnast; however because of the accident she will need to find a new identity. What is it that makes up identity? Have students answer the question “Who am I?” on a sheet of paper twenty times. How would Nellie’s brain describe itself at the beginning vs. the end of the novel? What about the other characters, Adam, Claire, and Sid? What would they say was the major thing that changed for them?

### **Values in Conflict**

The decision that Adam made to bring the keg to the party was in direct conflict with what he knew was the right thing to do. Even Claire, in passing that car, was in conflict, but somehow her jealousy and feelings of invincibility convinced her to go ahead. How difficult is it to reverse a “bad” decision, rather than make the “right” one in the first place? Do you always know when you’re making the “right” or safe decision? Teen brains sometimes need help in developing the tools to make those split-second decisions. What guides or moral codes can you use to help you decide what to do when you’re conflicted?

Adam is bullied in the novel by Nick, yet in many ways, so is Claire. Even Nellie is bullied by Meredith in a scene at the mall. Teens don’t often use violence in order to hurt one another, but often times the scars inflicted by peer-relational bullying can hurt just as much. Have students research the definitions of bully/victim/bystander. Roles that teens play in the bully/victim/bystander positions are rarely static. Trace how some of the teens switch roles of bullying within the story. Ask students if they have ever found themselves acting differently around different people. Discuss how difficult it can be to stick up for someone who is being victimized, and brainstorm ways they can help prevent bullying in the classroom and in their schools.

### **Family Life and Diversity**

The characters in this story all live in very different kinds of families and come from different socio-economic backgrounds. What makes a good family? What sort of values have they learned from their families that they’d like to incorporate into their own families some day? Have students write an essay about a family they admire and why.

### **Friendship**

Four friends, Adam, Claire, Sid, and Nellie, are affected by the results of several bad decisions. Have students explore the meaning of friendships and what sort of qualities they look for in friends. Have you ever lost a friend because they went down a different path? How do students think Claire’s home life affects her ability to keep friends? Are there things Claire learns about friendship in the story? How can you tell she has changed?

## **CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS**

### **Language Arts**

Ask students to write a journal entry from the point of view of their brain. What might they lose if they ever experienced a brain injury? What things would they miss

the most? What strengths might they call upon within themselves to deal with that loss? How are they making decisions every day to make the most of their fascinating, growing, yet fragile brain?

### **Health**

Have students invite a local trauma specialist to the classroom to discuss what resources are available for teens with traumatic brain injury in their state. Have a representative from their local M.A.D.D. present them with safe driving strategies. Although teens seem to have gotten the message about not driving while intoxicated, the same message about marijuana and driving has not gotten through. Have teens research the ways that smoking marijuana can also effect driving and brain development.

### **Creative Drama/Theater/Music**

Have students role play a situation where they might influence a friend who had used substances to not get into a car.

Have students make and produce a video or music video for younger grades in their school about the dangers of substance abuse and how to protect themselves.

### **About The Author**

Pamela Lowell is a licensed clinical social worker who specializes in counseling adolescents and their families. She began her career as a special education teacher working at a residential treatment facility with teenagers from inner city Washington, D.C. She received her Master's degree in Social Work from Rutgers University in 1984, and has worked in a variety of settings from private schools, to mental health centers and currently is in private practice. She lives in Rhode Island with her husband and children. Ms. Lowell began writing almost ten years ago, and has published poems, essays, and a self-help book for parents. *Returnable Girl*, her first novel, has won numerous awards, including ALA's Popular Paperback for Teens. She welcomes comments from readers and can be reached at [www.pamelalowell.com](http://www.pamelalowell.com)

**Recommendations for educators to address safe driving, substance abuse (especially marijuana), and traumatic brain injury as health concerns for adolescents.**

**Resources for Safe Driving**

**[WWW.TEENDRIVING.COM](http://WWW.TEENDRIVING.COM)**

To Order Books  
Marshall Cavendish  
[customerservice@marshallcavendish.com](mailto:customerservice@marshallcavendish.com)  
99 White Plains Road

Tarrytown, NY 10591  
Phone: 914-332-8888  
Fax: 914-332-1082  
[www.marshallcavendish.us/kids](http://www.marshallcavendish.us/kids)

This guide was prepared by Pamela Lowell, former special education teacher, writer, and clinical social worker in private practice in Barrington, Rhode Island.

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