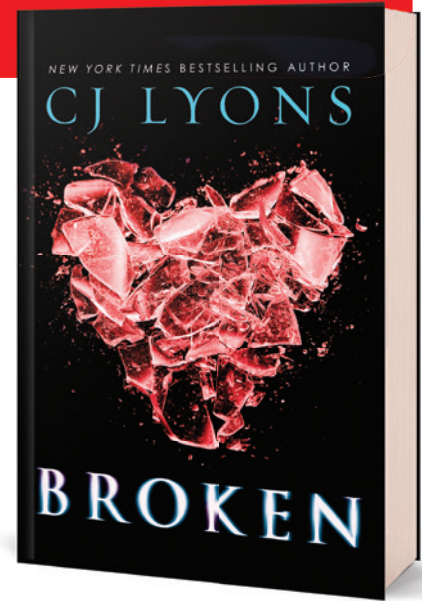


Broken by CJ Lyons

Discussion Guide



ABOUT THE BOOK:

WOULD YOU PUT YOUR LIFE ON THE LINE TO BE NORMAL?

Diagnosed with a rare and untreatable condition, Scarlet has come to terms with the fact that she's going to die of a broken heart. Literally. It could be tomorrow; it could be next year. But the clock is ticking...

All Scarlet asks for is a chance to attend high school. She wants to be like everyone else, even if it's just for a week. But Scarlet can feel her heart beating out of control with each slammed locker and vicious taunt. Yet there's more going on than she knows, and finding out the truth might just kill Scarlet before her heart does...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

As a pediatric ER doctor, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller CJ Lyons has lived the life she writes about in her cutting-edge thrillers. CJ's work has been praised as "breathtakingly fast-paced" and "riveting" (*Publishers Weekly*) with "characters with beating hearts and three dimensions" (*Newsday*).

During her seventeen years as a pediatrician, CJ assisted police and prosecutors with cases involving child abuse, rape, homicide, and Munchausen syndrome by proxy. She has worked in numerous trauma centers, on a Navajo reservation, and as a crisis counselor, victim advocate, and a flight physician for Life Flight and Stat Medevac.

CJ has been a storyteller all her life, always creating characters who discover the courage to make a difference. This segued into writing thrillers with strong relationships at the center, and led her to coin the term Thrillers with Heart.

Learn more about her writing at www.cjlyons.net.

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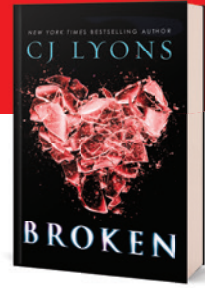
"Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* meets Kathy Reichs's *Virals*."

—Jill Moore, Square Books Jr.

"An intense page-turner."—April Henry, *New York Times* bestselling author

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PRE-READING PREPARATION:

Set in a small town in rural Pennsylvania, CJ Lyons's *Broken* explores what it would be like to live most of your life confined to a hospital bed, with people constantly explaining that you're "too sick" to do anything—to have friends, to make decisions about your future, or to choose what happens to your body. And each morning, you'd wake up with the knowledge that it could all end at any moment.

- How would a major, life-threatening illness change *your* life? How would it affect your interactions with family members: parents, grandparents, and siblings? What about your friends?
- What would you want to do if you knew you were facing an operation that might kill you? Would you dare to let new friends into your life? Would you want to go to school, on a road trip, or somewhere exotic? Who would you take with you? Who would you share your hopes and fears with?
- Scarlet, *Broken*'s protagonist, keeps a journal while she's in the hospital. Using the prompts above, write your own journal entry exploring what it would be like to face a serious illness or injury.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. All Scarlet wants is a chance at a normal life, even if it's only for a few days. But when she arrives at Smithfield High for her first day of school, she quickly finds out that "being normal is out of style this season. You have to be 'someone,' create an alter ego: a jock, a church girl, a rebel, a loser." (p. 5)

What groups do you see at your school? Do you ever pretend to be someone you're not, just to fit in? How does that feel?

2. In chapters 2 and 3, how does Scarlet describe the school and its students? How do these descriptions communicate her emotions? What word choices and senses are used to make the setting feel vivid and alive while also conveying Scarlet's personality?
3. Scarlet is almost immediately labeled a "freak" by her fellow students, mainly because she has to carry her own AED, a portable defibrillator she calls Phil, everywhere she goes. She compares herself to the slow zebra or gazelle left behind by the herd, marked for death by the predators.

Name some physical characteristics we might use to label people. Why do you think people tend to identify others using visual cues? Is this fair? Why or why not?

4. Scarlet finds a sanctuary in the school library and books: "To me, a good book is hot cocoa on a stormy winter day, sleet battering the window while you sit inside, nestled in a quilt." (p. 25)

What's your favorite way of escaping from the world? Is there a place you love to go? An activity that makes you feel really good about yourself?

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5. During her peer support group, Scarlet meets Nessa, Celina, and Jordan—fellow students struggling with problems fitting in at school—and their counselor, Mr. Thorne. Scarlet is overwhelmed by the realization that she’s not the only one who can’t master “normal,” as well as the responsibilities that come with being thrust into these new friendships. She realizes, “Just like that, these people are now part of my life. My safety net.” (p. 36)

Why would Scarlet describe her new friends as a “safety net”? How are your friends like a “safety net” for you? What does it mean to be a friend?

6. After Scarlet’s stepmom embarrasses her in front of everyone during lunch by making Scarlet take her medicine and treating her like a child, she thinks, “But it’s my life. If I can’t have a say in it, then what’s the point anyway? Might as well be dead. Of course, with Mom hovering like she is, trying so hard to keep me alive, I might die of embarrassment before my messed-up heart ever gets the chance to kill me.” (p. 58)

Do you think Scarlet is old enough to make her own decisions? Why or why not? Do you think Scarlet should have told her mom how she felt and asked her to stop treating her like a child? How would that have changed the story?

7. In chapter 30 (p. 120) Scarlet makes a huge decision: she decides to defy her stepmother and steal her medical records so that she can continue to work with Tony, the cute guy from her biology class, on their genetics project.

Did Scarlet do the right thing? What could she have done differently?

8. The next day at school, Scarlet and her friends are bullied by the football players (p. 154) and it quickly turns into a physical fight. Scarlet is frightened—both by the violence and for her friends’ safety—but she doesn’t know what to do.

Should Scarlet have reacted differently? How do you think the scene would have played out if an authority figure was involved? How would you have reacted if your friends were fighting and outnumbered?

9. When Scarlet’s stepmother helps Nessa, Scarlet realizes how difficult it is to make tough choices—like when to intervene in someone else’s life or what to do when you’re faced with a life-or-death decision. She’s glad her stepmom is finally treating her like an adult and letting her decide for herself if she should have the heart operation that might kill her, but Scarlet also feels overwhelmed by the choice and very much alone.

Have you faced a tough choice like Scarlet’s? Where do you turn for advice and help? How do you know if you’ve made the right choice?

10. As Scarlet uncovers secrets about her own family as well as her friends’ lives, she’s offered a difficult choice: to say yes to the heart operation in exchange for her mother not calling social services about a friend’s family.

What would you sacrifice to help a friend? Does Scarlet make the right choice? What would you have done differently?

11. When Scarlet and Tony finally put together the pieces and discovered what was really causing Scarlet’s symptoms, were you surprised? How did the author set up the plot so

Question continued on next page...

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that the real villain of the novel wasn't revealed too early? Did you see clues earlier in the story that helped you figure out what was going on? What tipped you off?

12. In the final chapter, Scarlet is dealing with a lot of anger: with her father, with herself, and with her stepmother. This anger threatens many of Scarlet's relationships.

How does she handle these overwhelming emotions? How do her friends help her? What are some healthy ways to cope with something terrible like what Scarlet has gone through? How would you have reacted if you were her?

POST-READING ASSIGNMENT:

Taking control of your life is the theme of *Broken*. People who try to control us—whether bullies at school, manipulative adults, or even caring, loving adults who think they're doing the right thing—can greatly influence how we feel and act.

When is someone old enough to take responsibility for their actions and decisions? Is that the same as taking control of your life?

Scarlet's philosophy about facing death is to live her own life or die trying. What philosophy guides you through life?

POST-READING ASSIGNMENT:

English/Language Arts: Scarlet's memories are in question for most of *Broken*. Using *The Glass Menagerie* or a similar story that features fragmented point of view or an unreliable narrator (examples include: *The Usual Suspects*, many Hitchcock films, *Ronin*, or *Memento*), discuss the use of memory in narratives and how what we remember may differ from what actually happened. Ask students to write their most distant memory and then verify its validity with a primary source.

Science: Scarlet's Long QT syndrome is an actual genetic condition. Discuss inheritance patterns and have students create their own genetic family tree using diseases or physical characteristics. Also discuss the impact of genetics on daily life through drug reactions/interactions, ability to smell and taste, blood transfusions/organ donation, etc. Demonstrate the power of genetics with a hands-on experiment such as tasting or tongue curling, etc.

Humanities: Discuss the ethics/implications of stereotyping and how difficult it is to change a first impression. Illustrate how this has impacted history (caste systems, the Nazis, the civil rights movement, etc.) and society at large. Then demonstrate how this can impact students on a more personal level, both in school and in the community. Ask students to debate an issue involving stereotyping from the opposite point of view than the one they hold. If age-appropriate, discuss the Stanford prison experiment and how a random assignment to prisoner or guard changed participants' actions and attitudes.

Enrich your book discussion group with these discussion questions and delve deeper into the issues presented in Broken. The guide is free and may be printed out or photocopied for use in the classroom, library, bookstore, or at home.