



50 Miles

By Sheryl St. Germain

A Study Guide

Synopsis

50 Miles is a memoir in linked essays that addresses addiction and alcoholism in a family cursed with substance abuse. The book traces the life and death of the author's son, Gray, a talented but troubled musician and video game aficionado, to a drug overdose at thirty, as well as the author's own recovery from substance abuse. Early essays address Gray's childhood ADHD diagnosis and potential connections between the drugs we use for ADHD and later addiction, adolescence troubles, and the author's own struggles with recovery. Along the way we learn of the ways in which she used the creative arts and creative activities as healing activities. A final essay discusses her role in creating the Words Without Walls program, which sends MFA students and faculty into jails and rehabilitation facilities to teach creative writing.

Author Bio

Sheryl St. Germain is an award winning poet and essayist whose 200+ works have been published in literary journals, magazines, chapbooks and anthologies. St. Germain also directs the MFA program in Creative Writing at Chatham University in Pittsburgh and is co-founder of the Words Without Walls program.

Reasons to Include This Book in the Classroom?

50 Miles offers a rare perspective on universal themes of family and motherhood through a mother's dual struggle with her own recovery and her son's descent into addiction. As the opioid epidemic is the number one killer of Americans under fifty, *50 Miles* also provides a timely analysis of how society perceives victims of addiction and the recovery process.

Study Questions and Writing Prompts

Content

1. From the introduction, St. Germain informs the reader that Gray does not survive the memoir. How does her use of present tense affect the reader's relationship with Gray?
2. St. Germain explains that addiction in herself and her son is a "family curse." What other members of her family tree suffer from this curse?
3. In "Parking Lot Nights," St. Germain identifies the types of video games we play as a reflection of our inner selves. What games did she play and why were those games in particular her favorites?
4. In "The Ink That Bleeds: Creative Writing and Addiction," St. Germain posits that creative writing can offer healing of the "spiritual crisis" caused by trauma. What other creative activities and endeavours contributed to her healing process throughout the collection?
5. What events does the title Fifty Miles come from?

Writing Prompt: In *World of Warcraft*, St. Germain recreated herself as a healer, a power she wished she could possess in real life. Create your own video game avatar. What powers or qualities would you endow them with that you wish you had in your own life? What problems could they easily solve that you find yourself struggling with regularly?

Digging Deeper

1. "Do No Harm" draws connections between Gray's ADHD treatment and later addiction, both psychiatric issues. What types of treatments and safeguards were in place to support his invisible disabilities? What types were needed?
2. St. Germain barely mentions her ex-husband in *50 Miles*. What impressions do you get of his relationship with the author and with Gray?

Digging Deeper (cont'd)

3. As a poet and essayist, St. Germain sometimes favors narrative prose and at other times lyrical description. What effect do these methods have on emotional distance between the author and audience?
4. What makes travel so healing for St. Germain?
5. In “Memory, Evergreen” St. Germain asks, “Is it wrong to remember the good in a person instead of the bad?” How does the diagnosis of addiction erase the societal perception of a person as anything but “an addict?”

Writing Prompt: St. Germain’s titles and introductory quotations are densely packed with imagery and meaning, so much so that they are essential to the understanding of the essays. Choose one of St. Germain’s titles or introductory quotations as a jumping off point to write about a time where you needed to heal, either spiritually or physically.

Overall Thoughts

1. What roles do nature (genetics) and nurture (environment) play in addiction?
2. How does the burden of trauma become part of a person’s identity?
3. In terms of trauma and healing, what are effective means of catharsis?

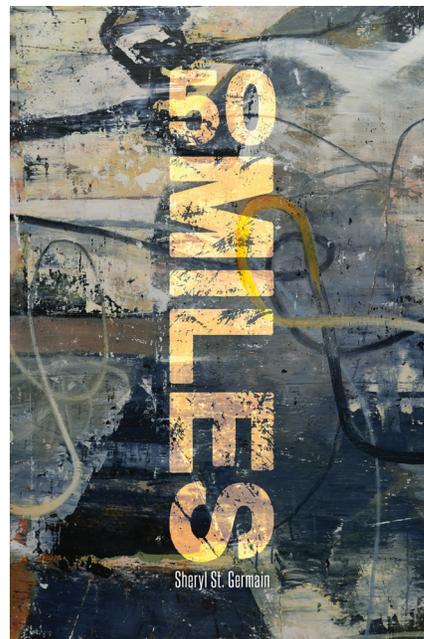
Writing Prompt: In 2018, approximately 115 people died each day due to opioid addiction. How do the personal essays in *50 Miles* change your perception of the opioid crisis? What perceptions and knowledge do they reaffirm?

Standards for the English Language Arts (compiled by NCTE and IRA)

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word

Standards for the English Language Arts (compiled by NCTE and IRA) (cont'd)

- identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
 5. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
 6. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
 7. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.



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