

## A GUIDE TO Words by Heart

Ouida Sebestyen

*“I want something for you, Lena. . . . And I hope I’m not wrong, because it’s going to cost you pain, but I want it for you just the same. I want you not to know your place.”*

### THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

*Words by Heart* is a coming-of-age historical novel addressing the issue of racial injustice.

**Setting:** 1910, the rural West (probably Texas).

**Protagonist:** Lena Sills, a bright twelve-year-old African American girl, the oldest child of the only black family in Bethel Springs.

**Conflicts:** The plot is driven by the external conflict between African Americans and a pervasively racist society. Other conflicts include the external one between Lena’s father and their neighbors, the poor-white Haney; the internal conflict within Lena, who admires her father’s patience but resents the hostility of the Haney; the external conflict between Lena’s hopeful, patient father, who wants to live in all-white Bethel Springs, and her more guarded, pessimistic stepmother, who wants to go back to their former home in all-black Scattercreek.

**Resolution:** Mortally wounded by Tater Haney, Lena’s father tells Lena to take Tater, also badly injured, back home. She does. Lena’s stepmother decides to honor her late husband’s wishes and keep the family in Bethel Springs. The major conflict between blacks and whites is also resolved to varying degrees in personal instances—for example, Winslow Starnes, Miss Chism, and Jaybird Kelsey show great sympathy and concern for the Sills family after Ben’s death. Even the bitter and resentful Henry Haney, Tater’s father, helps the Sills by picking the last of Ben’s cotton.

**Themes:** People will struggle to find a better life. Individuals should be judged on the basis of character and ability, not race. Family is the strongest influence in determining character.

### SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The novel should pose no problem to students reading on the middle school level. While the word nigger is used a few times, the novel sensitively explores the issue

of racial justice in an unusual setting—a western community fifty years after the Civil War.

### BACKGROUND

**Reconstruction and the Klu Klux Klan.** From 1865 to 1877, the period in American history known as Reconstruction, the former Confederate states were divided into districts occupied by federal troops. Certain Republicans in Congress, called Radicals, were determined to protect the newly freed slaves. To guarantee the rights of blacks, they passed laws, including the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Constitutional Amendments. These amendments made blacks citizens, no matter where in the nation they lived; assigned all Americans equal protection under the law; and ensured the right of citizens to vote. Many white Southerners strongly resisted the changes forced on them during Reconstruction, sometimes openly, sometimes in the dead of night. The Klu Klux Klan and other white vigilante groups were determined to keep blacks from voting. They fought to terrorize and intimidate African Americans through lynchings and cross-burnings. Other Southern whites elected Democrats who denied blacks their rights through the poll tax, a charge levied for voting, and the literacy test, which denied the vote to those who had difficulty reading. In 1877 the last federal troops were withdrawn, but the Klan, the poll tax, and the literacy test were firmly in place in the South.

### MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

**Lena Sills**, a bright African American girl, the only surviving child of her sharecropper father’s first marriage; proud of her “Magic Mind”; recently moved with her family from an all-black town in the South to the all-white Bethel Springs, in the West.

**Ben Sills**, Lena’s forty-year-old father, who remarried and started a second family after his first wife died; a hardworking sharecropper; gentle, courageous, and devout, he had wanted to become a preacher.

**Claudie Sills**, Lena’s stepmother, twenty-five; hardened by bitter experiences with the Ku Klux Klan;

married to Ben Sills for seven years, she has borne two sons and a daughter.

**Tater Haney**, oldest son of an alcoholic ex-cowboy; proud and strongheaded, he is resentful of Ben Sills, who has been given the job from which his father was fired.

**Jaybird Kelsey**, storekeeper and church deacon; kindly but sometimes foolish.

**Winslow Starnes**, white boy about Lena's age; her chief competitor at school; son of the town's undertaker.

**Mrs. Chism**, elderly widow of the town's wealthiest man and employer of Lena's parents; lonely, selfish, and foolish, but not unfeeling.

**Henry Haney**, Tater's father, an alcoholic, dirt-poor, irresponsible ex-cowboy; resents Ben Sills for having replaced him as Mrs. Chism's hired hand.

## PLOT

**Chapter One.** We are introduced to the **setting** and most of the major **characters**. Lena Sills is on her way to a Bible-verse contest, with her father, stepmother, and little half-siblings. Having recently moved to Bethel Springs, a small Western town in which they are the only blacks, Lena's family hasn't "mingled much" with their neighbors. **Foreshadowing** the novel's main **conflict**, Tater Haney snubs them because Ben took a job from which Tater's drunk father was fired. Lena, proud of her intellectual accomplishments, is determined to win the Bible competition. Standing before the entire town, she matches the local favorite, Winslow Starnes, verse for verse. The master of ceremonies offers the two competitors a draw, but Lena wants to go on.

**Chapter Two.** A triumphant Lena wins the contest but angrily rejects her prize—a bow-tie obviously bought for Winslow. When they come home from the competition, the family finds a butcher's knife stabbed through a loaf of bread. Claudie angrily remarks that Lena's victory has "pushed a white town too fast." This symbolic stabbing sets the main **conflict** in motion and **foreshadows** violence. Hurt and confused by her stepmother's reaction, Lena seeks an explanation of the situation from her adored father, who gently says that Claudie grew up in the South, where her family was mistreated. Claudie felt safe in Scattercreek and is worried that new horrors await her family in Bethel Springs. Ben tries to comfort Lena, who feels she has done wrong in winning the competition. Giving voice to one of the novel's **themes**, he tells Lena always to strive "to be better than yourself."

**Chapter Three.** Ben displays the depth of his **character** and develops the **theme** of family by telling Lena, at Claudie's insistence, of the racial injustice and desire for a better future that led him to move the family to Bethel Springs. As they walk together through the field, Ben explains that he grew up in "free" Kansas. When Kansans felt threatened by the migration of blacks,

however, his family was forced to move back to the South, where blacks were being denied hard-won rights. He eventually opted for the security of all-black Scattercreek but didn't "feel proud" of himself there and so brought his family west to Bethel Springs. Ben tells Lena that Claudie, frightened by the knife incident, wants to return to Scattercreek. He then breaks the sad news to her that their dog has been killed, probably by Tater Haney, who is also suspected in the incident with the bread. When Lena and her father return from their walk, they find some joy—new kittens at home. The next week Lena is to begin work. Later, when Lena expresses her worry about missing school to work for Mrs. Chism, Claudie retorts that her gentle father faces a "life and death" problem—deciding what he would do if someone were to hurt his family.

**Chapter Four.** Lena goes to clean for the proud Mrs. Chism, a lonely and garrulous woman. She is entranced by the stacks of books at the house, but Mrs. Chism wants to sell them and won't lend them. Lena slips a book into her satchel and later implies to her father that Mrs. Chism lent it to her.

**Chapter Five.** When Lena turns her homework in at school, Winslow spies the atlas she "borrowed" and teases her by grabbing it. Mortified, yet attracted by his laugh, she snatches the book back and runs to Mrs. Chism's. Lena returns the atlas, which she read late into the night, and "borrows" a poetry collection. We meet a new **character** when Henry Haney shows up late for a job; Mrs. Chism humiliates him and praises Ben, making Lena uneasy.

**Chapter Six.** In a chapter filled with trouble and mishap, Mrs. Chism asks Ben to leave his family and make the long ride out to Hawk Hill to check on her fences, a job formerly done by Henry Haney. Mrs. Chism won't accept Ben's refusal. That night, little Roy spills milk on the poetry book, and Lena has to admit that she took it without permission. After a discussion about the "borrowing," Ben and Lena stop at the Haney's to pick up Mrs. Chism's fencewire and posts. In a scene tense with potential **conflict**, Henry Haney claims not to believe that the fencing job has been taken from him. He says he will ride over to question Mrs. Chism but then heads the opposite way.

**Chapter Seven.** Still at the Haney's, Ben tries to look for the fencewire and posts, which he suspects Haney has sold. **Conflict** flares when Tater Haney threatens Ben, pushing the barn door against him. Lena—her father's avenging angel—hits the boy in the stomach with her satchel, heavy with the poetry book. Ben and Lena then head to Mrs. Chism's, where Lena confesses to having taken the book. Ben calms the angry old woman by assuring her that Claudie will help her with her big dinner party on Sunday. After doing some cleaning, Lena learns that her father and Mrs. Chism have made an agreement: He will fix her fences at Hawk Hill if she will give Lena her books. Lena is

worried about Tater Haney's threat to her father and the fact that the fencing job will take him a few days' distance from home. Ben reassures her that getting her books is important to him. Heading home, they see Henry Haney spying on them.

**Chapter Eight.** Lena is finally back at school, where the children torment little Sammy Haney by stealing the turnip that is his daily lunch. Lena, who has climbed up a tree to eat her lunch, offers Sammy some food, but he angrily refuses her charity. Winslow Starnes, however, showing another side of his **character**, observes her kindness and joins her in the tree. They start to become friends.

**Chapter Nine.** On Saturday Lena picks cotton in the field, which she finds hard work, while the little ones play nearby. Claudie, who is helping Mrs. Chism prepare for her party, is disturbed and bewildered by Ben's accepting the fence job. Ben hasn't told her about trading his labor for Lena's books. Later, Lena sees Claudie cry that night in bed, as Ben comforts her.

**Chapter Ten.** Claudie helps Mrs. Chism with her party, but, despite the many invitations sent out to family and friends and the heaps of food, only Jaybird Kelsey comes. Lena visits Mrs. Chism to cheer her up, but the old woman, drunk and pitiful, treats Lena rudely and smashes the fern Mr. Kelsey brought. Patiently, Lena cleans up after her and goes home.

**Chapter Eleven.** On Monday Ben bids good-bye to his anxious family and sets out to check the fences at Hawk Hill. At Lena's school the novel's larger **conflict** is developed as the schoolmaster discusses the "obvious" superiority of the Caucasian race. Winslow provokes him by asking about remarkable African Americans. With Lena feeling she has an ally in Winslow, the next day she learns that his father has forbidden him to associate with her. That night, when Claudie is out rounding up a wayward cow, a drunk Henry Haney barges into the house looking for Ben. Lena refuses to show the fear she feels. Humiliated, Tater Haney leads his father away. When Claudie comes home with a pumpkin, Lena expresses her feelings by carving an angry jack-o'-lantern. Claudie, who is more worried about Tater than about his father, tells Lena how the Ku Klux Klan burned her family's home. She also tells her daughter how much Ben wants her to know he loves her, again forwarding the **theme** of family.

**Chapter Twelve.** On Wednesday **suspense** builds when Ben does not return home. Worried, Lena checks the Haney's and sees Henry, but not Tater or Henry's horse. Lena puts on a brave front for the little ones but confides her fears to Claudie. Late that night, struggling with her **internal conflict**, Lena decides to look for her father. She writes a note to Claudie and slips out on foot. Following Ben's wagon tracks, she notices on her second day of travel that the tracks are joined by the hoofprints of a horse. Finally, she comes upon her

father's wagon and horses; all his gear is scattered, and he is nowhere in sight. She spots a plume of smoke in the distance and, terrified, drives the wagon toward it.

**Chapter Thirteen.** In the novel's **climax**, Lena finds her father wounded beside an unconscious Tater Haney. Tater shot Ben in the chest. Startled by the gunshot, the horse threw Tater, who is badly injured. Ben gently tells Lena that he is dying but that he feels lucky she has found him. Since Tater's life can be saved, Ben tells her to take him home in the wagon. Then he asks her to leave him alone for a while, which in turn leaves Lena alone to struggle against her desire for vengeance. When she returns, her father has died. Although crushed and angry, Lena knows what her father would expect of her—to do good to those who hate her. Finally, resolving her **internal conflict**, Lena gets Tater onto the wagon and drives him home.

**Chapter Fourteen.** After leaving Tater with his mother, Lena brings Ben's body to Claudie, telling her mother she "can't remember" who shot him. Knowing the identity of Ben's killer, Claudie accepts Lena's refusal to tell. After sleeping many hours, Lena wakes to find the preacher and Jaybird Kelsey at her house, along with Mrs. Chism. Winslow Starnes has come too, defying his father. Lena tells Claudie that she is willing to go back to Scattercreek, but Claudie decides to stay in Bethel Springs in honor of Ben's wishes. In the novel's **resolution**, Lena sees Henry Haney picking the last of Ben's cotton for them. Although he may be doing it to keep Lena from telling on Tater, she hopes he's there for a better reason.

## APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

An outstanding element of this novel is **character**—the relationship between Lena's developing character and her father's heroic one. Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

### 1. Exploring the Novel's Characters

Students will probably be most affected by the heroism of Ben's character and Lena's internal struggle to emulate her adored father, especially after his death. The novel's focus on character helps develop the theme that people should be judged as individuals, not as members of a particular race. The following activities can help students explore Sebestyen's characters. Ask students to

- develop a dialogue between Lena and Winslow, in which Lena tells Winslow how her father died and how she behaved at the time.
- write a letter from Ben to Lena that tells her how he feels about her and how he would like her to regard his death in years to come.
- outline Lena's future. Where does her "Magic Mind" take her?

## 2. Evaluating Credibility and Relevance

Discussion groups might focus on other specific elements of the novel:

- How believable is the situation of the **plot**? In the **resolution**, are the actions of Lena, Claudie, Winslow Starnes, and Henry Haney believable? Why or why not?
- How do the novel's **conflicts** connect with news stories, movies, or TV dramas you are familiar with?
- Does the novel seem primarily optimistic or pessimistic about relations between blacks and whites? Explain.

## 3. Extending the Novel

Discussion groups might extend ideas in the novel:

- *Words by Heart* is set eighty years ago. Ask students to discuss the ways in which the Sills' experience as the only African American family in a community would be different today.
- Today some minority groups make strong arguments for choosing virtual separation from other groups (Claudie's perspective), while others argue that only full integration brings equality (Ben's perspective). Ask students to discuss the merits of each argument.

## MEET THE WRITER

**Ouida Sebestyen** (1924– ) grew up in a small town in Texas, the daughter of two teachers. She widened her world by reading everything she could and began writ-

ing early, finishing her first novel (unpublished) at twenty. In all she submitted four novels to publishers before *Words by Heart* was finally accepted for publication. The book received a number of awards, including the American Book Award and the International Reading Association Children's Book Award.

## READ ON

**Ouida Sebestyen, *Far from Home*.** In this Depression-era novel, a thirteen-year-old boy takes over his mother's job at a hotel after her death and learns new lessons about family love.

**Mildred D. Taylor, *The Well: David's Story*.** In this novel set in Mississippi in the early 1900s, the family of ten-year-old David shares its well with drought-stricken white and black neighbors.

**Blanche Hannalis, *The Secret Garden*.** This play, based on the famous novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett, shows how love and determination help a bitter orphan and a lonely boy to create a loving home and family.

**Mildred D. Taylor, "The Gold Cadillac."** In this realistic short story, a family faces racism when they travel South in an expensive new car to visit relatives.

**Clifton Davis, "A Mason-Dixon Memory."** A group of friends refuses to give in to bigotry in this moving nonfiction account.

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