

# A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO

Newbery Honor–winning author of **THE WAR THAT SAVED MY LIFE**

# KIMBERLY BRUBAKER BRADLEY

# fighting words



*"Fighting Words is raw, it is real, it is necessary. A must-read for children and their adults—a total triumph in all ways."* —**HOLLY GOLDBERG SLOAN**, author of *COUNTING BY 7S*

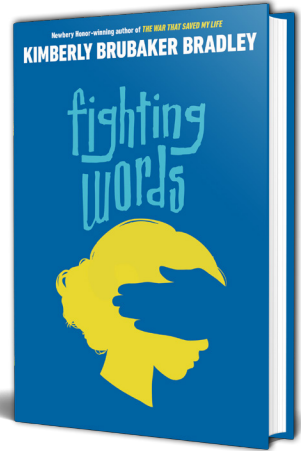
# About the Book

A candid and fierce middle grade novel about sisterhood and sexual abuse, by Newbery Honor winner and #1 *New York Times* best seller Kimberly Brubaker Bradley

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Ten-year-old Della has always had her older sister, Suki: When their mom went to prison, Della had Suki. When their mom's boyfriend took them in, Della had Suki. When that same boyfriend did something so awful they had to run fast, Della had Suki. Suki is Della's own wolf—her protector. But who has been protecting Suki? Della might get told off for swearing at school, but she has always known how to keep quiet where it counts. Then Suki tries to kill herself, and Della's world turns so far upside down, it feels like it's shaking her by the ankles. Maybe she's been quiet about the wrong things. Maybe it's time to be loud.

In this powerful novel that explodes the stigma around child sexual abuse and leavens an intense tale with compassion and humor, Kimberly Brubaker Bradley tells a story about two sisters, linked by love and trauma, who must find their own voices before they can find their way back to each other.

These essential questions were written by Room 228 Educational Consulting, with public school teacher Tracei Willis as lead teacher. We, too, believe in the power of words.

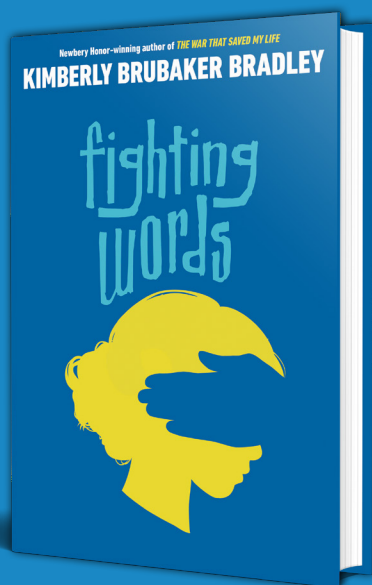
# Essential Questions/ Discussion Questions

1. Why are names considered to be first impressions? Is a person's name or appearance a reasonable basis for a first impression? Why might a name like Delicious be a difficult name to carry?
2. What does it mean to be invisible? Why does Della believe Suki's superpower is the ability to be invisible?
3. Throughout the novel, adults are behaving in ways that leave kids to act more like adults than the actual adults. What turning points determine our individual pathways to adulthood? What makes someone an adult?
4. There are many different types of family exemplified in the book (Suki and Della taking care of each other, Francine's relationship with them, or Trevor and his relationship with his mother). How does family play a role in shaping our values and beliefs? How do our values and beliefs shape who we are as individuals and influence our behavior?
5. Why is Della's story such a hard story to tell? How does Della remain authentic and true to herself throughout the telling of her story?
6. Suki makes sacrifices for Della throughout the novel. If any, what are the boundaries between love and sacrifice, and where should one draw a line between them?

7. In kindergarten, Della told her friend Junebug, “My mama cooks meth.” What was Junebug’s mother’s reaction? On page 89, Suki confides in Della that she had told her friend Stacy about Clifton when she was in fifth grade. How had Stacy reacted? How might different reactions have changed the course of Della’s and Suki’s lives? Why do you believe Junebug’s mother and Stacy reacted the way they did?
8. In Chapter 38, why won’t Suki “absolutely swear” to never try to hurt or kill herself again? Why is Suki’s promise “to always do her best” not good enough for Della?
9. Della changes throughout *Fighting Words*—she transitions and grows with each conflict she faces, becoming less dependent on Suki, thinking critically and making decisions about both her present situation and her future. Suki also changes, relinquishing her role as an adult and succumbing to the reality of the abuse she had endured over the course of four years. How can conflict lead to change? What problem-solving strategies can individuals use to manage conflict and change?
10. Consider Francine’s, Nevaeh’s, Teena’s and Maybelline’s transformative roles in both Della’s and Suki’s lives. How are Della and Suki transformed through their relationships with others? Think about the people in your life who might take on transformative roles.
11. Reflect on all of the adults Della interacted with throughout the novel—some not seeing or listening to her, others taking the time to see her and listen to her. What influence did these adults have on Della and the person she became by the end of the novel?

12. Clifton wielded power over Suki, forcing her to remain silent about his abuse. Ms. Davonte held a position of power in the classroom, and Trevor used his power as a bully over the girls in his class. To what extent does power or the lack of power affect individuals in *Fighting Words*? Where have you seen power conflicts arise in your own life, in your school community, and in the community at large?
13. Della took several different approaches in the way she dealt with Trevor's bullying. What was the most effective method of dealing with Trevor? When should an individual take a stand against what he/she believes to be an injustice? What are the most effective ways to do this? Is there one right way to take a stand? Explain.
14. Throughout *Fighting Words*, Della makes many difficult decisions while facing complicated consequences. Consider Della's decision to use profanity in order to get out of the family tree assignment, Della's decision to punch Trevor vs. her decision to disrupt class and confront him, and ultimately Della's decision to testify in person in order for Clifton to serve a longer sentence. What is the relationship between Della's decisions and the consequences that follow?
15. The power of words is demonstrated throughout the novel. Why do you think the author chose the title, *Fighting Words*?
16. Dr. Fremont and Della discuss consent at the end of one of their sessions. Della tells Trevor at recess that he doesn't have permission to touch her as a result. In what ways does consent apply to your relationships in school?

# PRAISE FOR *fighting words*



- ★ “At once heartbreaking and hopeful.” —**KIRKUS** (starred review)
- ★ “A sensitive exploration of the way people can suffer in different ways and need different things.”  
—**BCCB** (starred review)
- ★ “Raw and honest, this ultimately empowering novel is an important book for readers of all ages.” —**SLJ** (starred review)
- ★ “An essential, powerful mirror and window for any reader.” —**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY** (starred review)

## SEVEN STARS!

★ BCCB ★ SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL ★ KIRKUS REVIEWS ★ BOOKLIST  
★ HORN BOOK ★ BOOKPAGE ★ PUBLISHERS WEEKLY



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**KIMBERLY BRUBAKER BRADLEY** lives on a forty-two-acre farm in Bristol, Tennessee. She is the author of several middle grade novels, including the widely acclaimed *Jefferson's Sons* and the *New York Times* bestsellers *The War I Finally Won* and *The War That Saved My Life*, the latter of which earned a Newbery Honor and a Schneider Award.

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