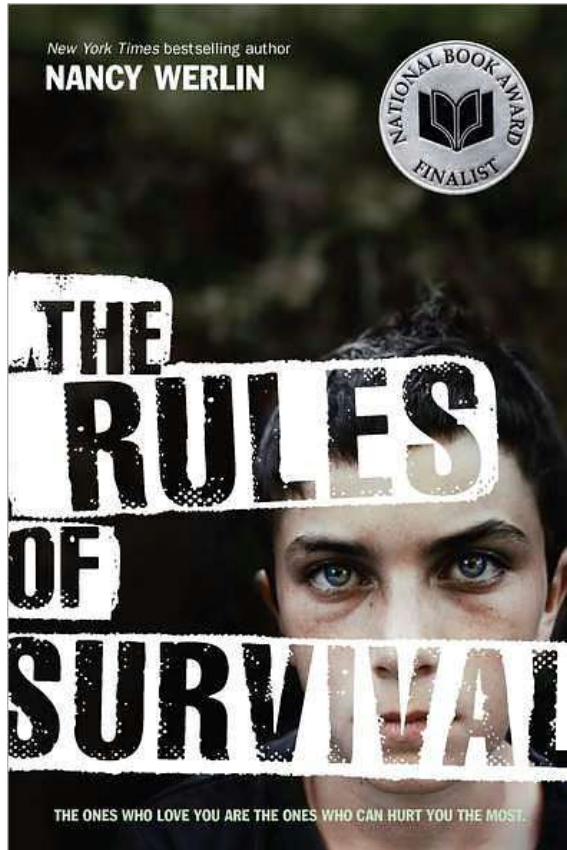


The Rules of Survival by Nancy Werlin



Finalist for the National Book Award

What's It About?

Matt has long since put himself in charge of protecting his younger sisters from their enemy.

Who is their enemy? It's their mother, Nikki O'Grady Walsh.

Matt's done okay. But secretly, inside, he's growing tired and hopeless. Then, suddenly, there's a possible ally on the horizon. Murdoch, his mother's ex-boyfriend, who maybe can help him get rid of his mother—for good.

- Finalist for the *LA Times* Book Prize.
- “*The Rules of Survival* spoke to me. I was there for every minute, reverse-wish-fulfilling as I read. The outcome made knots in my chest come undone.” —*Tamora Pierce*

Inspiration

The Rules of Survival is probably the darkest novel I have written to date, even though it ends hopefully.

While I was lucky enough to grow up with loving, responsible parents, as an adult I encountered someone like Matt's mother, Nikki Walsh. I ended up doing a good deal of thinking about what it might be like for a child to be in the power of someone like that.

This novel began its life as a short story that wouldn't leave me alone. There was a longer story there for me to explore. Eventually I realized I had to sit down and go into its dark places and find out.

The Rules of Survival is "told" by Matthew to his little sister Emmy. This approach was a deliberate artistic choice to try to involve the reader more intensely into the story. If "you," hearing the story, are not only yourself but are also a five year old girl...a child in danger...that does things to your emotions as reader that cannot be done when you are reading as an outside observer.

This is a realistic novel. There are children and indeed, adults, who are prey to people like Nikki Walsh. Many readers have written to tell me that they grew up in circumstances like those in the book. It's not always the mother, of course. More often, frankly, it is the father. Sometimes, it is a boyfriend, a husband, or a wife. It might be a sister or brother who terrorizes the family. It could even be a friend who gets too close . . .

- "This book is almost too scary to read. Listen, Nancy, could you put in a note to make sure everybody knows that the mother is *not* based on me?"
—*Nancy's mother*

Discussion Questions

(By Dr. Joni Richards Bodart & Nancy Werlin)

- There are many ways to survive in a dangerous situation. What are some of the ways Matthew, Callie and Emmy survive?
- Explain why Emmy prayed for Murdoch. Do you think she realized the effect that it would have on her mother? How might their lives have been different if she had just gone to bed that night?
- Matthew describes Nikki as evil. In what ways do you think she exhibited this quality?
- How did Matt and Callie's protecting Emmy endanger her instead? Speculate on how you think Emmy thought about their mother, both before and after they were separated from her.
- Discuss the scene when Matthew and Callie saw Murdoch for the first time, and what characteristics he showed them in their brief interaction with them, and how that meeting changed their lives.
- Compare Matthew's first view of Murdoch with the way he sees him at the end of the story. What are some of the key events that changed Matthew's perception of Murdoch?
- Why is it that the people you love the most are able to inflict the most pain on you?
- Discuss how the Walsh children's lives were different from and similar to the life of the POW in the movie they watched with Murdoch. In what ways were they prisoners?
- Describe how Matthew and Callie felt when no one would help them. How did those refusals affect them mentally and emotionally?
- Speculate on what might have happened if Ben, Bobbie and Murdoch had intervened sooner. Would Nikki have been able to stop them and retain control of her children, as Ben feared?
- Nikki knew her children very well, and knew exactly what buttons to push to manipulate them. Give several examples of her ability to do this.
- What were some of the reasons behind Nikki's eccentric and dangerous behavior? What did she gain by acting that way?
- In what ways was Ben a good father? In what ways did he let his children down?

- A number of adults in the book seemed to be afraid of Nikki. What did she do to each of them to make them fear her? What about her frightened them? What about her frightened you?
- There are several turning points in the book where the children's lives get significantly better or worse. Describe several of them and discuss what caused them and what the results were.
- Why was it so important for the children to pretend the summer with Murdoch had never happened? What might Nikki have done if they hadn't?
- Why did Nikki take Emmy away on the day she forced Matthew and Callie to go to church without her? Who was she punishing? Why and how?
- Discuss what Murdoch's quote means: "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Give examples of each of these kinds of people. Can you find examples in the book of these kinds of people?
- Why did Aunt Bobbie and Ben suddenly decide to start protecting the children? What caused them to start acting differently?
- Why did Nikki enjoy tormenting Bobbie, both as a child and an adult? What did she gain? How did it affect her children, Bobbie, and Nikki herself?
- On page 126, Matthew describes the scene when Murdoch commits himself to helping the children. Why did he make that decision at that point? Speculate on what might have happened to him earlier in his life that caused him to come to that decision at that moment?
- Matthew says he never really learned to trust Aunt Bobbie. Why not? What prevented that bond from forming? What would have had to happen for Matthew to come to trust her completely?
- Every time Matthew realizes nothing has changed in his family, he gets more and more depressed and hopeless. Discuss how future disappointments might have changed the man he would someday become.
- Compare Matt, Murdoch, and Bobbie's lives after Nikki got out of jail to living in enemy territory or an active war zone. How would those situations be physically and emotionally similar to what they had to endure?
- Matthew said he changed in the boatyard when he came face to face with Nikki. What caused that change, and why did he say that it was irreversible?
- Discuss Matthew's queen bee/mosquito theory. How did the change occur? Are there "queen bees" in your life that you might be able to change to "mosquitoes"?
- How would Matthew's life have changed if he had killed or seriously injured Nikki? How would his sisters' lives have changed?
- Speculate on what will happen to the Walshes, Murdoch, and Aunt Bobbie in the future, in five years, in ten years? What kind of people will Matthew, Callie and Emmy grow up

to be? How will their childhood experiences affect them as adults? Will Nikki come back? If she does, what effect will that have on her family and their friends?

Publication Info

Age 13 and up.

First USA publication 2006.

Published by Penguin in ebook and physical book. Audiobook available from Listening Library.

Translations: Korean, French, Spanish

Awards

- A 2006 National Book Award finalist, Young People's Literature
- A Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist.
- An ALA Best Books for Young Adults: Top Ten Choice.
- An ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Teen Readers.
- *A School Library Journal* Best Book of 2006.
- *A Kirkus Reviews* Best Children's Book of 2006.
- *A Voya Review* "Perfect 10" for 2006.
- A Top Ten BookSense Winter 2006-2007 Children's Book Pick.
- *A Kansas City Star* Noteworthy Book of 2006.
- A New York Public Library Best Book for the Teen Age.
- A Capitol Choices Noteworthy Book selection, 2007.
- A Junior Library Guild selection.
- Cybils Young Adult Book award finalist, 2007 (online community award)
- JHunt Young Adult Book award nominee 2007 (online community award)
- A Texas Tayshas reading list selection for 2007-2008.
- A Rhode Island Teen Book Award nominee for 2007-2008.
- A Virginia Readers' Choice list selection for 2008-2009.
- A Missouri Gateway Readers Award list selection for 2008-2009.
- An Iowa High School Book Award 2008-2009 Master List selection.
- A South Carolina Book Award 2008-2009 Master List selection.
- A Tennessee Volunteer State Book Awards selection, 2008-2009.
- A Washington State Evergreen Master List selection for 2009.
- An Oklahoma Sequoyah Young Adult Master List selection for 2009.
- A Garden State (New Jersey) Teen Book Award Master List selection for 2008-2009.
- A Heartland Award (Kansas) in young adult literature finalist for 2009.
- An Illinois Abraham Lincoln High School Book Award finalist for 2010.
- An ALA popular paperback selection, 2010.

Reviews and Praise

- "Werlin tackles the topic of child abuse with grace and insight. ... The characters captivate readers from the beginning, and short, terse chapters move the plot along with an intensity that will appeal to seasoned Werlin fans and reluctant readers alike. Teens will empathize with these siblings and the secrets they keep in this psychological horror

story."

—*School Library Journal* (starred review, 9/2006)

- "Werlin reinforces her reputation as a master of the YA thriller, pulling off a brilliant departure in this dark but hopeful tale, with pacing and suspense guaranteed to leave readers breathlessly turning the pages."
—*Booklist* (starred review, 8/2006)
- "In this heartbreaking tale of abuse and love, 14-year-old Matthew rescues himself and his younger sisters from a dangerously unstable mother Beautifully framed as a letter from Matthew to his younger sister, the suspense is paced to keep Matthew's survival and personal revelations chock-full of dramatic tension. Bring tissues."
—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review, 7/15/2006)
- "One of [Werlin]'s most deliciously harrowing works."
—*Voya* ("Perfect 10" 5Q/5P, 9/2006)
- "An excellent mystery; with heartbreaking descriptions of child abuse, both physical and psychological."
—*Kliatt* (starred review, 10/2006)
- "Fans of the Edgar Award-winning *The Killer's Cousin* will not be disappointed with Werlin's latest offering, which is not only a suspenseful psychological thriller but a compelling and unusual insight into the experience of child abuse."
— *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, Recommended* (9/2006)
- "Edgar Award-winner Werlin delivers another suspense-filled thriller that is sure to spark discussion."
— *Horn Book Magazine* (Sept/Oct 2006)
- "One of literature's most despicable mothers."
— *Publishers Weekly* (10/9/2006)
- "An exceptional novel, appropriate for all teens."
— *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* (4/2007)
- Audiobook review: "This audio production is a good example of narrator and text matching perfectly, turning an intense novel into a very listenable book."
— *The Horn Book* (March/April 2008)
- "The Rules of Survival spoke to me. I was there for every minute, reverse-wish-fulfilling as I read. The outcome made knots in my chest come undone."
— *Tamora Pierce*
- "As realistic an account of adult narcissism's devastating toll on children as has been portrayed in teen literature. One of the best from one of our best writers for teens."
—*Walter M. Mayes, author of Walter and Valerie's Best Books for Children*