

Bloomability Short Guide

Bloomability by Sharon Creech

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Overview

Bloomability takes place at an international boarding school in Lugano, Switzerland, just like the one where Creech taught.

Aunt Sandy and Uncle Max have just taken over the school, and they take thirteen-year-old Domenica Santolina Doone, also known as Dinnie, from her "home" in the United States to stay with them in Switzerland for the year. Although Dinnie is accustomed to change—her father moves the family around often while he searches for "opportunities"—she is not sure if she is ready to face this sort of upheaval. Her parents call this an opportunity, but she is not so sure. All of a sudden, she is surrounded by young people from different cultures speaking various languages and sharing various beliefs, while she is trying to adjust to life in a foreign country. However, her new friendships open her eyes to thoughts and experiences that she never could have imagined, and the beauty of Switzerland unlocks new dreams and mysteries inside of Dinnie. What she learns there, both in and out of the classroom, becomes a part of herself, and Switzerland becomes more than a temporary home.

Through her experiences, Dinnie discovers the beauty of nature, her place in the world, the value of friendship, and that life is full of exciting "bloomabilities."

About the Author

Born on July 29, 1945, and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, Sharon Creech is a respected author praised for her multilayered stories for young adults. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Hiram College and her Master of Arts from George Mason University. After working in Washington, D.C., for a number of years, Creech moved to England in 1979 with her children, Rob and Karin, but still maintained her American citizenship.

Beginning in 1979, Creech taught British and American literature for many years at The American School in Switzerland (TASIS) England American School, a grade school for the children of expatriate Americans in Thorpe, England, where her husband Lyle D. Rigg was headmaster. She has also taught at the Switzerland branch of that school, and has recently returned with her family to live in the United States. Creech began her first novel a month after her father's death in 1986, and the words have continued to rush out ever since. Her third book, *Walk Two Moons*, won the School Library Journal Best Book selection in 1994, the Newbery Medal and the American Library Association Notable Children's Book selection in 1995, and the Virginia State Reading Association's Young Readers Award in 1997.

Setting

The majority of the narrative takes place in Lugano, in the south of Switzerland, deep in the foothills of the Alps. The city of Lugano is located around a lake, with two mountains towering over it. Dinnie lives in a villa next to the school with Uncle Max and Aunt Sandy. Actually, as Uncle Max explains, they live "in a casa on the Via Poporino between Lugano and Montagnola in the Ticino in Switzerland in Europe on the planet Earth." From their home, Dinnie can see both Italy and Switzerland. While in Switzerland, Dinnie and the other students go on a number of trips nearby. They go skiing at St. Moritz and Andermatt in Switzerland, and the Dolomites in Italy. During the last trip they even encounter an avalanche. They also visit Herman Hesse's house, as well as Verona and Padua, the setting of Romeo and Juliet.

The school is run on an American curriculum and philosophy, but the makeup of the student body is quite diverse. While many students are American, others are from Canada, Japan, France, Norway, India, Saudi Arabia, China, Iran, Germany, Belgium, Spain, etc. The students (except Dinnie, who lives with her aunt and uncle) have to room with someone from a different culture as an additional learning experience. Everyone is required to take English and Italian, as well as another language of his or her choice. When they take a twoweek ski trip to St. Moritz, they have abbreviated class periods in the morning and skiing in the afternoon. At this school, Dinnie comments, it is actually cool to study and be involved with academic clubs and other extracurricular activities.

It is important to mention that while growing up, Dinnie lived in a number of places, often for no more than a year. Before Switzerland, she lived in Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Oregon, Texas, California, and New Mexico.

She was born in Bybanks, Kentucky, and by the end of the story her family has returned to live in Bybanks, where she joins them.

This is notable because all the female main characters in Creech's books have some sort of connection to the town.

Social Sensitivity

The chapter entitled "Disaster" is perhaps the most socially sensitive of the book.

The students go through a unit on Global Awareness, learning about both man-made and natural disasters. They become depressed and burdened about the current and past events around the world and want to help. They want to "do something" more than fundraising. During this unit, the kids are able to share with each other their own perspectives of history, how they were influenced by certain current events and how they felt responsible for past events. They each get to learn about history in a more personal way from their own peers instead of biased textbooks, and this opens them up to a greater understanding of other views than their own. At the end of the unit, after all the students are justifiably upset about what they have learned, Uncle Max makes a speech about how they need to learn to use the opportunities they have to help others. He encourages them to stay globally aware so that, as adults, they can make informed decisions, and to continue to learn about art, beauty, music, and laughter so they can someday change the world. The reader, vicariously experiencing this unit with Dinnie and her friends, is thus shown that other people interpret history in different ways based on their point of view in the situation, and that discussions like this with others can help bridge these gaps.



Literary Qualities

Not only do we get to read about Dinnie's experiences, but Creech also includes her dreams. Dinnie keeps a notebook listing the addresses of each of the places she has ever lived, as well as a notebook describing the dreams she has at night. Each dream in the book relates to an experience she has while awake, and appears either at the beginning of a chapter or interrupts it; some chapters have more than one and some do not have any. The dream is set off from the rest of the text in italics and with dotted lines, and each is titled "The Dreams of Domenica Santolina Doone." All of her dreams reflect her reaction to the world around her and reveal her anxieties, insecurities, and often humorous outlook on life.

As a complement to her theme of diversity in the novel, Creech strongly emphasizes sight and the eye. These symbols come from Ralph Waldo Emerson in *Nature*: "I become a transparent eyeball." At the beginning, as she is on her way to Switzerland, Dinnie is surrounded by a bubble, "clear enough to see through, but strong enough to keep me inside . . . I imagined pores in this bubble ball that could let in streams of things from the outside, so I could examine them and poke them back out again if I didn't like them." This is the way Dinnie imaginatively controls her world when everything around her seems overwhelming. When she first gets to Switzerland, all she can see is what is not there—her family. Then she meets Guthrie, and he tells her about the two prisoners in a jail cell who each looked out the same small window. One saw that there was a lot of dirt, and one saw that there was a lot of sky. At first, she does not understand the point of the story. As she gets to know Lila and Guthrie, she sees that Lila is the prisoner who sees a lot of dirt, who is not willing to look up and appreciate all that is around her, and Guthrie is the other prisoner.

Guthrie teaches his classmates that a transparent eyeball is seeing everything while being a part of everything. When Dinnie tries looking at the scenery in this way, she sees that other places she has been are really not much different than what she sees in Switzerland and she is able to contextualize her new experiences. Switzerland is no longer so foreign to her; however, she is not quite willing yet to give up her bubble. Dinnie even uses her abilities with a camera to capture the images of people she sees in Switzerland, people she does not even know. She realizes, after developing the pictures, that each looks like one of her family members and even enjoys similar pleasures!

As Dinnie wills herself to try new things, her vision expands and she no longer feels like a little dot amidst a great big world. She even describes her eyeballs as hurting after taking in so much around her. At one point, Guthrie and Dinnie climb to the top of Mount St. Salvatore and look out at the view. It is at this point, towards the end of the novel, that Dinnie is able to feel both like a dot and also like a transparent eyeball, a part of the world she inhabits. Guthrie, throughout the text, is a transparent eyeball, but Dinnie, like Emerson's text, becomes one. Switzerland and its people are no longer strange to her.

Language is also a motif in this text.



There are the literal languages, such as English and Italian. However, more important for Dinnie is the way different people translate these languages. She looks up words in her thesaurus that describe how she feels so she can announce it to the world in Italian on a poster in her bedroom window, but is constantly corrected by her aunt and uncle for her incorrect usage of those words. However, her classmates are a little more open with their interpretations of language. Dinnie finds their translations of English often more meaningful than her own: Plumpy seemed a better description than plump, and bloomable sounded much more interesting than possible. When [Keisuke] said running in my ears the bells, we knew exactly what he meant, and it seemed exactly the right way of saying how the St.

Abbondio bells echoed in your head after they'd stopped ringing.

By accepting the "language" of her classmates, Dinnie is able to look at her own culture in a new way. Bloomability, as the book's title, means possibilities. The term, though coined by Keisuke, is actually used more by Dinnie in telling her story, and it represents not only her acceptance of the way others view the world, but also her own attitude towards the "opportunities" (that she might not initially like) that come her way. It is this trait that makes the students able to become transparent eyeballs.



Themes and Characters

One of the most obvious themes of this text is the importance of diversity, of learning not to automatically discredit someone else's culture or viewpoint. Creech uses the diverse cultures of her characters to make this point clear. Dinnie does not want to move to Switzerland; in fact, she feels as if she has been kidnapped. She is intimidated by the language differences as well. However, as the story progresses, she accepts her classmates' differences to the point of not even consciously recognizing them as "foreign." She appreciates the uniqueness of each person.

It is through her friend Lila that Dinnie sees the destruction that can occur when you keep yourself closed off from learning new things. Lila, who is also an American, hates the boarding school. Her roommate, Belen, is Spanish, and Lila cannot stand rooming with someone who is not an American. When she is not allowed to switch rooms, she complains about the food, the required community service, and her sports requirement. It is especially eye-opening to Dinnie when she notices that Lila stereotypes all nationalities to one particular bothersome behavior or another. Creech shows this attitude, that all non-American cultures are substandard, to be problematic; therefore the other characters, and the reader, are not sympathetic about the trouble that Lila always gets herself into. Dinnie, though she does not like her friend's attitude, appreciates that Lila is not afraid to say what she feels or thinks. Guthrie, Dinnie's other main American friend, provides a contrast to Lila, and curiously is the romantic interest of both girls. Dinnie appreciates his enthusiasm for life and his love for the Italian language, even when he often uses his words incorrectly. He helps her to focus on the positive aspects of any situation, and to realize that she can choose what her attitude will be. He also helps her to try to understand Lila and not just dismiss her like the others do.

Belen, a Spanish girl, and Keisuke, a Japanese boy, are also good friends of Dinnie's, and are her two closest friends who are not American. Belen and Keisuke have a dating relationship while at school, but must keep it from their parents because their parents do not approve of interracial dating. The ironic twist to Creech's obvious references to diversity among the children is the lack of diversity among most of the adults in this novel. The children learn to appreciate each other because they are given a nurturing environment in which to do so. However, Belen and Keisuke's parents want them to marry someone of their own culture, and are upset about their love relationship. Lila's parents are overbearing, perhaps as a result of her complaints to them, and are insistent that Lila get special treatment. This is especially evident when Lila is in the hospital after the avalanche, when her parents are angry that they were not notified about the ski trip, angry that she has to share a hospital room, angry that she has to read foreign magazines, etc. In contrast, Dinnie's Uncle Max and Aunt Sandy are open to differences, making them effective in their jobs at the school.

Another theme in this novel is the importance of struggle, especially with learning. Dinnie realizes that her experiences are shaping her. One professor adopts a method of teaching during the year whereby he does not give the students any written home work.



They are required to just go home each day and think. The kids even spend three days in class discussing how one should evaluate thinking! Dinnie enjoys the intensity of her classes, and enjoys thinking about why others think the way they do.

She also struggles with her own ideas and attitudes. She thinks that she is average and that there is nothing interesting about her.

She finally comes to a point of realization that people who struggle, who do not take life for granted but wrestle with themselves and their surroundings, are the people who are interesting. Creech wants her readers to avoid following everyone else. Instead, she promotes actively wrestling with life's problems and ideas. It is important, then, that her protagonist is a female, for Creech is advocating that females can be part of this struggle for understanding and change, too, and that this activity will make them more interesting people. Because Lila does not struggle in this way, she is branded as a spoiled brat by her peers, or as not interesting.

A common theme in many of Creech's works involves the importance of mother/daughter relationships. In *Bloomability*, Dinnie struggles with her physical separation from her mother during this important period in her thirteen-year-old life. She is incredibly homesick and feels cut off from her mother, and realizes this when looking at a baby spider plant that has just been replanted.

Her Aunt Sandy cannot take the place of her mother, and so Dinnie feels disconnected. On her way back to the United States, she is looking forward to more opportunities with her family, especially her mother, and realizes that she has a choice to make about whether or not to return to the boarding school. At the beginning, she feels kidnapped, without a choice, but at the end she sees that she had made the choice to go all along. She chooses to go home to her family again, and even though we do not know if she will return to Switzerland, we know she will make the decision herself.



Topics for Discussion

1. If your teacher gave thinking assignments like Mr. Bonner, how should those assignments be graded? What sorts of questions might you choose to think about?
2. Dinnie got to ski for the first time in Switzerland. What new activities can you do in your town, and how would you go about that?
3. Why is it important to study both sides of a situation before you choose which one to believe? How does this help when handling new opportunities?
4. Discuss the importance of being flexible. If you got to attend school in another country, where would you go?
5. What do you think would happen with the characters in a sequel to this novel?

What is the purpose of the letters and postcards from Dinnie's aunts? How do they fit in with the story?

6. Why do you think the non-American parents would choose to send their sons and daughters to an American boarding school?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Draw a map of Italy and Switzerland and include the different language regions. Include the places Dinnie and her friends visited in Bloomability, and map their path.
2. Research the service organizations in your town. Find out what volunteer opportunities are available. Create a notebook with pages on each organization for your classroom library.
3. Find the nearest boarding school to your town and send away for information. Compare that school with Dinnie's school. See if you can correspond with someone your age from that school.
4. Read *Nature* by Ralph Waldo Emerson, specifically the "I have become a transparent eyeball" passage. Analyze the full passage with reference to the novel you just read.
5. Choose a current event and write both sides of the story. Present this to your classmates and discuss.
6. Choose a culture and write a paper on that culture's customs, comparing it with your own.

For Further Reference

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"Creech, Sharon." *Something about the Author*, Vol. 94. Ed. Alan Hedblad. Detroit: Gale, 1998, pp.46-50. This source cites parallels between Creech's first two novels and includes comments from the author.

Trites, Roberta Seelinger. *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997. Trites defines the feminist children's novel in terms of language, voice, agency, and community.

Related Titles

Creech's other books (all but *Pleasing the Ghost*) are similar coming-of-age stories about thirteen-year-old girls, and all are set in the same time and place. The four girls have connections to each other in various ways, though these would not be considered series books. Creech has been praised for this ability to centralize one character's story while keeping her connected to others her age.

Other popular books about boarding schools include: *Maizon at Blue Hill* by Jacqueline Woodson, the *Chalet School* series by Elinor Brent-Dyer, *The Small Rain* and *And Both Were Young* by Madeleine L'Engle, *The Girls of Canby Hall* series, and J.K.

Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Also, *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett might be interesting to read alongside *Bloomability* since they both deal with multiculturalism.



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