

So Much to Tell You Study Guide

So Much to Tell You by John Marsden (writer)

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Contents

So Much to Tell You Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Feb. 6- March 12.....	4
March 13-April 24.....	6
April 25-June 8.....	8
June 9-July 11.....	10
Characters.....	12
Objects/Places.....	14
Themes.....	16
Style.....	18
Quotes.....	19
Topics for Discussion.....	20



Plot Summary

So Much to Tell You is John Marsden's first novel. Published in 1987, it became an instant success. Marsden is an educator and focuses on writing about teenagers, although the themes in his books apply to all of us.

So Much to Tell You is based on the true story of Marina, a young girl whose face was permanently damaged in an incident for which her father is responsible. After the incident, Marina retreats into silence, first in the hospital and then at her boarding school.

A teacher at the school assigns his students the task of writing a daily diary and the novel *So Much to Tell You* is presented as Marina's diary entries. Though at first she is reticent to share and is distrustful of everyone, Marina's writing chronicles her inside world and her journey towards healing. The diary also tracks Marina's changing feelings towards her father and herself.



Feb. 6- March 12

Feb. 6- March 12 Summary

Marina begins her diary three days after arriving at her new school. She was at a hospital before that, recovering from an incident which left her face disfigured. She was on many wards during her recovery, most recently the psychiatric ward. As a result of the incident, Marina gave up speaking. She believes her mother has sent her to Warrington Boarding School because she cannot handle Marina's silence.

Marina enjoys her schoolwork and she loves English class in particular. Marina's teacher has assigned the homework of writing in a journal daily. Marina discovers that she enjoys this. She describes the world of her new school. She is in the Third Form and she lives in a dorm with eight other girls. Marina's chosen sport is Tennis, and though she goes to practice, which is compulsory, she just sits on the sidelines watching the others play.

Though Marina is not disobedient, she avoids social interaction, even with those who want to engage with her as friends. Marina discovers that this makes some people hostile towards her. One classmate in particular, Sophie, makes fun of her, but another girl, Lisa, usually comes to her rescue. Marina describes Lisa as popular but private.

Through her diary entries, Marina reveals that her mother is remarried to a man named J.J. and they have left town to go on a trip to New York. Marina infers that her father is in jail after having had a trial which Marina didn't attend. She acknowledges he pled guilty. She admits to hating her father, though she does not yet reveal the story as to why.

Marina has scheduled sessions with Mrs. Ransome, the school Counselor. Though Marina does not speak during these sessions, Mrs. Ransome speaks to Marina about her son. Marina enjoys listening but does not reveal that she is listening at all.

The girls in Marina's dorm are typical teenagers. Some are crude while others are still clinging to childhood. There are girls who smoke and drink, and there are others who still read books for young readers. While they all have the standard dorm sheets on their beds, all of the students except for Marina have doona-covers, colorful quilts that are their own. They all decorate and personalize their desks, all but Marina.

Cathy, a girl who Marina likes, once yells at Marina out of frustration. She later leaves a note for Marina apologizing. This is an unexpected gesture and Marina had not been prepared for such an invitation of friendship. Marina does not feel brave enough to reply with a note of her own, but she later leaves a flower on Cathy's bed.



Feb. 6- March 12 Analysis

This diary is the first opportunity Marina has given herself to express her thoughts since the incident occurred. At the outset, Marina plans to reveal little in the journal, but once she starts writing, she finds great comfort in putting her feelings on paper. While she is not sharing her writing with anyone, this is a first step at unbotting everything that is inside her.

Marina is still reluctant, however, to speak of her past. This will take more time. She does speak of not understanding the familial love she witnesses in other families. This is not reflective of her upbringing. Marina marvels at the family reunions on Sunday afternoons when parents come to take their kids out of the school for the afternoon.

Marina does not only refrain from speaking, but she is careful not to reveal her personality in other ways as well. She keeps her desk and bed impersonal and cold. She does not want to express herself through sport, music, or art. The only thread that may pull Marina out of her isolation is through her writing.

The moments with Cathy reveal that Marina is not ready to close herself off completely from others. As soon as someone threw her a strong enough line, she grabbed on to it and welcomed it, and responded in the only way she feels that she can have at this moment.



March 13-April 24

March 13-April 24 Summary

One day while cleaning, Marina breaks a beautiful sculpture that her roommate Ann had made. Marina stays clear of the dorm after that, but Ann finds her and tells her it is okay. Marina is unsettled by this act of kindness.

Marina is surprised to discover that many of the girls' parents are divorced and that most of the girls have challenges at home. One day Marina discovers Lisa crying alone, and though she wants to go over and comfort Lisa, she can't go through with it.

There is a week-long break for Easter during which time Marina does not write in her diary. She spends the mostly-uneventful week with her grandmother. She also goes back to the hospital to see her doctor. She finds it strange to be there and recognizes many people from when she was an in-patient. After her examination, the doctor tells her it will still be another few years before they can perform any plastic surgery on her face. Marina also finds that she thought about her father during Easter- how he was, what he was eating for Easter dinner... Not long afterwards, Marina's mother sends word that she's returned from New York.

One evening the students watch a movie that has a scene of an emblem being burned into the hand of a man. This sends Marina running to escape into the trees. Cathy finds her and wraps her arms around Marina, but soon Marina runs again, this time to her dorm. This moment launches Marina into a spiral of depression. She writes single-sentence nonsensical entries for a few days, and she is sent to sick bay to recover. Cathy brings her the journal. While she is there, Marina overhears a conversation between two teachers, about how the school should not have taken Marina unless they could offer her help. A few days later, Marina re-emerges. She writes a lot again, but the content is strictly of events. She consciously stays away from expressing her feelings.

One weekend, the English teacher, Mr. Lindell, invites Marina to his home for the weekend. Marina is touched and slowly warms up to the idea. She finally agrees and has a lovely time. She helps prepare the supper and she is enamored of the family with three young children. Anna, the youngest at 3 years old, climbs onto Marina's lap while watching tv to cuddle. Once Marina recovers from her shock, she puts her arms around the girl. When Anna says 'hurt face?' this releases Marina's tears, tears she hasn't shed in over a year.

March 13-April 24 Analysis

Marina gets further and further unsettled in the world of kindness she is experiencing. She is learning to accept some kindness, and her fellow students can see this.



Marina says the best part of Easter was the night she was home alone, though she recognizes that she gets depressed when she is alone now, which never used to be the case. She has grown accustomed - first at the hospital and now at the boarding school - to always being in the company of others, which, Marina is learning, has its advantages at keeping certain thoughts at bay. Alone, Marina also finds herself wondering more and more about her dad's reality now.

Marina's slip backwards into darkness is triggered, she thinks, by several events, including her mother's return from New York and the scene in the movie of the man's burning hand.

When she emerges from the fog, Marina is careful not to jump right back into trusting, but it doesn't take her long to find her way back to the edge of her comfort zone. Marina accepts Mr. Lindell's invitation, and instead of reacting with further distance when confronted with kindness, Marina is truly pleased.

It is not extreme cruelty that finally allows Marina to cry; it is innocent compassion that releases her tears. Marina is surprised she can still cry; she wasn't convinced she still had the ability. While she was embarrassed in the moment, she seems quietly pleased that she was able to cry.



April 25-June 8

April 25-June 8 Summary

A girl from a different dorm runs away. Marina is upset she didn't spot another sad soul like her. She is also upset that the teachers are more angry and less concerned with the underlying sadness that caused the girl to run away. The girl is eventually found at her Grandmother's farm.

Marina takes a big step on Cathy's birthday by giving her a card with a gift she made herself. After she hands over the present, she runs away shaking. Nevertheless, she is very proud of herself. Later, Lisa puts her arm around Marina- another first- and tells her that Cathy cried when she opened it. She also says that all of the girls notice Marina is happier lately.

When the semester is over, Marina returns home with her mother for the break. One day Marina finds herself walking to the family court, where the incident happened. She questions if this was all her fault and if what she'd said to the judge brought on what happened. A letter arrives from Cathy, which touches Marina greatly. At home, Marina's mother mostly ignores her, which makes Marina feel that even the hospital would be better than staying with her mom. And soon, she actually is readmitted to the hospital, not having broken into speech for the entire school term.

Marina writes to Mr. Lindell for help so she can return to school, and he does not disappoint. He visits the hospital and convinces the doctor that Marina has improved enough to go back to school. Marina is so happy to see Mr. Lindell that she smiles when she passes him in the hall. This is a new step.

Back at school, Marina reveals a bit more about what happened. Her father had tried to throw acid at her mother, but missed and hit Marina instead. Marina thinks of her dad more and more, and wonders if she should ask the judge to let him out. She wonders how she'd address a letter to him if she did write.

Marina has a second lovely weekend at the Lindells' home, this time looking after Anna herself for a while. She is sure that she's smiled over the course of the weekend and Mrs. Lindell notices Marina is happier. Not long later, Marina again communicates in a discussion with the girls- she smiles, shrugs and nods, all of which she is very proud.

Mrs. Ransome says more than she usually does at her next session. She tells Marina that the cure will involve looking at feelings, uncomfortable feelings about her parents, that will include both love and hate. In another act of communication, Marina draws prison bars on the wall, and after a few attempts, Mrs. Ransome correctly guesses these are her and her father.

Marina turns 15 years old. She has become part of the group, and everyone gives her presents for her birthday.



April 25-June 8 Analysis

These entries reveal a journey towards healing. At first the signs are subtle. She wonders what her first words to Mr. Lindell will be. She boldly returns to the scene of the incident. Soon there are more pronounced signs- Marina replies to Cathy's letter. She actively helps herself by writing to Mr. Lindell to intercede on her behalf so she can return to school.

When Marina returns to school, she continues her growth. She says she doesn't 'shrink into the walls' anymore. When she starts to hate the school, she reminds herself it was her choice to be there and accepts responsibility for it. She considers auditioning for the school play.

Mrs. Ransome gives Marina some thoughts to reflect upon at the moment that Marina is ready to hear them. At first Marina does not reveal that she is listening, but then she breaks through and with an image, conveys some of what is inside her to her counselor.

Marina thought it would be torture to be forced to accept many compliments but her birthday proves more enjoyable than she would have imagined, and this reveals that Marina is willing to leave her isolation behind.



June 9-July 11

June 9-July 11 Summary

School carries on, and now Marina's chosen sport is softball. She still does not participate. There is a dance coming up and Marina is anxious about having to go until she is told she can skip it.

Surprising herself, Marina asks Mrs. Ransome if she can get her father's address for her. Marina then has a note-exchange with Lisa, during which she realizes that she doesn't hate her father, and this knowledge feels like relief. Marina cries in front of Lisa and lets Lisa hold and comfort her.

When Marina finally receives her father's address, she writes him a short note. He replies within five days, clearly glad she has written to him, but careful not to spill out his heart. He speaks of going to the hospital of the town nearby his Prison Farm every Monday.

Cathy's mother arranges for Marina to come to home with Cathy at the next mid-term break.

Marina quickly realizes that Cathy lives near her father's prison farm and she is eager to make the journey.

Marina's time at Cathy's house is educational for her. Cathy's family all pitches in to get things done on the farm, and they all genuinely care about each other. This is in contrast to Marina's relationship with her own mother. Marina is surprised that Cathy helps out without asking. While they help out, Marina comes to appreciate the warm relationship that Cathy has with her father.

When Monday rolls around, Cathy's father takes Marina to the train station. Marina makes the journey to the hospital near her father. When asked, she says yea, she wants to see a doctor, buying time to look for her father while she is in the waiting room. The wait is long, and eventually Marina's name is called by the nurse. Marina did not see her dad in the room but when he hears her name called, they find each other.

Marina's father calls her name, and she replies "Hi Dad." They hug, somewhat awkwardly but long, and Marina then says "I have so much to tell you."

June 9-July 11 Analysis

At this point, Marina has come a long way towards making an effort to move forward in her life. Yet no matter what pathways her mind travels, she always ends up at the same place- her father. Marina is concerned for his well-being. She is concerned he will hate



her- will always hate her- for the things she said on the stand in family court, for not being at her father's trial, for not writing to him.

The moment Marina realizes she does not hate her father, a weight is lifted. She allows herself not to hate her father, and she also allows herself the right to cry, the right to cry in public even, and the right to be consoled by a friend. She sees the difference between her mother who really does not care for Marina, and her dad, who in his rage, attempted to throw acid at his ex-wife and hurt his daughter instead.

Marina is somewhat distraught that her mid-term plans are being arranged for her without much of her input, but all of that falls away when she realizes this will be an opportunity to see her dad. Marina feels the wheels she set in motion by asking for her father's address, and she understands that regardless of what she thinks she wants, she will follow this course to its natural conclusion.



Characters

Marina

Marina is a fourteen-year-old girl who is recovering from the mental wounds of recent incidents in her life. Her face healed as much as will ever heal, but the emotional scars have left Marina mute.

Not only does Marina choose not to speak, but she also chooses to avoid engagement with other girls, and engagement in life. At one point she calls herself dead, for she no longer feels part of the world. Marina shuns even those who are kind to her and wish to reach out to her.

During her journey from February through July, Marina comes to want to be part of the world again, to forgive herself, and to allow herself her love for her father.

Mr. Lindell

Mr. Lindell is Marina's teacher. He assigns the girls to keep a daily journal. He says he will not read it but will check to see that the girls are writing in it, as required. Mr. Lindell invites Marina to spend two weekends with him, his wife and three children. Both weekends are wonderful experiences for Marina.

Mr. Lindell is the person who Marina turns to for help when she is admitted to the hospital and deemed unfit to return to school. Lindell comes through for Marina, travelling to the hospital just to sort things out and ensure that Marina can return.

Cathy Preshill

Marina seems to like Cathy Preshill, a fellow student, above the other girls in her dorm, and Cathy, equally, is drawn to Marina. She slowly builds trust with Marina. Eventually, Marina is bold enough to present her with a card and gift. Cathy is the only person to ask Marina questions directly. Twice she secures permission to walk to the beach with Marina.

Lisa

Lisa, another Third-Form student, is a private person. Marina can see Lisa's unhappiness, though she hides it well from others. Lisa is well-liked and has a lot of clout with the girls in the Third Form. Marina admires her and appreciates that Lisa tends to stick up for Marina when people are making fun of her.



Sophie

Sophie is exuberant and Marina admires her bubblyness. Sophie, however, resents Marina and makes her life uncomfortable. She is cruel to Marina. Late in the novel, Marina sees that Sophie is quite unhappy with herself, and this softens Marina's thinking towards her.

Marina's Grandmother

Marina's grandmother (her mother's mother) visits Marina and takes her out on the occasional Sunday afternoon. She also takes her home for the Easter break as Marina's mother is away at the time. Marina appreciates that her grandmother does not push her too hard to talk or interact.

Mrs. Ransome

Marina has weekly sessions with Mrs. Ransome, the school counselor. Mrs. Ransome is nice. She is respectful of Marina and does not try to draw her into conversation. Instead, she just shares information about her own life. It is only once Marina has fought to stay at the school that Mrs. Ransome feels Marina is ready to hear about the work ahead regarding feelings, should Marina choose to get better.

Marina's Mother

Marina's mother can't cope with Marina's silence and her solution is to send her to a boarding school, while she and her second husband take a trip to the United States. She sends the extremely rare letter to Marina, none very loving. Marina feels her mother neither loves nor likes her daughter. When Marina is home between terms, she can't stand to be around her mother, who is largely ignoring her anyway.

Marina's Father

Marina's father pleaded guilty to throwing acid and causing Marina's disfigurement. He is now in a prison farm. He was not intending to hurt Marina but rather her mother when the incident occurred at Family Court, presumably after he lost custody of his daughter.



Objects/Places

Warrington

Marina is sent to Warrington Boarding School in her mother's hopes that she will start speaking again. Marina is in the Third Form and lives in a dorm with nine other girls.

Marina is given the space at Warrington to emerge from her silence at her own pace. Over time, she builds trust with the girls living in her dorm.

Diary

The novel is presented as Marina's diary, an obligatory homework assignment from her teacher Mr. Lindell. This diary is the only outlet Marina employs to express herself, and it is the beginning of Marina's road to recovery.

Dorm

Nine girls living together in a dorm gives Marina the opportunity to see that everyone is grappling with something in their lives, and that everyone has a story. Marina is exposed to typical adolescent life there, with girls trying drinking and smoking and endlessly talking about boys. She also sees how the teens can be vicious with each other and kind to each other a short while later.

New York

While Marina is at Warrington, her mother takes a long trip to New York with her second husband, instead of staying closer to her daughter.

Tennis

Each girl at the school is obliged to choose a sport in which she will participate. Marina chooses Tennis. Instead of joining in, she watches from the sidelines, impressed with the beauty of some of the players. Though Marina chooses not to get involved, she is drawn to sports and was a strong athlete earlier in her life.

The Hospital

During the Easter break when Marina is staying at her grandmother's place, she must go to the hospital where she was an inpatient for so long. It is a strange return journey for her. Later, during the break between terms, Marina goes again for an appointment



but is then re-admitted. She no longer appreciates being there and she fights to get out so she can return to school.

The Lindell home

Marina is invited by Mr. Lindell to spend the weekend with his family. Marina is overwhelmed by the feelings of love and goodness in the house, and it is there, with a child in her arms, that she has her first cry in three years.

The Gift

Not only does Marina make a gift for Cathy, but she does not leave it on Cathy's bed- she hands her the gift in person, face to face. This is the biggest single-step towards speech in Marina's time at the school. It is a long way from acting as if she doesn't hear what is going on around her to actively offering a symbol of friendship.



Themes

Forgiveness

This story is so full of many insights into humanity, adolescence, and love. Most of all, this is a story of forgiveness. While it is true that Marina follows a road that leads her to forgive her father, this story is about Marina forgiving herself as well. These two acts of forgiveness are inextricably linked together.

Marina holds feelings of guilt for having caused her father to act so outrageously. While Marina's diary never specifies exactly what happened at family court to ignite her father's rage, Marina reveals that she said some mean things about him on the stand. And while her father did have a past of taking the belt to her, Marina can't let go of her feelings of love for him and her responsibility for what happened. Marina feels anger-hatred even- for her mother and step-father, and in her diary she suggests that there are times she wishes her father had reached his target- her mother.

Marina comes to understand that she can allow herself to hold onto her love for her father. She learns that of her family members, it is only her father with whom she can imagine a full healing and restored relationship.

Silence

Marina does not speak from the time of the acid incident until over a year later. She walls herself into a safe world of silence, where people cannot hurt her. This is a place where others will not ask her the harsh questions about her emotions, and by extension she need not ask herself those questions. In this world, she feels protected. Marina strips down everything about her personality. She renounces her athleticism. She gives up the flute. She does not decorate and personalize her bed or desk.

Marina recognizes that when her face was altered, she was altered as well, yet she doesn't know who this new Marina is. By not communicating, Marina can avoid learning who she has become.

A lack of communication, particularly during adolescence, is keenly felt, and with time, the efforts of Cathy, Mr. Lindell, Lisa and Mrs. Ransome, slowly, carefully and unthreateningly draw Marina out of her shell.

Trust

Any trust in people that Marina had before her day in family court has been destroyed. Marina now expects people to betray and hurt her. The bubble of silence she's created protects her from all people, who she feels are dangerous. There is one lesson Marina has learned, which is that the people who are supposed to love you can do horrible

things to you and betray you. This lesson is not easily unlearned. At one point, Marina is surprised to hear Lisa tell some other girls that Marina now trusts them. Marina recognizes this as true, though she wouldn't have realized this herself.

Adolescence is a time of transitioning between innocence and a more realistic, possibly cynical view of the world. Marina's adolescence is an extreme example of such a transition.



Style

Point of View

So Much to Tell You is written in the first-person point of view of Marina, a fourteen-year-old girl, who is the main character. Marina writes in her journal daily.

The unusual aspect of hearing the story from Marina's point of view is that she never speaks and so the outside world has absolutely no idea about any of the thoughts or feelings Marina expresses in her diary.

Setting

The novel *So Much to Tell You* is set in the fictional Warrington Boarding School in Australia. The diary spans February 6 through July 11, which is a key moment in Marina's life as she grapples with her physical and emotional scars. On this day, she comes to terms with the consequences that she will endure for the rest of her life.

Marina primarily writes her diary at her desk in the dorm. It lies untouched during her Easter break. Eventually, though, she takes it with her wherever she goes.

Language and Meaning

Marina writes with the vocabulary of a highly intelligent fourteen-year-old girl. She has great insight into others' actions as well as her own. She attributes this to the extensive group therapy she attended while at the hospital, before coming to Warrington.

Marina likes writing and she likes poetry, but she does not see the magic in her own writing abilities or how much she reveals with her words.

Structure

So Much to Tell You is split into short, almost daily, diary entries written by Marina, starting on February 6 - her third day at Warrington - and culminating on July 6, when she sees- and speaks to - her father.

The information about the present is revealed in a linear fashion, in chronological order. The information about Marina's past is revealed slowly, over the course of the novel. The reader does not immediately get the full picture of exactly what happened to Marina to leave her face disfigured and her voice muted. Rather the information is drawn out over time. Marina writes for herself, so the past isn't specified and told but is rather inferred, and it is for the reader to pick up the clues and interpret the past accordingly.



Quotes

"Son, when your mouth's open, you're not learning anything" (March 5, p. 22).

"What signals do I make? None at all, unless everything I've done in the last eleven months has been a signal. But there's so much glass. Very thick - but no matter how thick it is, it's still transparent" (March 15, p. 33).

"When she came out she was laughing and joking with everyone and I guess only I could see what an act it was. That is her mask, I guess, Just as mine is silence" (March 22, p. 40).

"I can't describe the feeling when I go down - it's down down down and there's never going to be an up again. And whatever was good isn't good anymore; white becomes grey, music becomes dictionaries, honey becomes beer and the sky a curdled lemon. There's no caramel anymore" (April 17, p. 50).

"It didn't occur to me that there might be other people here who are feeling really bad. Little dark islands floating in the shadows of the school, occasionally touching, bumping together for a moment or two" (April 26, p. 60).

"Once I tried to tell myself that it's who you are inside that counts, but that didn't work too well because I knew I'd changed inside anyway" (May 29, p. 75).

"I was thinking tonight, after seeing the way Sophie was yesterday, in the bathroom, that maybe no-one's really happy; maybe underneath we're all the same. But I don't know" (June 9, p. 86).

"I seem to be dropping into a cold dark wet place, where no-one's been before and no-one can ever follow. There's no future there; just a past that sometimes fools you into thinking it's the future" (June 12, p. 87).

"It's like rolling a rock downhill, I guess. Once you've rolled it, even if it starts a landslide, all you can do is stand and watch" (July 9, p. 104).



Topics for Discussion

What happened to Marina before coming to Warrington? Where was she staying immediately before coming to boarding school?

Why does Marina start a diary? How does she feel about it at first? Do her feelings change over time? Does the diary play a role in Marina's recovery? How?

How does Marina's mother fit into her life? Why is she so much in the background? What do you think of her mother going to New York during this time? What are Marina's mother's obligations to her daughter, and does she fulfill them?

What does Marina find at Mr. Lindell's place? Why does she cry?

What is Marina's relationship with Cathy and how does it evolve over time? Why does Marina allow Cathy to get closer to her than others?

What has Marina lost due to the acid incident? What, if anything, has she gained? Does Marina grow throughout this novel, and in what way?

Why do you think Marina has chosen to stop speaking? What finally allows her to find her voice? Why does Marina seek out her father and what does she gain when she finally sees him again?