

The Writing on the Wall

by Wendy Lichtman

About the book: Eight grade, like algebra, has become pretty complicated for Tess. For one thing, there are the patterns she's noticing everywhere—like how charming-on-the-outside Richard keeps playing scary pranks on her, and how annoying copycat Lynn always has to follow what everyone else is doing. Then there's the patterns of graffiti that keeps appearing on the wall by her school—could those numbers be a code meant for Tess? Is it up to her to find out what they mean?

And most importantly, if Damien keeps up with his pattern of waiting for her after school, does it mean he likes her? Or is that just a coincidental system? Tess looks for formulas to help her figure it all out, but she's afraid there may be none. Sometimes you have to make up your own solutions. Sometimes you just have to risk it.

Awards for the book: Bank Street College of Education Best Children's Books of the Year for 2009.

About the author: Wendy Lichtman writes personal essays for the Washington Post, New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle, and Good Housekeeping, among other national publications. She has also written four previous young adult novels, including *Do the Math: Secrets, Lies and Algebra*. She holds a degree in mathematics and has tutored public-school students in algebra for several years. When she decided to write about a teenage girl who realizes that some questions have more than one right answer, algebra, with its unknowns and variables seemed a perfect metaphor. Wendy Lichtman lives in Berkeley, California. You can visit her online at www.wendylichtman.com

Author interview:

1. What do you wish kids realized about math? What about writing? *Math is so often seen as the “unpopular” course of study and something that is separate from other subjects. I’d love them to realized the interconnection of math and life, which is why I use math metaphors in my writing.*

What I always like to tell kids about writing a novel is that I don’t know what’s going to happen until I write it. In the best of times the story can transform the storyteller, because as we write we learn something we didn’t know before.

2. Are you a planner or a jumper? In other words, do you outline your novels or just dive in and see where they lead you? Why? *I jump in. One of the reasons I love first drafts is that I can be as creative as possible—I give myself a lot of leeway when I begin. When I see the story forming, then, yes, I begin to map it out.*

3. What are you working on now? *I’m writing two things: the third book in the *Do the Math* series, and another middle-grade novel that has nothing to do with math!*

Discussion guide:

1. Discuss Tess's problem with Richard. What would you do about him? Would you consider his actions bullying or not? Why? What do you think she should do?
2. Why is the principal so upset at Tess's middle school? Does your community face any issues with graffiti or vandalism? What's the difference? With which character do you agree on the issue?
3. How does Tess define the people in her life in mathematical terms? How would you describe your friends and family in this way? Why do you think this helps her cope with these relationships? How do you cope with yours?
4. What surprising thing does Tess learn about Lucia? Would you be able to get past it or would it not bother you at all?
5. Do you think Tess is justified in writing on the wall believing that there could be more danger ahead? How does Miranda surprise her on this issue too?
6. What does the tagger reveal in code on the wall? Would you be frightened or not? How does Tess put the clues she has together? Why is she willing to risk it? Would you?
7. Do you think Tess is right to be considering Mr. Z and Lucia for starting the fire? What is inside Tess's negative quadrant? What's in yours? Does everyone have points within the negative quadrant?
8. How does Tess manage to thwart Richard's plans for a fight? How does she avoid humiliation? Is it best to handle bullies head on like this or not?
9. At what point do you think Tess should not pursue the arsonist? Do you think it is more dangerous than she considers? If you were Tess's friend what would you tell her to do? Why?
10. Do you think Damien is a good friend to Tess? Why? What makes the perfect first boyfriend or girlfriend?
11. What consequences did Tess face from her choice to write on the wall? Which was the most difficult for her to take? What risk had she planned for? What risk hadn't she considered before she acted? Do you think she regretted her decision or not?
12. Would you believe the tagger when they revealed the identity of the arsonist or not? Why? Why do you think Miranda reveals the truth of what happened to Tess's mom?
13. What is Tess's opinion for the paper? Do you agree? Why?
14. Have you ever had a teacher who was sarcastic and cruel like Mr. Z? What qualities make a good teacher? How can you handle life inside a cruel classroom?
15. What did Tess learn as she worked to clean the graffiti off the bathroom walls? What did you think of Miranda's story about the Tibetan sand paintings?

Across the curriculum:

Reading:

Tess makes a series of choices as the novel unfolds. Create a graphic organizer that traces her choices and the consequences (cause and effect) throughout the story. Be sure to show what alternative Tess could have made and what those effects might have been as well. Use to jump off discussions in small groups.

Writing:

Write an Op-ed piece of your own on graffiti or an issue which is important to your school or neighborhood community. State a clear opinion but use facts and research to back it up with substantial materials.

Art:

Tag Art: Use a sponge to create a brick pattern on a large piece of cardboard or paper using dark red and black. Be sure to leave space between bricks for the white mortar to show. Then, tag this space with pastels or chalks (or try those oil crayons that Tess used) in any way that pleases you (and your principal!) Makes a terrific hallway display.

Music:

Find a song that you think best represents the conflict in this novel and write a brief journal about why you picked it. What scene do you think it should be played in the movie adaptation of the novel? Why?

Math:

Term:	Definition:	Example:	Why it's important to the story:
Four fours problem			
4! Factorial			
Formula			
Slope			
Rate of Change			
Coincidental lines			
Fibonacci spiral			
Simplify			

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