

HOLIDAY HOUSE

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



HC: 9780823460380 · Ebook: 9780823463367

The Steps

by Wendelin Van Draanen

“Plenty of welcome heart [in this] . . . fun, twisty mystery with a likeable narrator.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A cross between a cozy mystery and a YA thriller. . . . Engrossing.”—*Booklist*

ABOUT THE BOOK

Riverdale meets *The Queen’s Gambit* in this fun, twisty thriller by an Edgar Award–winning author, featuring a deliciously dysfunctional family with dark secrets and shifting alliances.

Fourteen-year-old chess whiz Ruby Vossen tries to keep to herself. She refuses to be a pawn in her wealthy family’s web of deception.

But ever since Ruby’s mother and aunt died in a car wreck, the battle lines drawn within the Vossen clan have ruled her life. Ruby’s father and uncle became irreparably estranged, and within months, Ruby’s cousin/BFF was banished from her life, her father remarried, and she wound up with a gold-digging stepmom who has two teens of her own—the Steps.

So when strange and dangerous things begin happening on the Vossen estate, Ruby sees only one logical explanation: The Steps are scheming to inherit the Vossen fortune. And as things get more and more intense, it seems like killing is in their playbook. It’s time to checkmate the Steps before they can finish the Vossens off.

Secrets, lies, and lethal threats abound in this clever, quirky thriller by the award-winning, bestselling author of *Flipped* and the Sammy Keyes mysteries.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The novel opens with Ruby describing a tree outside her attic bedroom. Discuss the significance of the tree to the story. How does the tree create a spooky environment? In what way does the opening paragraph foreshadow the ending of the book?
- Describe Vossen Manor. How does the remote setting contribute to the atmosphere of the book? Discuss what Ruby means by “[It’s] a house that’s watching ours, passing judgement” (p. 8).
- Discuss the cause of the Vossen family feud. What are the rules that Ruby and her cousin, Sterling, must follow? Uncle Axel, Sterling’s father, accuses Ruby’s father of killing his wife and taking the insurance money. Debate whether Uncle Axel knew the cause of the accident. If not, what is the basis for his accusations?
- Sterling and Ruby were best friends. What ended their friendship? Explain what Sterling means by “I should have known you’d be too much of a rule follower to help me” (p. 6). Contrast Ruby and Sterling’s personalities.
- In what ways does Ruby miss Sterling? Debate whether Ruby can ever have a relationship with Sterling, even after she saves Sterling’s life.
- Describe Tante Katrina. Why was she banished from the family? How is Katrina always there for Ruby? What insight does Katrina provide about the entire Vossen family? Why does Katrina decide it’s time to tell Ruby that her father is responsible for her mother’s death? Oma accuses Katrina of “conspiracy theories.” What specifically is she referencing?
- Discuss first impressions of Oma. How was Oma different when Opa was alive? At what point does Ruby realize that Oma manipulates and uses people? How does she figure out that Oma staged the break-in at her mansion when she and Ruby found Oma tied up? Explain how Ruby solves the entire crime involving Oma.
- Why does Ruby call Vivian, her father’s new wife, “Stepmommy Dearest”? Cite passages throughout the book when Vivian lives up to this title. How is Vivian different when Ruby’s dad is around? Explain what Ruby means by “The rest of the time she’s more like the tree” (p. 2).
- Ruby sees Vivian smoking in the pantry and overhears her on the telephone. What about the conversation makes Ruby suspicious of Vivian?
- Describe Vivian’s daughter and son. What is Ruby’s opinion of Brielle? Why does Ruby have sympathy for Liam? In what way does she identify with him? Explain why Ruby tells him that she believes his mother is trying to kill her. Debate whether this was bad judgement on Ruby’s part.
- Ruby is paranoid about many things. What contributes to her paranoia? How does this explain the rope, hatchet, and saw that she keeps under her bed? Why did Ruby’s dad refuse to put a lock on her bedroom door? Explain why the Steps scare her. How does Detective Raven sense Ruby’s fear?
- Why did Ruby think she could trust Nick? He drugs Ruby and Sterling and ties them up in the stable. He and Brielle plan to set the stable on fire and kill the girls. Discuss whether Ruby was so convinced that Vivian was the guilty party that she was blind to the real assassins. Explain how all the clues begin to merge in Ruby’s head. How does she manage to escape? Describe Brielle’s reaction when Ruby says, “You really hate being an alternate, don’t you?” (p. 188)
- Why does Ruby feel she must use code names on her phone? Discuss the significance of the code name “Nevermore” that she assigns to Detective Raven.

- Discuss Ruby’s relationship with Izaan Ray. Ruby declined Izaan’s invitation to go to the eighth-grade dance. How did this end their friendship? Debate whether Ruby was simply inexperienced with relationships with boys. She is reunited with Izaan when she joins the high school chess club. How does the entire club embrace her? Explain how they end up at Oma’s house at the end of the novel.
- A cliffhanger is a plot device that leaves the reader in suspense. How does the author make use of cliffhangers at the end of each chapter?
- Explain Detective Raven’s charge to Katrina: “Protect this child. Protect her with your life . . . and the law” (p. 238).
- What is the overall theme of the novel?
- The elements of a mystery novel include clues, suspects, a satisfying resolution, and sometimes a red herring. Ruby is telling the story. Who are the suspects in her mind? Debate whether she is surprised about the guilty party. What is the red herring in the story? Think about the ending. Debate whether it’s a satisfying resolution.
- The elements of horror fiction include a haunting atmosphere, suspense, exploration of deep-seated fears, and well-developed antagonists. Consider these elements and discuss whether the novel belongs to the horror genre. In what way is the novel both a mystery and horror fiction?

Guide created by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Wendelin Van Draanen is the award-winning, bestselling author of more than thirty novels for children and teens. Her books include *Flipped*, which was named a Top 100 Children’s Novel for the 21st Century by *School Library Journal* and became a Warner Brothers feature film; the Edgar Award–winning Sammy Keyes mystery series; and *The Running Dream*, which won ALA’s Schneider Family Book Award. *The Steps* is her new YA from Holiday House. A high school teacher for fifteen years, Wendelin is now a full-time writer who enjoys staying active in the school author-visit space. Visit her at wendelinvand.com.