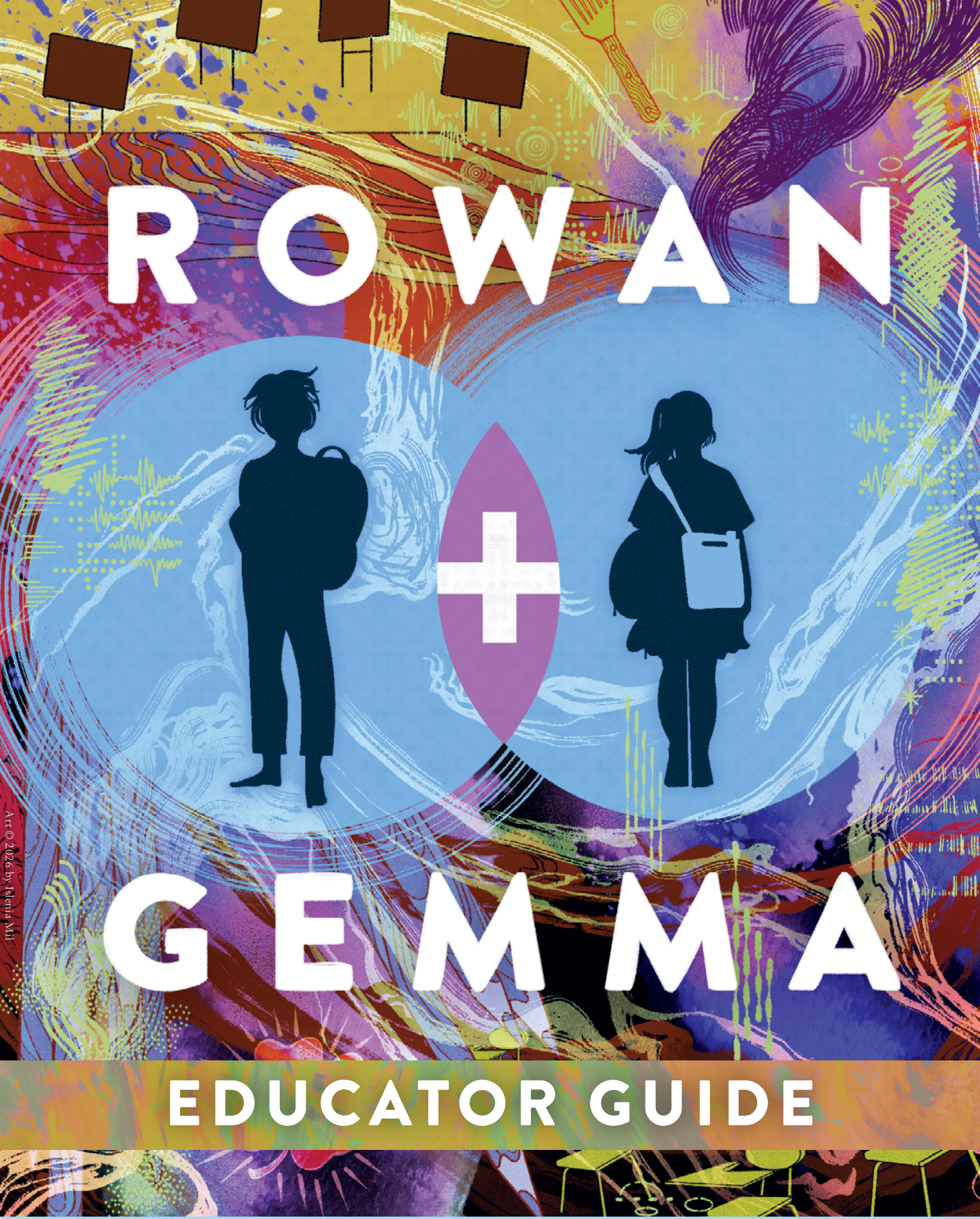
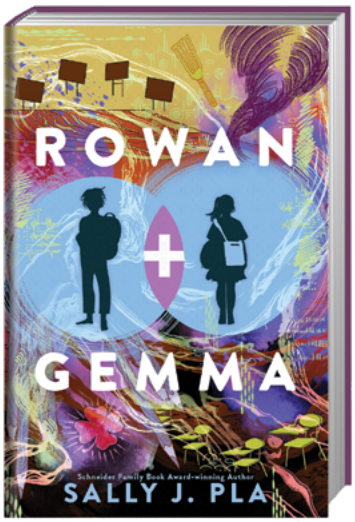


Art © 2026 by Isela Mir

ROWAN + GEMMA



ABOUT THE BOOK

Rowan Monahan is a friendly, kind 14-year-old boy with a stutter who's constantly underestimated. His new-in-their-small-town classmate Gemma is non-speaking autistic, and communicates with AAC (a text-to-speech device). The two ninth-graders meet and form an instant bond. But their relationship is put to the test when their mothers launch a nasty, mudslinging political campaign against each other. The vitriol and slander splits their once close-knit, tiny town of Friendship Prairie into two enemy camps. Caught int the middle and ordered to end their friendship, Rowan and Gemma start to feel like they are the only ones left in Friendship Prairie who understand the crucial importance of choosing language carefully.

★ *"Pla skillfully and concisely conveys great depth as she explores the characters' emotions and the theme of whether words are really necessary for communication. Insightful and riveting."*

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

A Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally J. Pla is the ALA Schneider Family Book Award–winning author of **THE FIRE, THE WATER, AND MAUDIE McGINN**, and the Dolly Gray Award winner **THE SOMEDAY BIRDS**, among other acclaimed novels and picture books. Her books have been translated into different languages, have earned multiple starred reviews, and have appeared on dozens of state award lists and "best of the year" roundups. Sally has appeared on television and radio as an author and neurodiversity advocate. She also runs the kid lit website resource, *A Novel Mind*. Sally, who is late-diagnosed autistic, believes in kindness, respect, and the beauty of different brains. Find out more at **sallyjpla.com**.

Art © 2026 by Isienia Mil

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Uncle Lucky try to console Rowan after his accident with the heavy tray at the restaurant? Why might he think his words would make Rowan feel better? Why do you think Uncle Lucky only made Rowan feel worse?

2. Why does Gemma's mother want her to go to the public high school after being homeschooled for so many years? Why is Gemma worried about attending school, and why is she excited? Think of a time recently when you felt both worried and excited about doing something. How did that experience turn out?

3. How does Gemma's mother try to persuade the school to accommodate Gemma's needs? Why is Gemma so upset with her mother? What advice would you give Gemma and her mother on how to talk to the principal?

4. At the PTO meeting, Rowan hears many opinions about the new people who have moved to Friendship Prairie. Why are some of the people, including his mother, unhappy that the new people are there? Why are others happy that they have arrived? What does Rowan think about the changes, and why?

5. When Rowan sees the giant sign his mother's supporters put up, showing her beating up Clare Caplan, he thinks, "I've always been proud of my mom. But this feels wrong. I feel ashamed" (p. 143). Why is Rowan upset with his mom even though she didn't put up the sign herself? What does this tell us about Rowan?

6. The novel portrays multiple neurodivergent characters, not just Rowan and Gemma, but also Rowan's friend, Mark, and Hannah. Why would they be considered neurodivergent? How do they differ in the ways that they are neurodivergent? What are some of the challenges they face because of their neurodivergence? How do they help each other and contribute to their wider community?

7. In what ways does the local newspaper, *The Friendship Reporter*, show its bias in the election? Why do you think the newspaper favors Rowan's mother over Gemma's? Do you think the newspaper's bias changes any voters' minds? Why or why not?

8. Why do you think the comments for the news articles about the election are so nasty? If you were the person in charge of *The Friendship Reporter*, would you refuse to publish the nasty comments? Why or why not? How would you handle them?

9. Mark uses the term "toxic masculinity" (p. 33) to describe Ty's behavior. What does he mean by that term? How is Ty's behavior different from that of Gemma's brothers, who are also on the football team? Why is Ty so angry and hostile, and what does it tell you about the challenges of being a boy and an athlete?



Art © 2026 by Islenia Mil

10. Along with Rowan and Gemma, the author has created many interesting characters with their own problems and situations, among them are Mark, Ty, Belinda, and the triplets. Which character in the book do you think is most like you, and why? Which character would you most want as your best friend, and why?

11. Despite their mothers' dislike for each other, the friendship between Rowan and Gemma shows that kids do not always follow in their parents' footsteps. How are Rowan and Gemma different from their parents, and what traits do they share with their parents? How is Ty different from his father? How might you be different from your other family members, and how are you similar?

12. Were you surprised at the outcome of the school board election? Why or why not? Who would you have voted for in the election, and why?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

YOUR PIPE DREAM

"Mom had *loved* that old Jepsen place.... Where Dad and I saw a rickety wreck, Mom saw possibilities. She saw a cute little inn with checkered curtains and easy chairs and home-baked muffins. Her pipe dream was to fix it up and run it as a bed-and-breakfast" (p. 2).
What is your pipe dream? Write a story about what you see yourself doing in the future that everyone else thinks is impossible.

OXYMORONS

An oxymoron is a figure of speech in which two completely opposite things or ideas are combined in a single phrase or sentence, like the Friendship Warhawks. Gemma writes, "Our mascot is a big scary hawk dripping blood from its talons—with the word 'Friendship,' of all things, written across its chest" (p. 151). Write down other oxymorons you've heard or make up your own, and then share them with classmates.

THE SCHOOL BOARD ELECTION

The Friendship Prairie school board election between Clare Caplan and Maggie Monahan was more about their personalities than improving the schools. But you could change that! Imagine you're a reporter who will interview both candidates. Come up with a list of questions you plan to ask each of them that would be useful for voters trying to decide which one would be better for Friendship Prairie's schools.

Art © 2026 by Islenia Mil

TWO SIDES

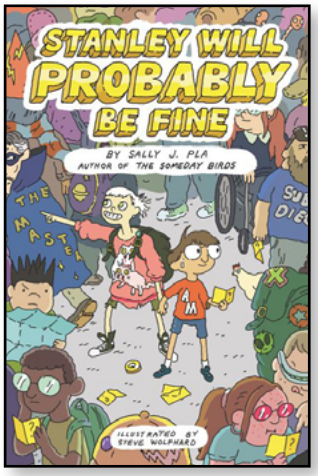
On pp. 203–207, Pastor Lawrence leads a discussion in which the kids come to realize there are two sides to the conflict between Rowan and Gemma's mothers. Think of a conflict in your own life. It can be with a friend or a family member, or in your school or wider community. Describe the conflict in a sentence. Make two columns and summarize each side of the conflict in its own column.

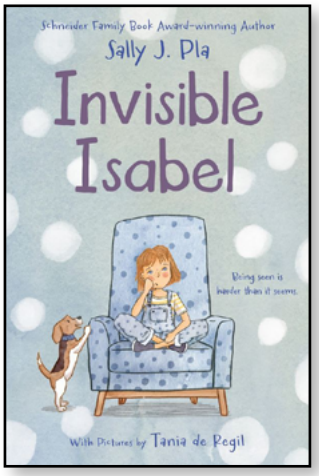
ROMEO AND JULIET

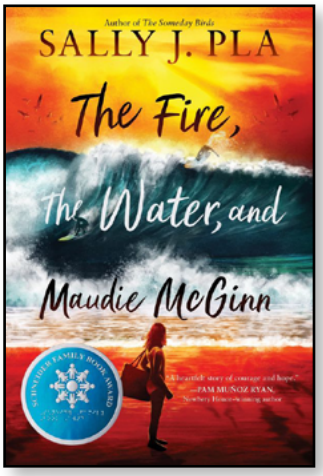
The story of *Rowan and Gemma* is inspired by William Shakespeare's play, *Romeo and Juliet*, first written and performed around the year 1595. Read a summary of *Romeo and Juliet* and list three things in *Rowan and Gemma* that you think are drawn from this famous play.

ALSO BY SALLY J. PLA

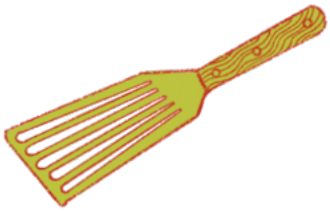








Guide prepared by Lyn Miller-Lachmann, MLIS, MFA, an author, translator, and teacher who writes books about young people on the autism spectrum.



Art © 2026 by Islenia Mil