

# Teachers' Guide for *Take the Stairs*

by Karen Krossing



Second  
Story  
Press

## About the Novel

*Take the Stairs* is about the limitations that press in on a community of inner-city teens – limits placed on them by others and those they impose on themselves. Set in a run-down apartment building where all the teens live, each of the thirteen characters in the novel has an obstacle that he or she is trying to overcome.

Some of the characters are dealing with tough issues: abuse, theft, racial prejudice, suicide, AIDS, homosexuality, abortion. There is Petra, who has learned how to escape her abusive father by hiding from him; and Flynn, who thinks nothing of stealing. Asim deals with hatred directed against his Muslim family, while Allie spends the night on suicide watch for her depressed mother. David tries to talk to his dead father's ghost, and Jennifer flirts with men she does not want instead of approaching the girl she does want. Madga resents her boyfriend when he won't mourn the loss of the baby they aborted.

Other teens in *Take the Stairs* are tackling lighter problems. Cori, whose mother has told her that all men are pigs, faces her own biases against men. Roger, a couch potato, receives a present of eggs in an incubator, which propels him off the couch and into life. Louis is a mountain biker who resists an invasion of commuters on his bike paths during a city-wide transit strike, and Sidney learns to take control of her life during a wilderness trip gone wrong. Tanya refuses to buy into the beauty myth and stops shaving her hairy legs, and Tony won't admit to the girl he likes that he lives in the filth and squalor of the Building.

All the characters face problems that real teens sometimes have to confront. In fact, *Take the Stairs* is based on real situations and real people. It's a blend of fiction and reality.

Karen Krossing, says, "I was thinking about limits when I wrote this book because that is what I remember of my teenage years. For example, my mother had suicidal moments, which we found out later was because of abuse as a child. I've had friends who struggled to admit they were gay, and I've known women who've had to tackle the agonizing decisions that come with an unwanted pregnancy. My husband grew up in several different inner-city buildings, which left him with the stigma that he was somehow not good enough. Everywhere I looked, there were teens who had to face tough situations, and sometimes people were not willing to talk about them. With *Take the Stairs*, I wanted to openly communicate about difficult topics that real people face."

Krossing calls *Take the Stairs* a novel in thirteen voices since there are thirteen characters who share their stories in the book. She says that "reading *Take the Stairs* is like walking down the corridor of the Building where the characters live. It's human nature to peer into any open apartments as we pass by, and, as we do, we get a taste of the hopes and troubles of each character."

The characters in *Take the Stairs* voice their secret, unspoken stories. Either together or alone, these inner city teens find some way – any way – around the obstacles that block their paths. No matter what happens, they push past the limits, and break out into the open.

## Pre-Reading Suggestions

1. From the cover, what do you think the book will be about? Why do you think the person on the cover has his hand raised to block his face?
2. Consider the title *Take the Stairs*. What does it mean to you?
3. Read “The Building” on page 1. Draw what you think the Building looks like. Your drawing doesn’t need to be realistic; it could be an abstract interpretation of the Building. (For student samples, go to <http://karenkrossing.com/2009/03/11/visit-to-vaughan-secondary-school/>.)
4. Is there social pressure on teens because of where they live? Why do you think that is? Discuss how where people live affects their social status and their life experiences.

## Discussion Questions and Activities

### Language Arts Connections

1. Look at the vivid imagery in “Hide and Seek.” Petra camouflages herself within her environment to protect herself from danger. Discuss how human beings protect themselves.
2. Read the following quote from page 181. Explain how the Building becomes a “character” in the book.

*Then, the sun glinted off a Building window that was covered in tinfoil. The light caught my eye, like a wink, and I got this weird feeling, as if the Building were watching all of us, and listening, too. Like our sounds and smells had seeped into its walls. The good and the bad. The laughs and the sobs. All those scuffmarks and fingerprints, sandwiched between layers of paint. The Building held it all, then let it trickle slowly back to us, like a tribute.*
3. Consider the following quote from Tony’s story (page 180). How does this passage relate to the title of the book?

*“Now how do I get out of this place?” I sighed.  
Then Crazy Tate was beside me, bobbing on his toes. “Take the stairs, man.” He pointed to the stairs that lead down to the sidewalk and away.  
I laughed. “Yeah, right. Easy.”  
Was it that easy? Could I just leave one day, like Petra had?*
4. Which story or character did you most identify with? Why?
5. What do you think is the basic message of *Take the Stairs*? Explain.
6. Use the Online Etymology Dictionary ([www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)) to complete the etymology handout on page 5 of this teacher’s guide.
7. Write a comparison between two characters in the book.
8. Select a character from *Take the Stairs*. Write a monologue or diary entry for that character. Describe how he or she felt at a key moment in the novel.

9. Create another chapter for an original character who lives at 64 Wilnut Street in *Take the Stairs*. Your story should include the following:
- a theme and purpose.
  - a conflict.
  - a beginning, middle, and end.
  - a climax.
  - description of setting, character, and actions.
  - figurative language.
  - all kinds of images.
  - a title.

Follow these guidelines:

- Use first person point of view.
- Use past tense.
- Consider your audience a 13- or 14-year-old.
- Consider how your story fits into the larger narrative.
- The length should be as long as it takes to tell the story, but 900 words is a guideline.
- Type your story.
- Make sure it's double-spaced.

A short story rubric is included on page 6 of this teacher's guide.

### *Creative Arts Connections*

1. Write a poem from one character's point of view about how he or she feels about the obstacles in his or her life.
2. a. Choose one of the stories from *Take the Stairs*. Find a song that you feel could best be used as the soundtrack or theme song for the story. Print a copy of the lyrics and include the artist's name. Lyrics have to be meaningful, relevant, and must not include inappropriate language.  
  
b. Write an explanation of why the song suits the story. Include the theme of the story and discuss how the song represents that theme and supports the ideas in the story. Discuss how the song relates to the characters in the story. Include quotations to show how the song and the story are related. A sample soundtrack assignment appears on page 7 of this teacher's guide.  
  
c. Karen Krossing was inspired by two songs while writing *Take the Stairs*: "Hands" by Jewel and "Iris" by the Goo Goo Dolls. Listen to the songs and discuss how they relate to the themes of *Take the Stairs*.
3. Write a review of this book as if you were writing it for a newspaper. Remember, your readers will want a description of the book as well as your opinion of it and reasons behind your opinion. When you are done, trade reviews with a partner and pretend you are the editor – the person who has to make the review better. What do you recommend to make the writing more convincing? If you want to go further, you could post your review to a website that includes reviews written by teens.
4. In small groups, act out scenes from the novel. Create a film or video based on the book or an excerpt from the book.

### *Social Studies Connections*

1. Each of the characters in the novel has a major issue to overcome. Choose one character and research more about his or her issue. For example, you might research abuse, theft, racial prejudice, suicide, AIDS, homosexuality, abortion. Create a poster that shows your opinions about the issue.
2. Create a class zine or blog on the challenges of inner-city living. The zine or blog could encompass many forms, from poetry and short stories to illustrations and nonfiction articles. When it is complete, hold a launch party or distribute it to your friends and family. Get them talking about the issues.

Note: These teaching ideas were prepared with contributions from Kathleen Moro of St. Ignatius of Loyola Catholic Secondary School in Oakville, Ontario, and Diane Tursman of Vaughan Secondary School in Thornhill, Ontario.

## Understanding That Language Evolves: Etymologies

Go to the Online Etymology Dictionary: [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com).

When was this online dictionary published? \_\_\_\_\_

Who wrote it? \_\_\_\_\_

Name seven sources from which this work is based.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Define "etymologies." \_\_\_\_\_

Follow the "Introduction and abbreviations" link.

Expand the abbreviation O.E.D. \_\_\_\_\_

What is it? \_\_\_\_\_

Now expand the following abbreviations:

O.E.: \_\_\_\_\_

O.Fr.: \_\_\_\_\_

Ar.: \_\_\_\_\_

L.L.: \_\_\_\_\_

Russ.: \_\_\_\_\_

Discover the languages from which each of these food names originated:

Hamburger: \_\_\_\_\_

Squash: \_\_\_\_\_

Tea: \_\_\_\_\_

Banana: \_\_\_\_\_

Coffee: \_\_\_\_\_

Pepper: \_\_\_\_\_

Cookie: \_\_\_\_\_

Soy: \_\_\_\_\_

Coke: \_\_\_\_\_

Pizza: \_\_\_\_\_

Now use this dictionary to discover something about the meaning of the following names:

Flynn: \_\_\_\_\_

David: \_\_\_\_\_

Jennifer: \_\_\_\_\_

Roger (no need to record the slang): \_\_\_\_\_

Petra: \_\_\_\_\_

(Hint: Can't find it? Try [www.askoxford.com/dictionaries/name\\_dict/](http://www.askoxford.com/dictionaries/name_dict/).)

Can you find the origin of your own name? Are there any unusual meanings associated with it?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Origin: \_\_\_\_\_

Meaning: \_\_\_\_\_

### Short Story Rubric

Criteria	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Idea	More than one element is unclear or weak.	One element is unclear or weak.	Theme is evident, the story has a point, the character undergoes some kind of revelation, and it fits in context of the novel.	Done with impressive originality.
Storytelling	More than one element is unclear or weak.	One element is unclear or weak.	There is a beginning, middle, and end; a conflict is introduced; the story builds to a climax; and the action is resolved.	Completed with interesting detail and pacing.
Description	Not much figurative language appears. It's hard to picture what's going on.	Adequate description.	The setting, the characters, and the action are vividly described using an appropriate level of figurative language. All kinds of imagery are explored.	Completed with very realistic detail and original imagery.
Mechanics	Several errors or inconsistencies.	A few errors or inconsistencies.	The story is told from the first-person point of view, past tense is used consistently, and there are no spelling/grammar errors.	Flawless, with a variety of sentence structures.
Presentation	More than one element is incomplete.	One element is incomplete.	You have considered your audience when writing, the story has a thoughtful title, the work is typed, it is double-spaced, and pages are held together.	Work is polished and you read your story to the class or create an illustration to go with it.
Process	Three or more elements are incomplete.	One or two elements are incomplete.	You have completed all stages of the writing process assigned in a timely fashion.	All stages are complete and you have paid attention to feedback and worked to improve your writing.

### Sample Soundtrack Assignment

I have chosen to use the song "Luka," by Suzanne Vega, as the soundtrack for the short story, "Hide and Seek," by Karen Krossing. The theme of "Hide and Seek" is child abuse or domestic violence. The father of the main character, Petra, has been beating his wife and has begun to beat Petra as well. The song "Luka" is the perfect soundtrack for this story because it is also about the theme of child abuse. In the story Petra talks about how her father had banged her head "with one fist, then the other, and he'd thrown my body around the room" (page 9). Petra is terrified of her father and has learned to see her father's face as "a warning flag in my mind" (page 8). She is clearly terrified of her father's rage. In the song, "Luka," Suzanne Vega writes, "They only hit until you cry, after that you don't ask why." Clearly the theme of child abuse is evident in both the story and the song.

Another way in which the story and song are similar is that they both feature similar characters. Luka and Petra are similar because they are both abused children. Both the song and story are written in the first person. This makes the issue more personal and real. In "Hide and Seek," Petra talks about how she has learned to hide from her father and disappear when he is angry. She also says that she has not told anyone about her father but that Magda "was the only person that I could maybe talk to. That I might be able to trust" (page 4). A similarity between the story and the song is that Luka also does not want to tell anyone. Suzanne Vega writes: "Yes, I think I'm okay, I walked into the door again. Well, if you ask that's what I'll say, And it's not your business anyway" and later she writes, "Just don't ask me how I am." Clearly, both Petra and Luka are uncomfortable with the secret of their abuse and do not wish to speak about it with anyone. In both the story and the song, there seems to be a sense of shame and fear shared by the main characters and a desire to escape and be alone. In order to escape, Petra hops on the back of a pick-up truck, while Luka dreams of being alone "with nothing broken, nothing thrown." Clearly, the main characters in the song and story are very similar. The similarities between both theme and character are why the song "Luka" would make an excellent soundtrack for the short story "Hide and Seek."