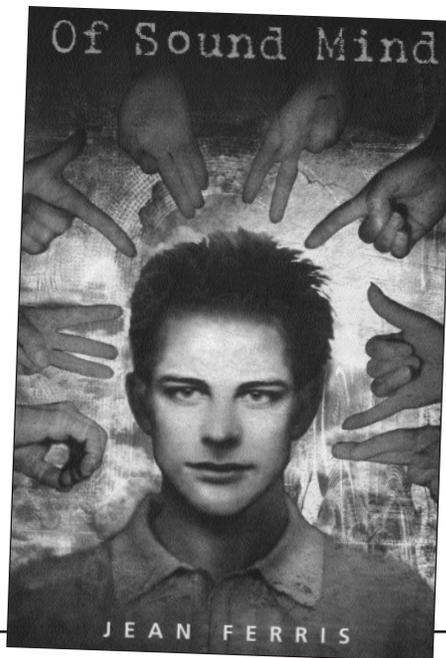
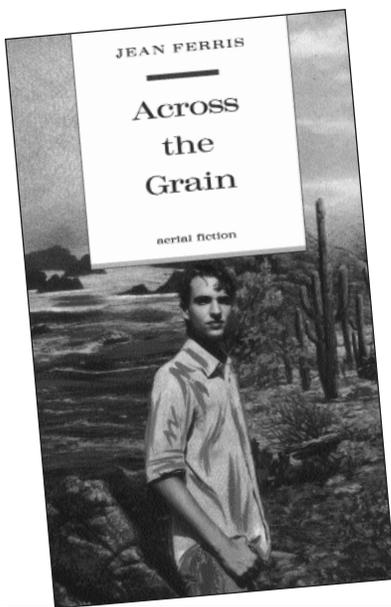


*Teachers' Guide*

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# The Novels of Jean Ferris



The young adult novels of Jean Ferris speak honestly about change and choice – two things that are an inseparable part of growing up. “Adolescence is a time of change,” she has said. “I’m interested in these changes – in the choices we make, the reasons for these choices, and what we can do to recover from the results of bad choices. This is where I find the ideas for my books.”

These thought-provoking ideas, which are relevant to teens’ own lives, are characteristic of her writing, as also are the absorbing stories and the engaging characters whose sharp and funny conversation is a model for the way all kids wish

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they sounded. Another interesting aspect of her work is found in the unusual settings that Jean Ferris researches with energetic creativity.

The shape of the origins of *Across the Grain* is intriguing. On a trip to the desert near their San Diego home, Jean and her husband stopped at a small diner in the nowhere hamlet of Ocotillo Wells, where two teenagers were working, a young woman waiting table and a young man tending the grill behind the counter. “What would it be like to grow up in such a place, with nothing but empty desert all around?” Jean wondered. She asked the young woman and found out that the young man was her brother, and that they had come there from Imperial Beach only a couple of months earlier. But why? And what would happen next? Then the café got busy, and Jean never found out. Weeks later, when she went back, the sister and brother had moved on. “I’ll just have to write their story for myself,” Jean decided. And so she did. In the Author’s Note to *Bad*, she explains how the book grew from an author visit to the Girls’ Rehabilitation Facility in San Diego and the consequent interviews – twice a week for three months – with the teens incarcerated there, background information that gives the novel much authenticity. *Of Sound Mind* had its beginnings in a class she taught in her last year of college, attempting to help deaf kindergartners learn to speak. Their frustration and tantrums convinced her that signing was a better way for deaf people. Years later, in preparation for the book, she visited the offices of Deaf Community Services of San Diego. “The minute I walked in the door I was in a foreign country,” she remembers. An interpreter was assigned to help her talk to deaf people about their lives, an experience she found both strange and enlightening.

The questions that follow can be used as writing prompts or for sparking lively talk in a book club or reading group, or simply for helping a solitary reader explore more deeply the characters and issues in these engrossing and touching young adult novels.

### ***About Across the Grain***

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Even though his sister, Paige, is twenty and Will is seventeen and still in high school, she constantly shrugs off her responsibilities as his guardian and insists that he go along with her sudden harebrained plans, like leaving their beach house to move to the desert and run the Snakebite Café in tiny Agua Seca. There Will has woman trouble with an angry, tough-talking

girl named Mike and delectable but clinging and brainless Cindy. Will and Mike, with the wise help of Sam, a whittler, travel a bumpy course to friendship and, in one hilarious scene, thwart Cindy’s romantic designs on Will. As they help build Sam’s adobe house, and as Sam shares his skill at whittling with Will, all three grow to understand and appreciate one another, and Will learns how to free himself from Paige’s net of obligation and take back his life.

## Discussion Questions for *Across the Grain*

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■ Will has left his beloved beach house and come to the desert with irresponsible Paige because he “*had a legal and moral obligation to.*” [p. 36] How true is this? In what ways is she dependent on him? Do you think she would agree? In what ways is he dependent on her? As the story goes on, how does that change? Why does Will get angry when anyone else criticizes his sister, even if what they say is true? Why does he feel a sense of loss when he has finally taken back his life?

■ Will and Mike have trouble getting along together until Sam explains the different friendship styles of men and women. Men, he says, “*aren’t as comfortable plowing around in each other’s heads, the way a lot of women like to do. And they especially don’t want to plow around in their own feelings, much less someone else’s.*” [pp. 126–27] Do you think this is true? Check with several people of the opposite sex to see if there is a gender difference in their answers. How do men relate best, according to Sam? What is Mike’s reaction to this idea? Should men and women try to change their behaviors, or is it enough to respect each other’s differences?

■ Sam tells Will, “*There’s a home landscape locked in every soul – the place you think of when you think of home.*” [pp. 66–67] Sam’s home landscape is the desert, but Will says his is “*near the ocean.*” [p. 67] What does Will love about the ocean, and what does he later come to appreciate and respect about the desert? What do the two different environments represent to him? What does Mike tell him at the archaeological dig that links desert and sea historically as reverse images? [p. 153] (For a secret joke from Jean Ferris about this contrast, look up the translation of *Agua Seca*.) What is your own home landscape?

■ Will loves the process of carving wood. “*He made the hard straight downward cuts across the grain of the pine practice board, and then the easy shallow sloping cuts with the grain . . .*” [p. 120] What has Sam said to him earlier that makes this passage a symbolic description of Will’s life, as well as the source of the title? [p. 87] Why is the carving of the black dog in the surf significant?

■ Sam handles his guilt and grief over his son’s death by periodic bouts of drinking. Mike and Will each try to help him, but in different ways. Which style of aid do you think is more effective? In what ways do both Mike and Will also mishandle their own troubles with self-destructive reactions? What (or who) is the center of difficulty for each of them? What one healing revelation about that central problem do they give each other?

### *Where to find out more about whittling*

Charles Beiderman and William Johnston. *The Beginner’s Handbook of Woodcarving*. New York: Dover Publications, 1988.

Keith Randich. *Old Time Whittling: An Introductory Text*. Rochester, N.Y.: Keith Randich, 1994.

### *About Bad*

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Dallas’s flighty mother “*knew what a good time was all about*” [p. 3] and it got her killed when her daughter was four. For most of her seventeen years Dallas has lived with her cold and correct father, and she is convinced he resents her as a reminder of her mother. Only when she is with Pam and Sonny and Ray is

the hollow emptiness inside her filled – until the night they hold up a Jiffy-Spot for fun, and Dallas is left holding the gun. The judge sends her to the Girls’ Rehabilitation Center, and there Dallas begins to learn from the other girls about the desperation of life on the streets, and how hard it is to turn your life around when the world has labeled you “bad.”

## Discussion Questions for *Bad*

■ In her Author’s Note, Jean Ferris explains that this book grew out of a series of interviews she did at the Girls’ Rehabilitation Facility in San Diego. The bedtime stories are an actual practice at the facility. In the book, were you surprised at how important this was to the girls? Why do you think they enjoyed it so much? Dallas says, “*The bedtime stories urged us on with poems and fables.*” [p. 178] What are some of the titles of the bedtime readings? Why do you suppose the readers chose these particular stories?

■ “*Habit’s a big part of the criminal life, and habits are hard to break,*” says Connie. [p. 148] What is her answer for this problem? How is this related to what Shatasia says about the routine at the center: “*There’s way too many rules . . . but I still like to know what’s happenin’ next.*” [p. 39]

■ Contrast the blame and disapproval of Dallas’s father toward her with “*the staff’s encouragement and goading [that] indicated we were worth salvaging.*” [p. 169] What is the effect of negative expectations from other people on a person’s self-image? Find some other places in the book where we see this in action.

■ “*The struggle to get where they wanted us to go seemed too hard,*” thinks Dallas. “*Only in Shatasia and in some of the books Kate*

*had given me had I been able to see someone actually making that struggle, seen how painful the effort could be.*” [p. 178] How does she think reading can help her in the future? On the last page of the novel is a list of the books Kate has given her. [p. 182] Have you read any of these? What books would you add that would help a person trying to find her or his way?

■ When Dallas’s father answers only “*I’m your father*” as a reason he might want to visit her, she says “*I need a better answer.*” [p. 96] What is the answer she wants, and why is it so hard for him to realize what it is? Why can’t she bring herself to give him even the slightest clue to what she needs? What does each misunderstand about the other, and what good reasons do they have to be angry?

■ As Dallas leaves the GRC for the group home, she looks at the guidebook to Texas that Nolan has given her and thinks, “*I was going traveling and I needed to know the way.*” [p. 182] Does this mean she is actually going to Texas or something else about her “journey” to find herself? Do you think it is likely that she will make it “on the outs”? How about Shatasia? Toozdae? Valencia? With all the help and good advice they have been given at GRC, why is it still so hard for all these girls to build new lives for themselves?

## To Find Out More about Kids in Jail

### Books:

Jack Gantos. *Hole in My Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.

Walter Dean Myers. *Monster*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.

Stanley “Tookie” Williams. *Life in Prison*. Lancaster, Calif.: SeaStar/Chronicle Books, 2001.

**Web sites:**

The Beat Within: Writing and Art from the Inside.  
*www.thebeatwithin.org/news/*

A weekly online newsletter outlet for the thoughts, stories, opinions, and ideas of incarcerated youth expressed in striking poetry and art.

“I’m Arrested. Now What?”

*www.ocgov.com/Probation/eArrested/index.asp*

A detailed step-by-step description of what happens to a minor in Orange County, California, who commits a crime and is taken to jail to be booked.

Juvenile Hall Literacy Program

*http://write2read.aclibrary.org/juvenilehall/main.asp*

A program of book talks and author visits to Juvenile Hall in Alameda County, California, has had dramatic results. Here the readers talk about it.

## About *Of Sound Mind*

Theo’s mother, Palma, father, Thomas, and little brother, Jeremy, are all deaf – Theo is the only hearing person in his family. He is needed to interpret in their interactions with the world, especially by his imperious and demanding mother, a famous sculptor. But now that he is a high school senior, Theo bitterly resents these responsibilities and feels used by his family. When his solid, sensible father has a stroke, Theo must manage everything, and the burden becomes almost unbearable as he sees his plans for studying mathematics at MIT slipping away. The only person he can talk to about his guilt at feeling resentful is beautiful, nurturing Ivy, also the child of a deaf parent. But she keeps telling him things he doesn’t want to hear – and his anger is getting in the way of the love he is beginning to feel for her.

## Discussion Questions for *Of Sound Mind*

■ Although Jean Ferris reminds us that this is “*a fictional narrative, not a factual discussion of the complexities of deafness*” [Author’s Note], the information in the novel about signing and the special world of the deaf is fascinating. It is especially interesting that American Sign Language is not English but has its own grammar and expressive possibilities. For instance, Palma’s selfishness is conveyed by the way “*her hand smacked into her chest in the sign for me*” [p. 6] when she demands Theo’s help. What other ways of shading the emotion in a signed communication do we see in the book? What other signs have you learned from watching these characters “talk”? Try making some of them yourself.

■ Theo jokes with his little brother, Jeremy, that sign is “*the only language that allows you to talk with your mouth full.*” [p. 77] Find some of the other advantages of sign over spoken communication in the novel. What do you think a deaf person would see as some of the advantages of speaking with the mouth rather than the hands, other than the obvious fact that most people understand spoken speech? What else about the world of the deaf were you surprised to learn in this book?

■ When Theo tries to find a word that describes their mother to Jeremy, he settles for “*impatient,*” although lots of stronger adjectives go through his head. [p. 9] What other words would you use to describe her behavior and personality? Why is it ironic that she takes the position that “*deafness elevated people, made them more sensitive and attentive, more observant, more appreciative*”? [p. 144] By contrast, how is her attitude toward “hearers” different?

■ Ivy loves to nurture people by cooking delicious food for them. When she and Theo quarrel, how does he explain the psychological meaning of that behavior to her in a true but hurtful way? What realization on his part later makes him see that her behavior is okay? Are there home-cooked foods that make *you* feel nurtured and cared for? Can you think of a time when this food was especially comforting?

■ Theo is at first unable to act on the truth about his future that Ivy tells him: that to save himself he must let go of some of what he sees as his responsibilities. Why does he find this so hard to accept? How does it help when after Thomas's death he finally comes to understand his parents' relationship and the feelings that lie behind Palma's behavior? He wonders, "*What would Palma have been like if she could hear? Still insecure?*" [p. 172] What surprising revelation about deafness and his family does this line of thought bring him? And in the end how does Hazel's wise treatment of Palma show him a way to live peaceably with a prima donna?

### ***Where to find out more about American Sign Language***

#### ***Web sites:***

A Basic Guide to ASL

*www.masterstech-home.com/ASLDict.html*

A brief sign language dictionary, including numbers and fingerspelling.

Michigan State University American Sign Language Browser (needs AOL Quick-Time)

*http://commtechlab.msu.edu/sites/aslweb/browser.htm*

A dictionary of signs with small videos to show the movement.

ASL Fingerspelling

*http://where.com/scott.net/asl/*

A very clear on-screen presentation of the signs for the letters of the alphabet, with movement of the hands. Also fingerspelling for any word you choose, plus a short self-test.

What Is American Sign Language?

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders

*www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing/asl.asp*

Some fascinating facts about the origin, history, and use of ASL.

## About the Author

Jean Ferris grew up as the daughter of an army doctor, which meant she had to move around a lot and went to three different high schools. She was lonely always being the new girl, and she turned for comfort to books. In each new place she tried to figure out clues to the local ways by eavesdropping and watching people, and she kept a diary of her thoughts and impressions that soon became the basis for stories that she began to write for herself.



photo © Jon Lyons

At Stanford University in California she earned a master's degree in speech pathology and audiology (the study of hearing) that turned out to be "a total waste of time," she admits, because she didn't like the work and wasn't suited to it. "I didn't even notice," she says on her Web site, "that whenever I had room in my schedule, I took an English class. I didn't even notice that I was still writing piles of stories – after all, I'd been doing that since I was seven."

After college Jean married lawyer Alfred Ferris in 1962, settled down in San Diego, and had two daughters, both of them now teachers. Not until the girls were in junior high did Jean write her first young adult novel and get published at last. With that book she found her literary voice and went on to produce sixteen novels for teens, many of them award winners.

Jean takes her role as a writer for young adults very seriously. She looks back on her own adolescence, she told the editors of *Authors & Artists for Young Adults*, and "I remember all the things that worried and confused me – and how much I wished I had a sympathetic

grown-up I could talk to. Through my books I try to be that sympathetic grown-up for today's teenagers, who have things to be concerned about that could never even have occurred to my own teenage mind."

### ***For more on Jean Ferris:***

#### ***Articles in reference books:***

*Authors & Artists for Young Adults*. Volume 38. Gale, 2001.

*Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*. Volume 38. Gale, 1999. Pp. 129–30.

*St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers*. 2nd edition. St. James Press, 1999.

*Something About the Author*. Volume 56. Gale, 1989. Pp. 47–48.

#### ***Web sites:***

[www.fsgkidsbooks.com](http://www.fsgkidsbooks.com)

Contains more information about the author's books.

[www.jeanferris.com](http://www.jeanferris.com)

Jean Ferris's own home page, featuring more information about the author and her body of work.

[www.authors4teens.com](http://www.authors4teens.com)

(subscription database)

Features an interview with the author.

***Across the Grain***

Aerial Paperback: 0-374-40057-1 · \$6.95

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An IRA Young Adults' Choice**

***Bad***

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An ALA Quick Pick for Young Adults  
The California Young Readers Medal  
An IRA Young Adults' Choice  
An NCSS-CBC Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies**

***Of Sound Mind***

ISBN 0-374-35580-0 · \$16.00

Sunburst Paperback: 0-374-45584-8 · \$6.95

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This guide was prepared by Patty Campbell, a critic, librarian, writer, editor, and teacher in the field of young adult literature, and winner of the Grolier Award from the American Library Association and the ALAN Award from the National Council of Teachers of English.

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