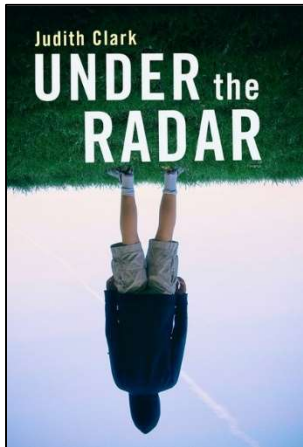


***Under the Radar* by Judith Clark Teacher's Guide**

Created by Martha Brack Martin with support from Judith Clark and the Cormorant Team.



Gunnar is eagerly anticipating his last year of high school in his small town in rural Alberta. He has high hopes of being picked as wrestling captain, and while he doesn't love most of his classes, he's looking forward to Phys Ed and the social aspects of high school with his close friends. What he's not looking forward to is keeping his sexuality a secret for one more year – but he feels he has no choice. While his incredibly close family would likely support him, he isn't willing to take that step in his close-knit community. Unfortunately, life often goes off-script, and Gunnar soon realizes his plans may have to change. With the help of his new friend Aidan, Gunnar learns that being true to yourself is a whole lot more important than staying “under the radar.”

Themes

Some key themes and “big ideas” in this book include:

- What do we hide behind to protect ourselves?
- Homophobia
- Bullying
- Family
- Finding your true self
- Coming of age

The Plot

One more year. That's all Gunnar has to wait until graduation. More importantly, it's one more year until he'll feel safe to come out.

Gunnar has kept his sexuality a secret — only his twin sister knows he's gay. Coming out now would make him the target of homophobic bullies at his school. But a year is a long time, especially when life starts moving at its own pace, and Gunnar meets guys he wants to date.

Set in rural Alberta, *Under the Radar* is the uplifting story of a teen who dreams of a life in which he can be himself.

The Setting

This story takes place in the farm country of southern Alberta, in the present.

What Kind of Reader Will Love This Book? One who...

- Enjoys stories told in first-person narrative with a strong, self-aware voice
- Is interested in stories about coming out and accepting one's self
- Likes coming of age stories set in contemporary times and with realistic issues
- Comes from a rural or farming background, or would like to know more about that lifestyle
- Loves sports and working out
- Is fascinated by fashion, design and modelling
- Appreciates stories with strong, solid families

Pre-Teaching Prep

Content Warning:

Some characters in this book deal with homophobia and assault because of their sexual orientation. Consider the experiences of your students. Ensure all students reading the book are aware of the content and allow them to privately choose an alternative if they wish. To better prepare yourself to teach the subject matter, explore websites such as this one:

<https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>

Depending on where you live, there may be words or expressions in the book with which your students may not be familiar. Encourage the creation of a list where students can post these words or phrases. Then discuss them as a class.

Canada's west had a large influx of Scandinavian immigrants in the 19th and 20th centuries. The characters in this novel are likely descendants of those immigrants. Students may wonder at the names of the characters, so you may want to introduce this before you start the book.

Chapter Questions (for Independent Work or Class Discussion)

Pick and choose the questions that work for *your* students in *your* classroom. Use as many or as few as you like. All page number references are for the original paperback edition, 2020.

Somewhere Under the Rainbow

1. The author begins the book with Gunnar and his friends discussing the events of the party the night before. What do we learn from this conversation about the type of guy Gunnar is? Explain using specific examples from the text to support your ideas.
2. The author has created Gunnar as a very self-aware character. Where do we see this in the first chapter?

3. Gunnar's trademark hairstyle stands out in his high school and community. What does his choice of style say about his true personality? Explain.
4. On page 4, Gunnar describes his feelings about being on the wrestling team. The coach talks to the team about the "mental game." Gunnar reflects, "I thought it meant not letting your head make you lose. That's the real battle – the one with yourself." What do you think Gunnar means?

A Not-Boring Sunday Night

5. On page 9, little brother Tor embarrasses Gunnar by asking, "Would you have kissed Cari if she wasn't drunk?" Have you ever had a totally mortifying moment thanks to a friend or family member? How did you handle it? Share the story with a friend or the class.
6. How would you describe Gunnar's family? Use evidence from the text and your own ideas.
7. Gunnar lives in a small farming community in southern Alberta, far from any big cities. Do you think it would be easier or harder to be gay in this kind of small-town setting? Why?

Make Hay While the Sun Shines

8. How does the author show that Gunnar loves his prairie homelife, even if he doesn't love the idea of being a farmer? Find two examples from this chapter that prove this.

Aidan

9. The author uses italics in this chapter to show us Gunnar's inner thoughts. How do those thoughts contrast with the image Gunnar is trying to project?
10. Write a brief "inner monologue" from Aidan's point of view in this chapter. Be prepared to justify what you've written.

Tall Tall Charlene's

11. On page 26, Sam asks Gunnar, "Everything cool?" Gunnar realizes Sam isn't noticing the gay flirting that just happened, but instead was "...thinking about what happened in June." What do you think happened in June?
12. Gunnar tells the story about a funeral he attended with his father. He concludes by saying, "...I don't want to go through life feeling like I'm in jeans at a funeral" (p. 27). In your opinion:
 - a. How important is it in high school to feel like you fit in?
 - b. Do only people on the margins of high school feel like they don't fit in or does everybody feel this way?

Explain your thoughts.

13. How important is the encounter with Blondie to Gunnar? Why?

Thrown to the Fashion Wolves

14. How do you think Aidan is feeling about the change in trip plans? Explain.
15. Make a prediction about how you think the shopping day will go. Prove your prediction with references to the text and your own ideas.

Shop till Your Head Explodes

16. Earlier in the book Gunnar says, “Fashion was a language I didn’t speak” (p. 21). In this chapter, he says “Fashion was a language I couldn’t speak” (p. 32). Why might the author make a point of repeating this idea? Share your ideas with the class.
17. Do you think Aidan knows – or even suspects – Gunnar is gay? Why?
18. On page 36, Aidan gives Gunnar advice on being confident in his clothing choices. He says, “Fashion isn’t about trying to be the center of attention.” Instead he says “...it’s like you’re having a conversation with the world.” Consider your school community. Do you think many of your peers would agree with Aidan? What about those in pop culture? Discuss.

Sweet Tea

19. How important is it, in your opinion, for Gunnar to see healthy gay relationships like that of Parker and Derek? Why?

Like a Date, but Not Really

20. Gunnar is left at the end of the chapter, wondering “What just happened?” (p. 45). What do you think was going on under the surface in this chapter? Explain.

Incarceration, Day One

21. We learn in this chapter that Brody’s father is against homosexuality.
 - a. How does the author use this information to further flesh out Brody’s character?
 - b. Do you believe prejudice can be taught or untaught? Discuss your ideas with the class.
22. What does Gunnar mean when he describes Rawdon’s tattoos as “none of them the kind that middle-class kids who want to be edgy get” (p. 49)?
23. Why do you think Aidan might have a “disappointed look on his face” (p. 52) at the end of this chapter?

Catastrophe (Second Day of Classes)

24. Gunnar saves Aidan but injures Brody in the process. How do you feel about what happened?
25. What would you have done if you were Gunnar in the same circumstances?
26. Gunnar says, “I wasn’t supposed to fight. I hadn’t thought twice. I hadn’t thought at all. But it wasn’t fighting. It was defending. Not fighting” (p. 59). Why do you think Gunnar is so concerned about fighting? Is there a difference between “fighting” and “defending”?
27. How do you feel about Gunnar’s parents’ reaction to the situation? Explain.

That Day in June

28. We finally learn what “happened in June.” Gunnar describes the event in detail with his usual self-awareness, yet when he joins the fight, he simply says, “I don’t remember much after that” (p. 67). Why can’t Gunnar remember? How is this like the fight with Brody?
29. When Gunnar joined the fight against the five guys in town, what do you think motivated him the most? Why?
30. Leader Boy and his friends use homophobic slurs when they see Gunnar in town. How do you feel when you hear words like “fag”? Do you ever say anything when you hear someone using gay slurs or other discriminatory terms about race, religion, etc.? Why or why not?

Consequences

31. For Gunnar, sports are everything. They are the only part of school he likes, as we learned in the earlier chapters. He clearly doesn’t want to be removed from his Phys Ed class, but he gives in. What do you think about his reasons?
32. Predict how Gunnar’s friends and family will react to the consequences of the fight. Prove your prediction with evidence from the text and your own ideas.

Barn Therapy

33. How does Gunnar “grieve” when he gets home? How would you deal with your emotions if you had a big disappointment? Share your coping strategies with the class.
34. How does Gunnar’s family support him? Are you surprised by this? Why or why not?

Layers and Layers of Misery Cake

35. At dinner, Gunnar says, “Caleb’s private life was his. He should be able to decide who finds out about it. I hadn’t thought we had anything in common at all, but I was wrong” (p. 81). Explain what Gunnar means in this quote.
36. Gunnar assumes Caleb’s father has beaten him in punishment for the fight. What was the real reason? In your opinion, what does this say about Caleb’s father?
37. Gunnar comments that rejoining society and listening to his messages weren’t as bad as he had feared, because he wasn’t on social media.
 - a. In your experience, how does social media affect situations like Gunnar’s?
 - b. How easy would it be for kids to avoid social media like Gunnar does?
 - c. What advice would you give kids who find themselves being judged on their socials?
38. Sam manages to break through Gunnar’s self-pity. Are you surprised by this? What makes him successful, do you think?

In Which Riding Saves Everything

39. There are several similes, metaphors, and examples of other poetic devices in this chapter. Pick three, cite them correctly, and define which poetic device they represent.

40. Why do you think Aidan “shook his head and looked away, still smiling” in the last sentence of the chapter? Explain.

Wrestling with Nanaimo Bars

41. Gunnar finds out Jason has been chosen as captain of the wrestling team. While he’s happy for his friend, it reminds him of what he’s lost.
- Have you ever wanted something really badly and not received it? Share your story with a friend.
 - How hard is it to “put on a brave face” when you are disappointed and just “get over it”?
 - What does it say about Gunnar’s personality and his friendship with Jason that he is able to still be happy for his friend?

The New World

42. Gunnar says, “My new clothes felt like a disguise: I was still trying to be the guy who dressed like this for real” (p. 97). In what other ways is Gunnar “disguising” himself? Use evidence from the text and your own ideas.
43. Are you surprised Cari asked Gunnar to eat lunch with her? How would you have responded if you were him?
44. Gunnar chooses to stay with Becca as his project partner, despite Cari approaching him. What does this tell us about the kind of person Gunnar is? What does it say about Cari?

Possibilities

45. Gunnar works for Derek and Parker after school, then runs into Sam’s dad when he comes home. How does Sam’s dad feel about Gunnar helping the two men? Are you surprised? Why or why not?
46. Why do you think the author purposely placed both encounters on the same day, one right after the other? Explain.

Discoveries

47. Predict why Parker was so unnerved by the medal and the photograph Gunnar finds in one of the boxes, and explain your reasons for your prediction.
48. The GSA meeting keeps surfacing in Gunnar’s conversations throughout the day. Why do you think he is so reluctant to attend?

Nothing Blows Up

49. How does the author show that Aidan and Gunnar are on the same wavelength in this chapter? Find two examples that demonstrate this.

Malachite Dreams

50. Would you say Gunnar is a confident person? What about Aidan? Explain your ideas.

Life Keeps on Keeping On

51. Are you surprised that Ryder is now the focus of attention in the football group, rather than Brody? Why or why not?
52. If Myk and Jason are such close friends of Gunnar, why do you think they haven't figured out that he is gay?

The Show

53. On a scale of 1-10, how smooth do you think Gunnar was during his encounter with Ty? What advice would you give him, going forward?

A Guy with Ice-Blue Eyes

54. Compare the Gunnar in this chapter with the Gunnar from the earliest chapters of the book. In what ways has he grown and matured? In what other ways do you notice he is different?

Eyes Like Mine

55. Gunnar is worried about disappointing his father. Based on what you've seen in the book so far, do you think he needs to worry?
56. Predict how other people close to Gunnar might react to the news that he's gay. Share your ideas with others in the class.

The Date

57. On page 134, why do Sam and his friends relax once Gunnar starts talking about Ty's horse? Explain.
58. Gunnar is worried about why Gary had an "assessing look" at Marky's (p. 134). What do you think caused Gary's look? Prove your answer with details from the story and your own ideas.

Ty Day Two

59. Gary explains how he and Sam spent their time the day before. Are you surprised by Sam's behaviour? Why or why not?
60. How do you feel about Ty as a potential boyfriend for Gunnar?

Life, Hurry Up

61. Have you ever wished for life to "hurry up?" What were you most anxious to do, and why?

Revelations

62. What do you think Aidan was going to say before the family came in the door at the end of the chapter?

Old Good Stuff, New Good Stuff

63. Tor is a classic little brother, and the author uses his character to provide some lighter, humorous moments in the story. How important is it for a story to have both heavy and light elements?

Eighteen

64. Think about what you would expect your eighteenth birthday to be like, including gifts, food, and plans. Now compare that to Elin and Gunnar's. How are they the same? How do they differ?
65. What do you think is behind the look Collier gives Gunnar – the one Gunnar “couldn't decipher” (p. 155)? Explain your thoughts.

Ty Arrives

66. What do you think of Gunnar's mom's rules about cooking and laundry? How does her philosophy differ from the “spy drone parents”? Which do you prefer, and why?
67. Ty explains the challenges of being out of the house and away at school. How do you think you would handle what he describes? Why?
68. Gunnar explains he likes “real things” (p. 161) and argues that social media only shows “what you want people to see.” Do you agree with him? Why does he feel hypocritical when he says it? Explain.

Treats and Tricks

69. Think about the various encounters Ty and Gunnar have with other people in this chapter. As dates go, how would you rate this one of Ty and Gunnar's? Discuss your rating with the rest of the class.
70. What do you predict might have happened if Ty and Gunnar didn't agree to take Cari to her grandmother's house? Why?
71. How do you feel about the way Ty let Gunnar know they wouldn't be exclusive? Are you surprised by Gunnar's reaction? Why or why not?

Jet-Propelled

72. Why do you think this chapter is titled “Jet-Propelled”?
73. When Myk confronts Gunnar outside the house, Gunnar manages to hold his temper despite Myk punching him. Then Myk figures out Gunnar's secret:

“No way.” My best friend from kindergarten and I stared at each other.

“You're a fag?” What was I hearing? Shock? Disbelief? Something worse?

The words hung between us.

I took a breath – and realized I'd stopped breathing. “I prefer gay.” (p. 173)

- a. Which do you think hurt Gunnar more, the punch or the word “fag”?
- b. Do you think the pain was worse because Myk was his best friend or might it have been less? Share your thoughts with a friend or the class.
74. How do each of Gunnar's family members react to the news? Are you surprised?

Reverberations

75. Compare the conversation Gunnar has with Aidan to the text conversation he has with Ty in this chapter. What do you notice?
76. "I'd lost a best friend, been ejected from the closet, and didn't even have a boyfriend to show for it," Gunnar says (p. 181). What advice would you give Gunnar?

First Day Out

77. Aidan tells Gunnar, "Be as you wish to seem" (p. 184). How do you feel about this advice? How does it help Gunnar?
78. Gunnar describes how the kids in his classes respond to seeing him. Would you say this is an accurate way teens handle situations like this? Why or why not?
79. On page 185, why do you think Collier says "thank you" to Elliott?
80. Gunnar finds support in unexpected places throughout his day. He also finds conflict where he did expect it. Create a Venn Diagram, sorting his various positive and negative encounters in the day. Are there any that belong in the middle, in your opinion? Share your diagram and reasons with the class.

Reveal

81. We learn more about Derek and Parker's relationship in this chapter. Why does Parker think it took more bravery to be Derek, coming to rural Alberta, Canada, than to head to Vietnam?

Alliances

82. Gunnar finally makes it to the GSA, though not without hesitation. On his way he sees Brody, who doesn't act the way Gunnar expects. Why do you think Brody is in the library? Why does he look down at this tablet and turn red, in your opinion? Explain.
83. Gunnar notices Collier and Aidan together as usual. On page 195 he wonders, "Was he *with* Collier or were they just friends?" What do you think?
84. At the end of the chapter, Gunnar reaches out to Aidan. "I pulled out my phone and thought about how I could find out what I wanted to know." What do you think Gunnar wants to know? Use evidence from the text and your own ideas to prove your theory.

Rapprochement

85. How do you feel about Myk's apology to Gunnar? Share your ideas with a partner or the class.
86. Coach Mac is shocked to see Myk with Gunnar at the table where the GSA kids sat. What would you do if you were Myk or Gunnar and had the opportunity to further confront Coach Mac's prejudices at that moment? How successful do you think you would be? Explain.

Gift Exchange

87. It would have been easy for Aidan to buy Gunnar a nice shirt or for Gunnar to just buy Aidan a cookbook (or something else). Why does the author instead have them both create something for the other? Explain your thoughts.

Break(s)

88. Gary and Gunnar talk about Sam while they work on the old farmhouse. What do you think about Sam's choices? Imagine you are Gary or Gunnar. Create an imaginary text exchange between you and Sam. What would you say? How would he respond? Remember to write in the voice of each character.
89. Gunnar and Aidan text through the holidays, but Gunnar seems concerned. What is bothering him, in your opinion? Do you think he should be concerned?

Brandon

90. Why do you think Aidan brought Brandon to meet Gunnar? Explain your reasoning.
91. What does Aiden mean when he says, "I translated" (p. 214)?

Signposts

92. Gunnar has an epiphany when Becca mentions he should go to cooking school (p. 216). Have you ever had that same feeling where you realize something just "fits" that you hadn't considered before?
- If you have, describe your experience. What did you do about it?
 - If you haven't, describe what you think Gunnar should do.
93. We are beginning to clearly see how Gunnar feels about Aidan, even if he hasn't figured it out yet himself. Give three examples from recent chapters that show Gunnar's true feelings.

Prairie Seasons

94. Are you surprised Gunnar agrees to be Aidan's model for the competition? Would he have done it back in the first part of the book, do you think? What does this show us about his character?
95. Do you think Gunnar recognizes how he is feeling about Aidan? Why or why not?

Spring is Coming

96. Why is it not surprising that Gunnar is only able to nail down his modeling walk when he thinks of animals, not people?
97. Gunnar reflects that he is "supposed to be paying a price for being different" (p. 228) and suspects people at school aren't happy that he doesn't care what they think. How do you feel about his reasoning? Use your own experiences and details from the book to explain your feelings.
98. Compare the way the basement of Gunnar's house is used at the beginning of the novel, to the way it is used in this chapter. The setting is the same, but what is different? What's the author saying by choosing the same location but changing the other elements?

In the Headlights

99. Rawdon helps Gunnar out yet again in this chapter. Explain what happens.

Fashion Daze

100. Gunnar and Aidan clearly have some romantic tension between them. Who do you think will acknowledge it first? Why?

Hot Zone

101. Did the way Gunnar and Aidan address their romantic tension go the way you predicted it would? How did you feel about this chapter?

Gentling

102. Why is Aidan so uncertain about whether Gunnar is sure about them being a couple now?
103. Gunnar figures out how to convince Aidan by using what he knows about gentling a horse. How does this fit with their standing joke about Aidan needing to translate Gunnar?

The New Us

104. How do you know when you are really growing up? What criteria would you use? Discuss your thoughts with the class.

Tethers

105. Elin and Gunnar discuss some deep things in this chapter. Do you agree with the advice Gunnar gives Elin? Do you agree that you “can’t build your life around what might happen” (p. 256)? Explain.

Getting It

106. Think of the different meanings of the expression “getting it.” How does this title fit with the events in this chapter?
107. Are you surprised by what Gunnar learns about Brody and about Coach Mac? Why or why not?

Détente

108. What does it say about Gunnar that he is so easily able to move past the loss of his friendship with Sam? Explain.

Real

109. Are you surprised by the destination Gunnar and Aidan have chosen for their graduation trip? Where would you pick to travel in their shoes? Why?

110. Earlier in the book, Gunnar realizes he wants a relationship like Parker and Derek have. Do you think this relationship with Aidan might lead to that? On what do you base your opinion?
111. When Gunnar answers, "I'm ready" on the last page of the book, what question(s) do you think he's really answering? Explain.

Discussion Questions and Essay Topics

These topics can be used for the traditional assessment options of discussion or essay.

- a) Choose the theme of "family." Discuss how this theme is used in the book, citing specific examples from the text to discuss the author's purpose.
- b) Discuss the theme of "Appearance versus Reality" in the book. How many different examples can you find where something was not the way it appears or things are disguised?
- c) Throughout the book, Gunnar's encounters or relationships with other characters in the story cause him to rethink his circumstances, make other choices, and change the direction of his life. Select at least three of these relationships/encounters from the book. Explain what changes they caused, why they caused those changes, and what Gunnar learned from these encounters or relationships.
- d) As you were reading, did you have any personal connections to any of the events or characters in the book? Explain your connections and the scenes in the book that prompted them. How does making connections affect your understanding and enjoyment of the stories you read?
- e) If you could ask Judith Clark about her writing work or specifically about *Under the Radar*, what would you ask her? Create a list of questions and share them with the group.

Culminating Activities

Give students the opportunity to make connections to the world and themselves, as well as to other texts, and to choose their own way of demonstrating them. Here are some other activities to consider once you finish the novel. Students could choose one or more they feel personally speaks to them or you can assign specific ones as you wish.

Fashion Show

Aidan and Collier both want to be fashion designers and compete in the Fashion Daze event in Calgary. In the book, like Gunnar, we learn more about the career of fashion design and what it takes to be successful as a designer.

Imagine you are a fashion designer and have made it to Fashion Daze. What would your fashion narrative be? How about your colour palette? What kind of model would best suit your line?

Create a portfolio of your "line," including your collection's palette, fashion narrative, and sketches of the clothes themselves, or a marketing campaign featuring the clothing line.

Now You're Cooking

Gunnar never considers cooking could be a career until Becca mentions it, yet he loves making his family's recipes and being creative in the kitchen. Do you have family recipes you like to make? Are you a secret chef?

Create a dish you love to cook or eat. Bring it and the recipe you used to class. Host a potluck with the class creations and share the recipes in a class-created cookbook. (You might even decide to donate a copy of the cookbook to the school library.)

Weird Careers 101

Gunnar and his classmates are trying to figure out what they want to do after graduation. Most have plans in place, featuring traditional careers...but what are some non-traditional careers they could choose?

Research the most interesting and unusual career you can think of. What does it pay? Where does someone go to do it? What kind of qualifications does a person need to do it? What kinds of skills are required to excel at it?

Create a presentation about your career to share with the class. Alternatively, you can write an advertisement an employer would post for this career, including all the same information.

Be Social

Gunnar has no use for social media, and his experiences in the novel certainly don't convince him to feel differently. Now that he's moving away from home and starting his career, however, he might decide it's time to finally join.

What social medium would fit him best, in your opinion? Who would he follow? Who would follow him? What would he post?

Create a fake account for Gunnar, modeling it after the real social medium you've chosen. Then create some content (a series of posts, a story, etc.) that Gunnar's fake account might have. Be creative and have fun, but remember to stay in character!

Pick a Pitch

In the chapter titled "Discoveries," Gunnar is struggling to find a novel for his book report in English. Imagine you are a classmate in that class. What would you recommend for him? Why?

Imagine you have been asked to suggest a novel to Gunnar. Prepare a quick pitch about the book you have chosen for him. Be sure to include why it would appeal to him and use your most persuasive language. Then give your "book pitch" out loud in front of your class.

When everyone is finished pitching their books, take a vote to determine which book should win as the "best book" for Gunnar.

Exploring the Same Themes in Different Texts

After reading *Under the Radar*, consider reading one of the books Gunnar reads in English class, *The Inexplicable Logic of My Life* or *Dante and Aristotle Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. You

could also consider a different title by the same author, Benjamin Alire Saenz. Why do you think these books appealed to Gunnar? How are some of the same themes as those in *Under the Radar* repeated in these stories? How are they handled differently?

Create a presentation comparing the themes in the books or share your ideas orally in a class discussion. Alternatively, you can channel your inner actor and do a book report on one of these books as if you were Gunnar.

Take Action

The GSA group was formed to fill a need that Elin and Katie recognized in their school community. Does your school community have a group that supports LGBTQ+ students? Is there some *other* group in your school or local community that could benefit from support in some way?

Think about what your school or local community lacks, in terms of ways to support all or some of its members. Then think about how you could initiate or create a way to address this need. Make a plan that considers what steps will be required and who needs to give approval, then make a presentation to sell your idea.

Interview with the Author



Martha: Hey Judith! Thanks for chatting with me about *Under the Radar*!

Judith: My pleasure!

Martha: What prompted you to write a book about a kid navigating his journey of coming out?

Judith: So many things! One motivation was the battle over Bill 10 and GSAs in Alberta in 2014 and 2015. Another was a memory of the many LGBTQ+ friends I made at university, most of whom were not out in their small rural towns because they didn't feel it was safe. True, this was a long time ago (1980s), but I'm not sure circumstances have changed that much for teens in some rural, conservative environments.

Martha: The province of Alberta, and the Canadian west in general, has a reputation for being very conservative. Yet you wrote a book about a gay kid coming out and placed it right there. Can you talk about that a bit?

Judith: I mentioned the rural LGBTQ+ kids I met at university. Because most LGBTQ+ people flew "under the radar" where I lived, many people assumed they didn't know any or thought that they only existed in some faraway big city. If people don't realize that they know LGBTQ+ people, they may think LGBTQ+ people aren't part of their community or aren't people they should care about. I wanted my book to make it clear that LGBTQ+ people are everywhere.

Even if you don't know any (or think you don't), they live in small towns and on farms too, I promise you.

Martha: What is your writing process like? Are you an "outliner" or a "fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants" kind of writer?

Judith: I start with a character and begin to build a world around that person. As the world becomes clearer to me, I create scenes and plan narrative arcs. I'll jot notes that can end up looking like outlines, but I like to leave room to surprise myself along the way. That's the fun part!

Martha: Did you stick closely to your initial vision for this book, or did you find yourself making significant changes?

Judith: My sense of the characters deepened over time, which sometimes changed my understanding of what a given character would do in a specific situation. Some plot elements did a complete reversal. For example, it took me a while to realize Ryder was manipulating Brody and then I had to figure out why. That understanding changed Brody's story arc.

Martha: I love the character of Gunnar! I love that he is this great, athletic, popular kid who knows he's gay. That's a different character than I've seen in other "coming out" books I've read before. I also love that he has a great supportive family – whether they know he's gay or not. Again, that's not the stereotypical "coming out" trope.

Judith: I loved writing Gunnar-- his embrace of nature, the way he cares for the family's horses, how he protects vulnerable people.

Martha: Another thing I love about Gunnar is how self-aware he is. His narrative voice is so fun to read. And so believable! You're a middle-aged woman, yet you write a very authentic male high school gay kid's experience. That takes talent.

Judith: Thank you, but I have to admit there's a little bit of me that is still age 13 — the bit that writes about wads of horse snot and filter-free little brothers. There's also a part of me that can tap into memories of high school, like going to a dance with my friends. The clothes, hair styles, and music may change, but those teenage feelings are universal.

Martha: Aidan's a great character too. I hesitate to think how different Gunnar's life would have been if Aidan hadn't moved to town (and if Elin hadn't coordinated their connecting!) I absolutely *loved* their relationship. I love how they come together and learn to see each other – or "translate" each other. You must be a true romantic.

Judith: Let's just say I reread Jane Austen's *Persuasion* every year. Every. Single. Year.

Martha: On what town did you base Valgard in southern Alberta?

Judith: Valgard is a mash-up of several towns in Alberta. I had fun looking at student handbooks online and seeing how rural high schools in Alberta presented themselves on their websites. Some things seem exactly the same as they were when I was in school but others are *so* not!

Martha: Speaking of settings, the basement gym was an interesting choice. I feel like you were describing one that actually exists. Am I right?

Judith: Gunnar’s basement is far better equipped and much bigger than my exercise space at home, but in my office, I have an elliptical trainer, a treadmill, and a stationary bicycle. Alberta can have temperatures where exposed skin will freeze quickly outside, so if you want to stay in shape when there’s an extreme cold warning, you find a way. For some people that’s going to a pool or a gym. For me it’s exercising at home.

Martha: I’ve also been wanting to ask, are you a foodie or a secret clothing designer? You seem to have a lot of knowledge about both of those fields. Where did that come from?

Judith: I love to cook. The lentil soup and focaccia Gunnar and Aidan prepare are actual recipes I make all the time.

I like fashion and enjoy reading *Vogue* and *GQ* and style sections in online publications. While researching for *Under the Radar* I watched lots of London Fashion Show videos of men on the catwalk and listened to interviews with models and designers. Fashion is a fascinating “language” that I want to understand, but I myself am not fashionable at all. At home — yoga pants or leggings. On errands, jeans or shorts depending on the weather. I only wish I could dress like Gunnar.

Martha: Well, I’m sure Gunnar’s clothing choices will inspire some of your readers to take a greater interest in what they’re wearing. What else do you hope to inspire in your readers as they turn the last page?

Judith: I hope they’ll try something they’d like to do that challenges them or frightens them a little. And I hope they won’t let their friendship firewalls cut them off from great potential new friends.

About Judith Clark

Judith Clark is a former librarian with a Master of Library and Information Science from the University of Texas and a Master of Arts from the University of Arkansas. Clark was born in Arkansas and moved to Alberta in 1997. She is a playwright and has also published adult novels under a pseudonym. *Under the Radar* is her first young adult novel.

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