



## Dear Blue Sky

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A timely, eye-opening novel showing how war affects families on both sides

Ever since her brother Sef left for Iraq, Cassie has felt like her life is falling apart. Her parents are fighting over her brother having gone to war. Her smart, beautiful sister is messing up. Her little brother, who has Down syndrome, is pretending he's a Marine. And her best friend no longer has time for her. In her loneliness Cassie turns to a surprising source of comfort: Blue Sky, an Iraqi girl she meets through her blog. The girls begin a correspondence and Cassie learns that when Blue Sky says "I want my life back," she means something profound, as she can no longer venture out in her destroyed city. Cassie takes strength from Blue Sky's courage and is inspired to stop running away from the pain, and to reclaim her life.

## Dear Blue Sky Details

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Author : Mary Sullivan

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## From Reader Review Dear Blue Sky for online ebook

### Zainab says

Amazing book! Touching to the heart!

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### Emily Kurland says

This book was about how a girl named Cassie has to deal with her brother going to Iraq to fight and face it that one day she might wake up and her brother will be sitting in the living room with no legs and one arm. She makes herself believe that her brother-Sef will be ok and safe. No matter how much she can convince herself that he is fine back home he was the only thing that would keep their family from mental breakdowns. One of her family members fighting in Iraq isn't her only problem. Her old best friend won't talk to her at all and she has no idea why. Also her sister that was just a normal high school kid before she started dating a boy that totally changed the way that she did things and treated other people. A completely different story goes on when she starts looking at a blog of a girl in Iraq and she can relate very well to. She has lost all of her pride faith and bravery in the war. She lives in Baghdad and her town was destroyed partly by terrorists and partly by the American soldiers. While she wishes the girl well and follows up with her she tries to stay up to date with all the sad things going on in her own life at that time and how she can help anybody who needs it.

I think that this book was placed correctly for 7th graders because it's not that small of print not too long at parts of the book very relatable to what might go on in a 7th graders life. Also I think that even though the main character is a girl the horrible things she has to experience both genders could have possible feelings for.

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### Barbara says

When her beloved older brother Sef goes off to serve in Iraq in 2003, seventh grader Cassie feels as though her whole world has been ripped apart. Nothing is going right now that he has gone. Her older sister is involved in a relationship with a musician who seems to disrespect her and expects her to behave in ways that may not be healthy for her. Her younger brother Jack deals with a neighborhood bully by refusing to speak to anyone, and her best friend Sonia seems to have moved on to other, more popular friends. Cassie eventually finds a good friend in Kim, and thanks to a school assignment, she makes friends with an Iraqi girl whose blog and email describe the conditions in the country where Sef is serving. As hard as things may seem for Cassie, she realizes that the girl she knows as Blue Sky is living in a world where nothing is as it once was. In fact, the family's lives are in danger because of her father's years of working for the Americans. Readers will understand the plight of both girls and also realize that Cassie's brother will never be the same after his experiences in Iraq. The writing is honest, showing the various ways that family members cope with stress, and the storyline provides plenty of material for class discussions on the effects of war on those on the frontline, those left behind, and those in the country where war is being waged. My main criticism of the book is that Cassie's voice doesn't always ring true in the emails that are included in her correspondence with Blue Sky and her brother.

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### **Dylan S says**

I am currently reading Dear Blue Sky by Mary Sullivan. My character Cassie or Cass is a quiet, loving, laid back kind of girl who is going through hard times. Her brother is going to war in Iraq and she cries all the time about it. Her parents are always fighting, her older sister is starting to make bad choices and her little brother who has Down syndrome, is pretending he's a Marine. Cass feels like her life is falling apart so she cries every night, until she meets an Iraq girl who's name is Blue Sky. She writes about her experiences and says her world is falling apart to and when Cass realizes Blue Sky's world IS actually starting to fall apart she starts looking at things differently and realizes to be thankful for what she has (even though she thinks she has it hard). I really like Cass's character and I enjoy learning more and more about her.

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### **Yadriana Rivera says**

AMAZING book! A beautiful story about two girls in two very and somehow very alike worlds. Gives great descriptions about the scenes and can get you very emotional at some parts. I recommend it to any age 10 years old and older.

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### **Ricki says**

When 12-year-old Cassie's older brother, Sef, goes off to fight the war in Iraq, her whole family seems to fall apart. Her sister becomes obsessed with her boyfriend and makes bad choices; her younger brother, who has Down Syndrome, stops speaking; and her mother becomes emotionally unavailable and gives Cassie the Cold Freeze (silent treatment). Cassie begins communicating with a 13-year-old girl in Iraq with the pseudonym, Blue Sky. Her perceptions of the war and her personal life are forever changed.

I was fortunate enough to receive an ARC of this book, and can't wait to pass it along to another teacher. This book made me want to teach middle school again, as it will be a great resource for teachers. There are an incredible amount of great themes and connections that teachers can draw on, and it is a book that kids will find very appealing, as it is very engaging. It would be a great link to a unit about Iraq or grief. Additionally, there are numerous allusions to THE GIVER, and it would be a great pairing for teachers who use this text.

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### **Samantha says**

Cassie's family may have seemed a little crazy before, but it begins to unravel when her older brother Sef joins the marines and is shipped off to Iraq during the worst part of the war. Her mother spirals out of control, flirting with her best friend's dad, drinking way too much wine, and taking pills to relax her. Her younger brother Jack, who has Down's syndrome, talks about nothing but going off to join Sef and help him fight the war, until he just stops talking at all. Her older sister Van begins drinking to impress a boyfriend she is barely hanging on to. Her father throws himself into his work and is never home. Cass can barely breathe. All she thinks about is her brother dying in Iraq, that's all her family thinks about too. Then, her social

studies teacher assigns her class an assignment. They must find and read a blog from someone in another country who is close to their age, and learn about that person's life experiences. Cassie discovers Blue Sky, a girl living in Iraq as the war wages. Through Blue Sky, Cassie learns more about the dangers of the war but also begins to feel closer to her brother Sef. Throughout the novel, Cassie and her classmates are also reading The Giver by Lois Lowery and begin questioning how free they actually are and consider a world without memories, color, and experience. Cassie wonders if it would be easier to live with no memories of Sef or if those memories can help her and her family find some sort of normalcy while Sef is away. A good story about the effects of war and loss, told from two different points of view, that relates the damage that war can do to families both in and outside the fighting zone. Good for grades 7 and up.

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### **Naia Jeremiah Garcia says**

Dear Blue Sky by Mary Sullivan is a wonderful story about two different people who are not so different after all. Two girls one in Iraq and one in America are both affected by war. The American girl has a brother fighting the war in Iraq. Meanwhile the girl in Iraq is being attacked by the American soldiers.

This is a great story about girls not that different from me and my classmates. I would recommend this book to a friend because it is a great book to sit down and relax with.

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### **Kayla Edwards says**

Cassie's family is falling to pieces and she feels powerless to stop it. Her mom is flirting with her best friend's dad, her brother is refusing to speak, her sister is starting to drink with her loser boyfriend, and to top it all off her brother - her rock - has been shipped off to Iraq for the war. Life kind of sucks. Even her best friend is pulling away and ignoring her at school over the issues with their parents. Everything is out of Cassie's control.

But then she starts exploring Iraq a little more and finds a blog belonging to a girl who calls herself Blue Sky. The two begin to share their lives and troubles with each other and soon Cassie is rethinking everything around her. She also starts talking to Kim, a girl at school she knew before but never really hung out with. Slowly, Cassie starts trying to cope with her brother's deployment and everything that has followed. But will it be enough to save her family?

This is a really cool book for middle grade teens - it gives a unique perspective to the War in Iraq by having the thoughts and feelings of two girls similar in age side-by-side. We as readers also get to watch Cassie as her thoughts and convictions change and adapt throughout the novel. It is also interesting to see how the family dynamic shifts as Cassie's attitude does. It does a great job of encouraging readers to look beyond prejudices and appearances to see the people behind them.

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### **Riley Brady says**

"No one is happy about a thing until it is lost", Blue Sky writes. Cassie is an average, fun loving 12-year-old girl until her older brother Sef leaves for Iraq. Her sister Van starts making horrible choices while depending on her boyfriend, her younger brother Jack with Down Syndrome goes mute, Cassie's parents fight about Sef

leaving for war, and her mothers' emotions freeze over. Cassie's world is falling apart and the only one who could fix it is thousands of miles away.

Cassie is worried and stressed out about her family and her brother, Sef, who is fighting in an un-winnable war. Cassie trusts her brother's motives for war are pure at a place where fighting and killing is your only option. Cassie corresponds with an Iraqi girl who lives in the bloody, chaotic, war-torn country and whose house was damaged by bombs and bullets. Blue Sky has seen people she knew get killed in front of her. Blue Sky's determination encouraged and inspired Cassie to regain control of her life. Blue Sky is a children's fiction book but the emotion is very much real. Dear Blue Sky is not part of any series. I read this book at my house and school, really anytime I could get my hands on this breathtaking book. I felt sorry for Blue Sky and Cassie because both of their lives were changed drastically.

This book definitely gave me a new perspective on how families on both sides of a conflict can be changed because of war. Mary Sullivan's novel is appealing to young readers, but all ages can enjoy this complex, beautiful book. Dear Blue Sky isn't Mary Sullivan's first amazing book. She has won many awards with glowing reviews. This book reminds me of Minnie McClary speaks her mind because things aren't great home for her but she encourages people to think creatively and for themselves. Both girls push through obstacles and thrive. Mary Sullivan paints a picture of what life in Iraq is like and uses words that make the reader think and want to keep reading. There are many great connections people can draw from this book, which makes it very engaging. Dear Blue Sky is a breath-taking, eye-opening, inspirational novel. This book is not about stopping everything waiting for things to return to normal but instead finding peace and hope in the process of waiting.

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## Lynda says

**"Amid the statistical haze that enshrouds civilian casualties, no one is sure how many children have been killed or maimed in Iraq. But psychologists and aid organisations warn that while the physical scars of the conflict are all too visible - in hospitals and mortuaries and on television screens - the mental and emotional turmoil experienced by Iraq's young is going largely unmonitored and untreated."**

- Michael Howard - *The Guardian*

*As the US military fought their way into Baghdad 11 years ago, the life of one Iraqi girl, Marwa Shimari, was changed forever when she was gravely injured in an air raid.*

The Middle East region has been home for this kiwi gal for the past 6.5 years. When I tell people I live here, it sometimes evokes mixed feelings and notions and is often associated with mysticism and conflict. Many fail to understand its complexity and diversity, its people, religions, resources and politics.

The region is a crossroads to three continents: Asia, Europe and Africa. The fact that the Middle East is a tri-continental junction has been a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, this geostrategic location promotes trade and exchange and thus benefits the region; on the other hand, it means that different powers from within and outside the region compete for its control. Consequently, the Middle East has been a center of conflict, and a battlefield, for centuries.

The latest conflict is in Iraq. Many readers will identify with the The Iraq War, which was an armed conflict in Iraq that consisted of two phases. The first was an invasion of Iraq starting on 20 March 2003 by an invasion force led by the United States. It was followed by a longer phase of fighting, in which an insurgency emerged to oppose the occupying forces and the newly formed Iraqi government. Roughly 96.5 percent of the casualties suffered by the U.S.-led coalition were suffered during the second phase, rather than the initial invasion. The U.S. completed its withdrawal of military personnel in December 2011, during the ninth year of the war. However, the insurgency is ongoing and continues to cause thousands of fatalities. Many of those fatalities are children.

For two decades, Iraqi children, along with the rest of the population, have been subjected to grave human rights violations, caused by decades of war, foreign occupation and international sanctions. Iraq has turned into one of the worst places for children in the Middle East with around 3.5 million living in poverty, 1.5 million under the age of five undernourished and 100 infants dying every day.

In the Iraq war, children were still exposed to violence on a daily basis and there were no programmes designed to deal with the psychological problems this causes. As one Iraqi man said:

*"They are so young and don't have the ability to comprehend what's really happening around them. Their lives have become meaningless. They don't know what they are doing. Most of them have become aggressive, even when they play."*

Iraq remains among the humanitarian emergencies in the world. Children continue to suffer from the psychological trauma of war and conflict, and access to education and development opportunities has been severely constrained.

*Gun-toting Iraqi boy. Courtesy - Daily Mail*

Gun-toting children were paraded for the cameras in Iraq only last month – on both sides of the bloody conflict. A shocking video emerged showing armed boys watching the execution of a prisoner by masked jihadi fighters. The children – some as young as eight – look on as a prisoner is made to kneel in the dirt before being shot in the back of the head. The video of gun-toting children was uploaded on YouTube with the chilling message:

*"Brutal sectarian war has come again to Iraq and many say it's as bad as in the dark days of 2007."*

**Dear Blue Sky** focuses on a family in suburban Boston that is drawn into the war in Iraq when 13-year-old Cassie's older brother, Sef, enlists in the Marines. Sef is the one who holds the family together—a strong and thoughtful high school graduate who chooses the military over college because of the attacks on September 11, 2001 and because he believes he can make a difference. His family is divided—his mother opposes the war, his father supports it. Cassie's older sister, Van, has other concerns, and her eight-year-old brother Jack, who has Down syndrome, refuses to change out of his one camouflage outfit or leave Sef's room until they let him join the military too. The neighborhood is also divided.

As Cassie observes,

*"I didn't even realize how much Sef held us together until he was gone. He was the only one who could make Van smile. He was Jack's hero and Dad's best buddy. He was the only one*

*Mom listened to when she'd had too much to drink. And me, I was myself with Sef."*

### *Cassie and Blue Sky*

When a school assignment requires Cassie to read a blog about the war in Iraq, she comes upon an Iraqi girl her age who goes by the name Blue Sky and her perspective on things changes. (Blue Sky's blog is very much modeled on that of a typical Iraqi girl.) While Cassie feels that her life is falling apart, she realises it is nothing compared to Blue Sky's life; that of the bloody chaos of war and a shattered life. Blue Sky's house has been damaged by bombs. Most days she cannot go to school or even leave her house. She sees neighbors shot or blown up before her eyes. She pleads,

*"I want my life back."*

The two begin e-mailing each other about their very different lives, and their correspondence runs throughout the book. Cassie takes strength from Blue Sky's courage and is inspired to reclaim her life.

*"It's hard to imagine bombs falling and snipers shooting on the way to school,"*

Cassie writes.

*"I try to be strong but many times I shake at night,"*

Blue Sky writes.

Together, they trade strategies for dealing with panic attacks, and in their connection, Cassie discovers both a dark truth about the world and a way to appreciate her own life, diminished as it is by Sef's absence and her family's other problems.

*"This is truth,"*

Blue Sky tells her.

*"No one is happy about a thing until it is lost."*

As Cassie reads Blue Sky's blog and initiates a correspondence with her, Sef also writes his family, and readers see that he, too, is learning that things are not as black and white as he believed. Cassie in turn worries about him, for his faith that he can make a difference because his motives are pure is being sorely tested on a battlefield where one never knows who is friend and who is foe.

Sullivan's novel is complex and compelling, with appeal to young readers and much for their elders to ponder. It is a good-read for all ages; both timely and timeless.

**3.5 stars**

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## **Rebecca McNutt says**

*Dear Blue Sky* is one of the most amazing novels I've ever read, and I don't say that lightly. This book is a clear display of how we are all connected in ways we don't even realize, and how distance doesn't define true friendship.

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## **Stephanie says**

I must be missing something that other reviewers saw, as I found *Dear Blue Sky* to be uninspiring. The characters seemed to be ciphers rather than people: Mom is drinking too much, Van (the teenage sister) is flirting with alcohol and anorexia, Sef (the older brother) is a soldier with a positive, can-do attitude. I also found Blue Sky, the Iraqi blogger, to have a flat, predictable voice and the interplay between Blue Sky and Cassie never went anywhere.

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## **Ms. Yingling says**

In 2006, Cassie's brother Sef is going to Afghanistan, despite her mother's objections to the war. Cassie's father is all for the fighting, her sister Van is too caught up in her own teenage drama to care much, and her brother Jack doesn't quite understand all of the details of Sef's deployment because he is nine and has Down's Syndrome. When Cassie has a school project to follow a blog about current events, she happens upon one written by an Afghani girl her age who goes by the name Blue Sky. Cassie finds out how bad things are for the people of that country, and starts to realize that the US military is not always thought to be the good guy... or behaving that way. She then worries about her brother's safety AND whether or not he is doing the right thing by being there, as well as worrying about her father's job, her mother's drinking, her parents' relationship, Jack, and the social dynamics of middle school. Of course, all the while, Cassie realizes that while things may be tough in her world, they are even tougher in Blue Sky's Afghanistan.

**Strengths:** This was very well done both in dealing with how Cassie feels about everything going on in her life, but also in how Sef's deployment is not black and white. Blue Sky's posts seem very realistic, and the correspondence between Cassie and Blue Sky is thought provoking.

**Weaknesses:** One of Cassie's classes is studying *The Giver*, and a lot of references are made to this. While this book is frequently studied in classes, references to it slowed down the story for me and would be confusing to someone who has not read that book.

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## **Kris says**

I was struck by the beauty of this cover and premise and couldn't wait to dive in. Cassie's beloved brother Sef is fighting in Iraq. As he leaves the family seems to fall apart at the seems. Her special needs brother, Jack stops speaking because of a neighbor bully. Her sister Van becomes emo over a boyfriend and starts drinking. Her mother flirts with her best friend's father. Now her best friend has dumped her and Cassie feels lost. Her 7th grade social studies teacher assigns the students to read the blog of a person their age from another country. Cassie discovers a blog by a young girl who lives in Iraq. She calls herself Blue Sky. Cassie begins to see a different side to this war through the eyes of Blue Sky. This starts Cassie on a journey of self discovery. She finds new friends. I love that this character does not have to change who she is or hide her

pain to make those new friends. The bond of this grieving family is interesting to watch. Particularly how they band together to love and support Jack. Even with their pain and personal struggles they find a way to come back to each other. What comes out of that is a very real portrait of a family dealing with the “new normal” as they miss a loved one who they may never see again. Many young people out there may know someone fighting in either Iraq or Afghanistan and may identify with the characters in this story. This book will give young readers a great perspective about how different sides of a conflict see things very differently and how understanding those differences is expands our minds and creates room for compassion to grow. I also love the references to Robert Frost.

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