

## A Curriculum Guide to

### ***What Every Girl Should Know: Margaret Sanger's Journey***

By J. Albert Mann

#### **About the Book**

Margaret Higgins Sanger, pioneering women's health activist, feminist, and founder of Planned Parenthood, learned at her father's knee that women should not be limited by their gender. Yet reality told a different story; society seemed determined that she be a wife, mother, or school teacher—and nothing else. In *What Every Girl Should Know: Margaret Sanger's Journey*, author J. Albert Mann introduces readers to the young Maggie and her childhood experiences that informed and shaped the woman she would become. Witnessing the toll of constant pregnancy on her mother's body fueled the fire within Sanger to make groundbreaking changes in the quest for women's health and reproductive rights. This novel of Sanger's early life paints the portrait of a young woman with the passion and courage to change the world.

The questions and activities listed below address the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.9-10.10) (WHST.9-10.7) (R.10)

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. Although her father “always professed in the loudest of voices” that being a man or a woman “should not make a difference in our life's prospects,” Maggie notices that society has different rules and expectations for men and women. Discuss these societal expectations and how beliefs have or have not changed since Sanger's lifetime. Where do you think these expectations come from? How have men and women reacted to them?
2. Reread the scene in which Maggie is sprawled on the floor with a basket of mending as her father, Michael, extols the virtues of freedom and “lady liberty.” While she struggles to mend a seam in her brother's trousers, she wonders why liberty is always a lady, yet women aren't allowed to vote. In another passage, Maggie's brother drops his oatmeal bowl into her sink full of dishes with a smirk. Maggie chases him with soapy hands until her father says, “Enough playtime. There is work to be done,” and drops his own bowl into the sink. How are these scenes related? What do you learn about Maggie's father based on these interactions? How might the roles the family bestows upon their children affect her brother's view of women as he grows up? Why do you think Maggie later says, “Liberty might be a lady, but I never met a lady who was free.”
3. Maggie's friend Emma disassembles her dolls to “see how they are made.” Consider the way Emma's mother reacts to the doll incident versus how she responds when Emma's brother, James, disassembles an entire stove. What does this tell you about how social norms were reinforced? What effect do you think this had on Emma and James?

4. Instead of buying coal, Michael and Maggie make the impetuous decision to spend the precious money on bananas, which they distribute to people on the street with great fanfare. Discuss what beliefs and values led to this decision. How might you have reacted in this situation? Maggie would always remember this event and the things her father said while doling out the fruit: "As he handed a banana to each child, he looked them directly in the eye and told them, 'Leave the world better, because you, my child, have dwelt in it.'" How might these lessons have influenced Maggie's choices later in life? What do you think it means to live "by your convictions"?

5. Maggie's mother, Anne, is constantly pregnant. Maggie says, "I have almost never known my mother to be alone in her body." In one scene, her mother is laboring to deliver a stillborn baby while breastfeeding another, prompting Maggie to wonder, "How much could one body do?" Consider and discuss the mental and physical impact and the amount of resources needed to care for many children. What kind of strain can this put on a family? What might be some of the long-term effects on families like Maggie's? What traits can be admired in Maggie's mother? How does she view her children? What are her biggest struggles?

6. Children then and now are considered "precious gifts," but Maggie describes babies as "housework" and "bleating little goats." Why do you think she felt this way? How has family planning changed things for women today?

7. When thieves try to steal chickens in the night, Maggie's father shouts at them while Anne "snatched the lamp from his hands and ran out into the spring night in her bare feet." "Drop those chickens," she shouts. When a rogue hen "squawked off in the opposite direction behind the barn," her mother takes off after it and returns with the errant fowl. Why do think Maggie continues to replay the image of her mother "turning the corner of the barn, her nightgown whipping in the rain and the chicken firmly in her grasp"? What conclusion do you think Maggie draws from seeing her mother's "large and commanding presence"? How is this image at odds with the way society viewed men and women at that time? What do you think made Anne act against these stereotypical expectations?

8. After her father invites a well-known atheist to speak in their hometown of Corning, New York, Maggie and her family are shunned and pummeled with beets and apples by friends and neighbors who now consider them "the devil's spawn." While painful, this incident teaches Maggie "how to ignore a sneer." In what ways do you think this skill helps Maggie in her future endeavors? Discuss the meaning of the phrase "grow a thicker skin." How does the phrase relate to Maggie?

9. Maggie resents the idea that a future of diapers, dishes, cleaning, and mending seems preordained. Discuss the concept of preordained destiny. What specific actions does Maggie take to avoid the path societal influences have laid out for her? Maggie feels guilty about not embracing her lot in life as wholeheartedly as her sister Mary, concluding that she must be "bad." Why do you think she draws this conclusion? What kind of a relationship does she have with her sister?

10. Maggie wants to be exceptional and dreams of being a doctor, a goal that she knows will take strength, especially for a poor girl from Corning. How does doing the things she fears most, including crossing the train trestle, help Maggie gain fortitude? Can you relate to Maggie with any of your personal fears? How does fear motivate or pressure you? Discuss the concept of self-actualization and how it applies to Maggie.

11. When Maggie goes away to attend Claverack school, she works in the kitchen to help pay tuition. She is amazed when she is praised for clearing tables, washing dishes, sweeping, and mopping, and thrilled to be called a “good girl.” Why do you think it had such an effect on her? How does this experience compare to the way Maggie was treated at home?

12. At Claverack, Maggie convinces her friends to sneak out at night and attend a dance. Once faced with the darkness, her friends want to turn back; Maggie is defiant, saying, “I’m going to be an actress. Or a doctor. Or something. I’m going to be something. God rot it. And tonight, I’m going dancing.” Describe the qualities Maggie displays in this passage. How do her words affect the other girls? Despite being caught for their transgression, the girls are not expelled. Instead, the school principal identifies Maggie as the ringleader and tells her to decide whether to use her leadership abilities to “get yourself and others into difficulty, or to guide yourself and others into constructive activities that will do you, and them, credit.” What impact do you think this experience has on Maggie? Do you agree with the principal’s words? What kind of constructive activities might he be talking about? How might things have been different for her if she had been expelled?

13. Maggie is a natural public speaker who enjoys reading aloud and performing. She is accepted at Frohman acting school, but tears up the acceptance letter when she learns she has to send her measurements including “the size of my breasts to New York on a form . . . Does nothing women do not depend on our bodies?” What social norms is Maggie defying in this passage? What does it tell you about her character? What kind of choice would you have made if you were in her position?

14. Maggie gives a speech on the subject of women’s rights; she is booed, but remains undeterred, saying, “I have tasted the fruit of knowledge. I am floating on a cloud of conviction.” What does she mean by a “cloud of conviction”? If Maggie’s father had heard her speech, how do you think he would have reacted? In what way was she following his example?

15. When Maggie has to quit school because her sisters are no longer able to pay the tuition, she takes a teaching job but feels like she “had been stuffed in a box. My dreams are going nowhere.” Teaching is an important and worthy profession. Do you think it would have been easier for Maggie to accept her circumstances and learn to be happy? Why might the easiest route not always be the best one? Explain your answers. Why do you think Maggie struggles with this placement?

16. When Maggie’s father calls her home from her teaching job to care for her ailing mother, Maggie suspects she is really there to save her father from a sink full of dirty dishes. What does she mean when she says, “I am more afraid of that burnt saucepan than my father is”? Do you think your relationship with your family contributes to your future plans or goals?

17. After her mother's death, Maggie stays home cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. How does Maggie feel when she realizes her life has "become someone else's laundry"? How do her feelings contribute to her decision to leave? What does this year-long experience teach her?

### **Extension Activities**

#### **Oh, Baby!**

There was a time when large households with nine or ten kids were common and considered "right." Have students research the history of family sizes in the United States from 1850 to the present. Ask students to focus on the following questions: When and why were large families prized? How did large families impact the struggle to break the cycle of poverty? When and why did things begin to change? How was society impacted by women working outside the home? How has family planning contributed to these impacts? How does knowing this information add context to Sanger's story?

#### **What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?**

It's a question often asked of children. Maggie spends a lot of time thinking about this, and trying to see herself in the women around her. She is not like her oldest sister, Mary, the dutiful daughter who always wins her mother's approval. She can't see herself being a teacher like Miss Hayes, or a wife and mother to a huge "boodle" of children like her own mother. She is left wondering if it's even possible to become anything different. Ask students to think about the role models in their lives. Have them create lists of the qualities these role models possess. Have each student write a one-page essay describing their role model and how they might use this person as an example as they work to achieve their personal goals. Ask them to discuss whether they think Margaret Sanger is a role model for women today.

#### **Where Else Would You Be?**

When Margaret Sanger was a girl, society expected women to stay home to take care of their husbands and children. Her brother once asked her, "Where else would you be?" Things have changed, but not without impassioned women like Sanger fomenting for social upheaval. How did these leaders make their cases? What were they up against? Some women opposed to political equality actually believed that voting would make them grow a beard! Divide the class into small groups and have them research and prepare short, passionate speeches using the arguments for or against women's rights as equal citizens from the late 1880s or early 1900s. Select someone from each group to present opposing views.

#### **Freedom for All**

Near the end of the book, Maggie says, "There is no freedom without choice." Ask students what this concept means to them. The United States Constitution grants the same rights and freedoms to all citizens, yet in our country's history, freedom has often been limited by lack of choice, particularly for women and African Americans. Give students time to research current news reports having to do with reproductive rights, women's health issues, and the ongoing battle over abortion rights. Give students the opportunity to report their findings back to the class. Write a

class letter to Margaret Sanger with an update on the issues surrounding women's health in the twenty-first century.

### **Not for You to Know**

Students might be surprised to know that in the late 1800s, it was illegal to distribute information on how to avoid pregnancy. The Comstock Law, as it was called, made it a federal crime to disseminate birth control devices or even information about birth control. One bookseller was jailed for distributing information about reproduction after an undercover officer asked him to order a medical textbook. Read about Margaret Sanger's crusade against this law in her own words here:

[https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/documents/speech\\_comstockery\\_in\\_america.php](https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/documents/speech_comstockery_in_america.php)

And more about the law here:

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-anthony-comstocks-chastity-laws/>

Lead a class discussion about how the Comstock law limited women's freedom, and have students weigh in on whether the law was unconstitutional.

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