

Everyone's Sorry Nowadays

READING GUIDE



Bart
Moeyaert

Querido

Tegenwoordig
heet
iedereen
Sorry



Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award

© Illustrations: Björn Berg, Ingrid Vang Nyman, Ilon Wikland



Bart Moeyaert. Photo: Stefan Tell.

The Belgian author Bart Moeyaert received the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2019. Moeyaert is a multiple award-winning author who published his first book in 1983 at age 19, and since then has authored some 50 titles in various genres. He has written picture books, novels, works of poetry, plays, song lyrics, television screenplays and essays. Moeyaert is also a translator of children's and YA literature to Dutch, has served as Poet Laureate of the City of Antwerp (2006–2007) and has a reputation as an accomplished speaker.

Interested readers can learn more about Moeyaert on his website, which includes an international section with texts in English. Information is also available at www.alma.se, and a number of Moeyaert's interviews and lectures can be streamed on YouTube.

www.bartmoeyaert.com

www.alma.se

This Reading Guide was written by:
Katarina Lycken Rüter, lead teacher
at the Anna Whitlock Gymnasium,
Stockholm.

About the book

Life isn't so easy. Not for Bianca, who says little but thinks all the more. Not for her little brother Alan, who has had three heart surgeries and can't go far from his ventilator. Not for her mother, who spent money they didn't have to renovate the kitchen after the divorce, and who worries about her children. And what about Bianca's father, when his daughter and his new partner don't get along at all?

Everyone's Sorry Nowadays (*Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry*) is about a Saturday afternoon that brings a lot of changes. Bianca is waiting for her father, who is coming to pick her up for the weekend. She thinks silently about what it is like to be Bianca—passed over, always overshadowed by her very ill little brother. When a friend of Alan's comes over to play, it turns out that his mother, who comes with him, is a TV actress whom Bianca admires. For Bianca, talking to her idol suggests new ways of thinking and talking about her feelings and experiences. Meanwhile, the family's neighbor is cleaning up her yard. Bianca's hideaway place, where she goes to escape from the world so she can think in peace, disappears. But does she really need it any longer? When her father finally arrives to pick her up, she has a new plan for showing and being the Bianca that she wants to be. The closing chapters suggest new possibilities for reconciliation and more trusting communication, for all the characters.

As the narrator of *Everyone's Sorry Nowadays*, Bianca gives us the story of the book through her eyes. She observes, evaluates, and makes associations. She experiments with expressing herself in different ways, and she thinks about both the things that do happen and the things that could happen, but never do. This means that as readers—and this is typical for Moeyaert—we really have to pay attention. So much of what happens in the book is never explicitly stated. As a result, there is a great deal to discuss and discover together, whether in a book group or in the classroom.

When this Reading Guide was produced, *Everyone's Sorry Nowadays* was not published in English, but you can find more information about the book in English, as well as an English translation of the first few pages by Laura Watkinson, at:

www.flandersliterature.be/books-and-authors/book/everyones-sorry-nowadays

For book groups

Everyone's Sorry Nowadays is one of those books that seems tailor-made for book group discussions. Despite its short length, it is rich in themes to explore. These include parenthood, our need to be seen by others, communication, the importance of literary (and other) role models, and the possible shape of a chance to “start again.”

Many of the questions suggested here for classrooms could certainly also be used to start off discussions in an adult book group.

In the classroom

Everyone's Sorry Nowadays has a limited scope, relatively easy language, and complex content. This makes it both feasible and appropriate for many readers. Since it does require attentive reading, it also presents a great opportunity for students and teachers to work together on practicing that skill, and can help students develop as independent readers.

Before reading

Before students begin to read, teachers should think about how much of an introduction to Moeyaert's narrative technique the group will need. Certainly, some groups may be able to jump right in without further ado (including many older high school groups, although not all). Other groups might benefit from an orientation. Teachers could point out the way the book starts us off right in the middle of the action, and that the choice of narrator, Bianca, requires our attention from the very beginning. We are privy to Bianca's thoughts and emotions, so we understand her actions—but what do the people around her see? Are there things we as readers understand that Bianca does not see or does not understand?

REFLECTIONS ON THE TITLE

One way to introduce the text might be to think about the title. Give students a short writing assignment: can they think of different ways that we express being sorry? How is “sorry” connected to other emotions such as anger, worry, or loneliness? What things make us sorry? What do they make of the title's “Everyone”? What do they make of the word “Nowadays”?

You might discuss the responses in groups, either before reading (so that students can bring more perspectives to bear while reading) or after reading (to see if answers have changed or deepened based on the reading experience).

During reading

Depending upon the level of reading experience in the group, and the context in which the book is being read, teachers might want give students questions or guidelines to direct their reading. Many of the questions suggested below for after reading would work during reading as well. It might also be a good idea to point out that it's frequently rewarding to make note of specific words or images that reoccur. Insert slips of paper in the book to keep track, or note down page numbers on a separate sheet.

For experienced readers, it might be enough to suggest collecting thought-provoking or evocative quotations. One good method is to keep a read-and-respond log where students can copy out quotes and write their own short responses.

After reading

To be sure, the most important question for any reader is to understand what the text is saying to them and their response to it. A discussion that helps refine and pin down meanings from the book can help answer that question. But to make the discussion truly investigative and awaken fresh perspectives, it often helps to start with some specific questions. Below are some sample questions to choose from, organized under a few different topics.

CHARACTERS

Bianca:

- Bianca's father describes her as "unmanageable." Her mother calls her "wild." How does Bianca describe herself? How would you describe her? How do you think it feels to be Bianca?
- As readers, we understand that Bianca thinks much more than she speaks: partly because we can hear her thoughts, partly because we hear what other people say about her and to her. How do you think Bianca's thinking helps her? Are there times when her thinking actually makes things harder for her? If so, when, and how?
- At the beginning of Bianca's conversation with Billie, she gives herself a new name, P erdon. What do you think she means when she then says, "These days you mainly hear 'Sorry'"?
- How would you say that Bianca changes during the afternoon we spend with her? What events make that change possible?

Alan:

- In what ways does Adam's illness affect his life? How do you think it has affected his relationships with others?

Mum:

- What picture do we get of Mum from Bianca's descriptions? Are there things Bianca can't see, but that we as readers understand? If so, what are they?

Dad:

- Even though her father isn't physically present during the hours covered in the book, Bianca thinks a lot about him and their relationship. How has that relationship changed? In what ways is her father a participant in the change, and in what ways is Bianca a participant? Do you have any sense of whether there is a difference between Dad's relationship with Bianca and his relationship with Alan? If so, what is the difference?

Billie:

- Billie is Bianca's great idol—but she turns out to be a significant person for Bianca in real life, too. Why do you think that Billie and Bianca, in just a few short exchanges, are able to communicate about such important questions, even though they don't really know each other at all?

Jazz

- Jazz is a strange bird—but a welcome one—in Alan and Bianca's house. In what ways do you think Jazz challenges Bianca's ways of thinking and reacting to the people around her?

COMMUNICATION

In her thoughts, Bianca tests different ways of expressing the same thing. For example, this is Bianca thinking about how she is expected to react to Dad's new proposal:

I stare at Mum, and I ask her with a look if she expects me to go ping any moment now, as I've had a minute to think about the new plan that Dad and his Cruz have come up with and ultimately / all things considered / of course / it's fine / no problem / super.

(Translation by Laura Watkinson.)

- How does this style of writing make you feel? What are your thoughts about Bianca's relationship to her own language?
- Bianca is frequently quiet—outwardly, at least. What strategies does she use to deal with her powerful emotions when she cannot or does not want to express them in words?
- Bianca talks about “Dad and his Cruz.” Her relationship with “his Cruz” is marked in many ways by poor communication. How are the difficulties described, and what openings for improved communication do you see in the text?
- Fairly often, the text talks about being “clear.” Give some examples of “unclear” communication and its consequences, and examples of “clear” communication and its consequences.

- At the end of the afternoon, Bianca makes two important drawings, one for Cruz and one for her mother. What would you say is significant about the drawings, both in their design and in what they stand for?

FICTION AND REALITY

- A soap opera called “At Home with Us” takes up a lot of space in Bianca’s mental world. How does she use its characters and events to make sense of her own life? What lines does she “borrow,” and why those lines in particular? Do you recognize this way of using film, theater or literature? If so, how and when have you experienced it?
- In “At Home with Us,” the characters have predetermined roles and a script to follow. What is “at home” with Bianca, Mum and Alan like?
- Bianca has a clear memory of the celebration of the thousandth episode of “At Home with Us”—she remembers part of the show itself, as well as watching with her father. What significance does that situation take on for her?

THE IMPORTANT SPACES

- The kitchen is an important room for Mum, according to Bianca’s descriptions. How do her descriptions of the kitchen reflect her complicated relationship with her mother? What does the kitchen look like, and what happens there? A saucepan of lingonberries makes several appearances—what do you think it means?
- Alan often plays by the side of the pool and on the lawn. How do you think his games are linked to who he is and his situation in life? How does Bianca relate to his games on the lawn?
- Bianca has a secret hiding place in the neighbor’s yard. What does that spot mean to her? What might the secret place, and its removal, symbolize within the story?

READY FOR MORE? At alma.se you’ll find more than 20 reading guides, some in English, to books authored and illustrated by ALMA laureates. You’ll also find a list of some of their books published in different languages.

THE ASTRID LINDGREN MEMORIAL AWARD (ALMA) is the world's largest award for children's and young adult literature. The award amounts to SEK 5 million and is given annually to a single laureate or to several. Authors, illustrators, oral storytellers and reading promoters are eligible for the award, which is designed to promote interest in children's and young adult literature. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of our work. An expert jury selects the laureate(s) from candidates nominated by institutions and organisations all over the world. The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award was founded by the Swedish government in 2002 and is administrated by the Swedish Arts Council.

SWEDISH ARTS COUNCIL

Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award
Swedish Arts Council | P.O. Box 27215 | SE-102 53 Stockholm
Office: Borgvägen 1–5, Stockholm
Phone: +46 8 519 264 00 | litteraturpris@alma.se | www.alma.se/en



Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award