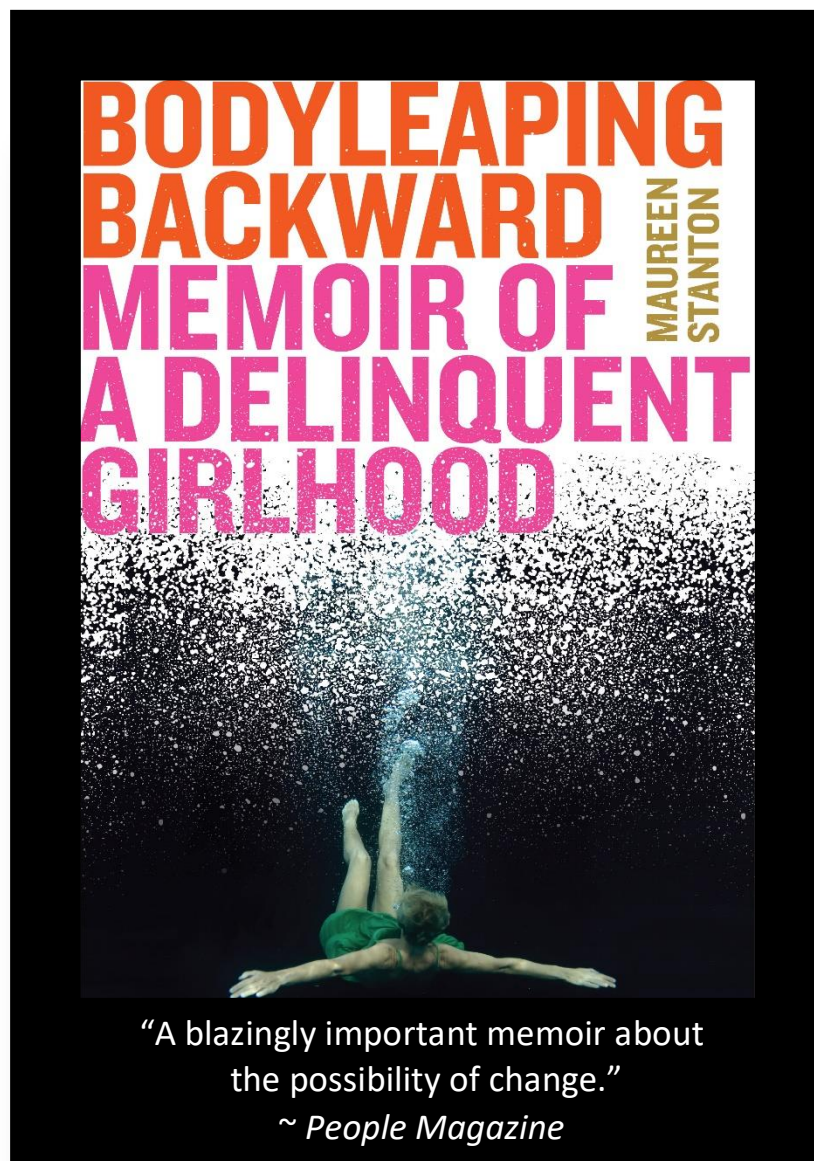


# A Teacher's Guide To



“An informative, intelligent read for anyone, young or old, trying to make sense of teenage rebellion. *Body Leaping Backward* is a well-told, insightful memoir that could hardly be more relevant today.”

~ Alice Cary, *BookPage*

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## About the Book

Maureen Stanton's acclaimed memoir, *Body Leaping Backward: Memoir of a Delinquent Girlhood*, is a "sharp, candid, and deeply felt"\* account of Stanton's coming-of-age in the 1970s in Walpole, Massachusetts, then home to the state's sole maximum security prison.

Stanton's story of her descent into drugs and delinquency as a teenager is set against the cultural moral ambiguity of the 1970s in the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam war years, in an ordinary suburban town where the prison symbolized outdated notions of good and bad. Reviewer Jenny Shank wrote in *America Magazine*:

*"Body Leaping Backward is at once a mea culpa, an in-depth work of sociology and an extravagant gesture of forgiveness toward the adults and institutions that failed to prevent Stanton's self-destructive behavior. Stanton writes with crystalline prose and a storyteller's verve that makes this memoir linger and reverberate in the reader's mind."*

In this richly-layered narrative, Stanton interweaves her compelling personal story with sociocultural and historical research, which offers students multiple opportunities for learning and discussion, including topics such as:

- ♦ Teenagers' "coming of age" experiences
- ♦ Adolescent girls' voices
- ♦ Divorce and family sociology
- ♦ Depression, mental health, psychology, and counseling
- ♦ Drug abuse and recovery
- ♦ Class and economic issues
- ♦ Crime, juvenile delinquency, and youth offenders
- ♦ Sociopolitical issues of the 1970s: feminism, the war on drugs, Vietnam, Watergate
- ♦ Personal narratives, memoir writing, and writing about place

At 208 pages, *Body Leaping Backward: Memoir of a Delinquent Girlhood* is a compelling read, and a manageable length for classroom adoption. The diary excerpts in the narrative allow readers to hear the authentic voice of a 15-year-old girl as she struggles to find, and keep, her sense of self.

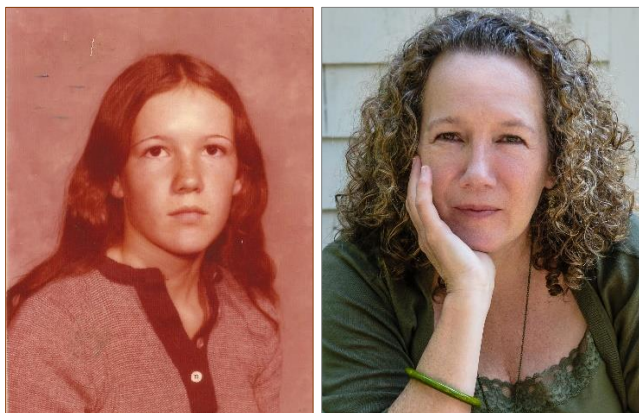
\* Boston Globe, July 10, 2019

## About the Author

Maureen Stanton is an award-winning nonfiction writer whose work has been widely published in literary journals, and reprinted in teaching anthologies, including: *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: An Anthology* (Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2020); *From Curlers to Chainsaws: Women and Their Machines* (Michigan State University Press, 2016); *Writing True* (Cengage Learning, 2013); *Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction* (Longman, 2011); and *Literature: The Human Experience* (Bedford/St. Martins 2010).

She's received a Massachusetts Book Award, the *Iowa Review* prize, Pushcart Prizes, the *American Literary Review* award, the Thomas J. Hruska prize from *Passages North*, the Penelope Niven Award from Salem College Center for Women Writers, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Maine Arts Commission, and the MacDowell Colony.

Stanton earned an M.F.A. from Ohio State University and a B.A. from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She has taught literature and writing to high school students, undergraduates, and graduate students. She is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. For more information or to contact her, visit [www.maureenstanton.com](http://www.maureenstanton.com).



*Maureen Stanton at 15 years old and today.*

## Prologue and Chapter 1

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- ♦ In the prologue and chapter one, Stanton mentions the prison in her hometown of Walpole, Massachusetts. How does the prison figure in Stanton's imagination as a child? What does the prison represent to Stanton and her family?
- ♦ Billy Wagner is a figure of intrigue for Stanton as a girl. Discuss what aspects in Billy that Stanton sees in herself. At this point in the book, how would you describe Stanton's persona, and her role among the seven children in her family?
- ♦ The Boston Strangler represents a dark figure in Stanton's child-imagination. What other cultural references does Stanton mention, and how do they contribute to her view of the world?

### Critical Writing Prompt

Review the opening paragraph of the prologue. Think about the landscape of your neighborhood, town, or city. What architectural, geological, environmental or other landscape features stand out? How does those feature help to shape the culture of the place?

### Creative Writing Exercise

Start by drawing a map of your street or neighborhood, including as many details as possible. Don't worry about the quality of the drawing. The idea is to use images to generate memories. While drawing, annotate the map to mark incidences that occurred at particular places, i.e., the neighbor's house, the street intersection, the woods, the school field, the corner store. Once the map is annotated, expand on one memory and tell the story more fully.

## Chapter 2

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- ♦ In chapter two, Stanton's parents separate. Discuss how the relationship changed between Stanton and her father once he no longer lived in the family home. What did Stanton understand then, at age 12, about this change, and what does she understand later as she reflects back on the separation in her memoir?
- ♦ Not long after Stanton's father moved out, her mother recruited the children to install an above-ground pool in the ground. Describe the character of Stanton's mother. What sort of role model is she?
- ♦ Stanton situates her parents' split in a cultural context. What are some of the changes she notices in the world around her as an adolescent girl around the time her parents separate? How does her consciousness change? What research does Stanton weave into her personal narrative to show the shifts in the society?

### Critical Writing Prompt

Research demographic and sociological shifts between the 1960s and 1970s, such as changes in wages, education, the economy, gender roles, the environment, etc. Use your research to explore in what ways the zeitgeist shifted from the 1960s to the 1970s.

### Creative Writing Exercise

Draw a timeline of your life so far, on which you demarcate the points of major shifts in your life, i.e., the birth of siblings, geographic moves, changes in family status or structure, major moments in your own activities and life in these years. Select one of these "shifts" or major points and write about that moment in more detail, thinking about how and when you learned of the change, and what you understood about it then and now.

## Chapter 3

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- ♦ Chapter three presents a major turning point for Stanton and her mother. Discuss the changes that each experiences, and the pressures or catalysts that might underlie these changes.
- ♦ In this chapter, Maureen offers excerpts from her teenage diary in the narrative. How do these segments add to your understanding of who Maureen is, or is becoming, and the struggles she faces?
- ♦ Stanton writes candidly about her early sexual experiences. In what ways do these experiences resonate—or not—to today's social mores around adolescent sex and desire, especially for girls?

### Critical Writing Prompt

Research and compare the economic conditions of the 1970s recession with the more recent recession in the 2000s. Discuss the similarities and differences, and the effects of economic distress on working and middle-class families.

### Creative Writing Exercise

Try keeping a diary or journal for a week, writing daily. Then revisit your diary entries and write about them reflectively, looking to understand why you recorded certain information and left out other details. Or if you have kept a diary or journal in the past, revisit those pages and choose some excerpts about which to write reflectively, with the benefit of time passed.

## Chapter 4

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- ♦ In this chapter, Stanton's mother returns to school, and then full-time work. How does this effect Maureen and her siblings?
- ♦ Earlier in the book, Stanton goes inside the prison to the Hobby Shop. But in this chapter, prisoners are out in the community. What is the significance, or symbolism, of showing this movement of prisoners, especially after Stanton's mother and her new boyfriend commit a serious crime?
- ♦ Stanton describes the five state institutions near her home. What are those institutions, and why do you think Stanton included this background in the book? What are similarities in the populations of those institutions?

### Critical Writing Prompt

Think about the concept of about “inside” and outside,” as Stanton first mentions in the book's prologue. Write about acceptance and visibility in our culture based on any of the institutionalized populations Stanton mentions, or other marginalized groups in our society.

### Creative Writing Exercise

Write about a time when you crossed a line—a moral line, a socially constructed line, or a line that demarcates acceptance or rejection. Tell the story and reflect on how you felt then, and now about crossing that line.



## Chapter 5

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- ♦ In this chapter, Stanton sinks into self-destructive and illegal behavior. What are some of the risky behaviors? What do you think is happening to Stanton psychologically or emotionally at this time that contributes to her making such poor choices?
- ♦ Stanton shows that some teachers noticed her decline and tried to help. Why do you think these efforts fail, and what more could the adults or institutions in Maureen's life have done to help her? Or was she unreachable at this point?
- ♦ Stanton and her friends elaborately plan a burglary, and they follow through with it. How did Stanton's behavior escalate to the point where she commits this crime? How does Stanton feel about this crime at the time, and later as she's writing about it?

### Critical Writing Prompt

Think about all of the people mentioned in this chapter who committed crimes, and the consequences for each. Research and write about the concept of "justice," and whether or not our criminal justice system metes out appropriate and fair punishments for the various perpetrators of crime.

### Creative Writing Exercise

Think about "escape" as a metaphor. Write about a time you escaped, or a situation you wish you could escape. Your story can be serious or humorous.

## Chapter 6

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- ♦ Stanton's plunge into reckless behavior is set in the context of the pop culture depiction of teenage girls in the 1970s. Discuss the images, and/or stereotypes of teenage girls in the 1970s and today.
- ♦ Why do you think Stanton's parents seemed unaware of her self-destructive behavior? What might they have done to help Maureen, or what limitations prevented them from doing so?
- ♦ Stanton describes the phenomenon of bombing and bomb scares in 1970s America. Discuss how these broader incidents may have trickled down to the local level. Are there phenomenon today in which this dynamic can be seen, whereby behaviors and ideas in the larger sphere are enacted at the local level?

### Critical Writing Prompt

Stanton paints a bleak portrait of teenage life in the 1970s, at least in her peer group. Investigate the concept of "juvenile delinquency," especially how this term is defined and to whom it is applied, and why.

### Creative Writing Exercise

Stanton lists songs, books, films, and television shows that influenced her in her teenage years. Write about a song, book, film, or television show that had a powerful effect on you as a child, or as a teenager. Or write about a fictional character from pop culture with whom you identify.

## Chapter 7

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- ♦ Stanton’s first job was as a gas station pump attendant. Discuss the observations Stanton makes about the world she sees from her perspective at the station. What does she learn about this larger glimpse of society?
- ♦ Two pivotal events form a turning point for Stanton—losing her two best friends and her boyfriend. Discuss how these losses lead to the beginning of change in Stanton’s life.
- ♦ Stanton writes that she had “harbored a fugitive sadness.” What do you think she means by this? Discuss the ways that Stanton dealt with—or avoided—her emotional distress up to this point in the story.

### Critical Writing Prompt

Stanton notes the demographic shift in the inmate population of Walpole prison, which she observed first at her gas station job. Research and write about the demographic changes in prison populations from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to present. Discuss one of the trends that you find in your research.

### Creative Writing Exercise

On p. 158, Stanton “reads” the text of a photograph of her and her boyfriend, Nicky. Find a photo from your past—at least a few years past—and tell the story of what is happening inside the frame of the photo, and also outside the frame of the photo. Does the photo tell an accurate story, or is it showing only a moment that doesn’t exemplify the “larger picture” of your life then.

## Chapter 8

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- ♦ On p. 169, Stanton writes that she was “melancholy and moody, awkward and self-conscious.” Discuss why Stanton now sees these traits as positive.
- ♦ Stanton’s nearly full-time job at the gas station was part of a work-study program, for which she earned school credit. She writes that the job was like a “practical lab” to her sociology class. Discuss what teachers might have thought Stanton would learn on a work-study job and what Stanton says she learned. How was Stanton’s job an education?
- ♦ The cross-country road trip Stanton took with her sister and friends was a pivotal moment in the trajectory of Stanton’s coming-of-age. Discuss what Stanton experienced on this trip and how it changed her.

### Critical Writing Prompt

At the end of chapter 8, on p. 190, Stanton refers to programs meant to divert at-risk youth from delinquent behavior. Research the Boston, or the Iceland programs Stanton mentions, or other diversion programs and discuss why, or why not, they are effective.

### Creative Writing Exercise

Write about a trip you took, describing in detail the place, your observations, and how you felt before, during, and after the trip. Your trip might be to somewhere distant, but it might be to a neighborhood close by that is new to you, or into a building or business or other place for the first time. The trip might be on foot, bike, car or plane. Remember, as the reader’s guide on this journey, in order to bring readers along you must describe the journey in rich, sensory details. Write what you saw, heard, smelled, touched or even tasted, and how you *felt* on the trip.

## Chapter 9

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- ♦ Why was Stanton able to abuse a drug like PCP for nearly two years without any adult intervening? Discuss some of the factors that contributed to this situation in Stanton's life, and if there are similarities or differences today in drug abuse awareness.
- ♦ In this chapter, Stanton gives a brief history of public awareness of PCP. What is the status of this dangerous drug today?
- ♦ Stanton notes the discrepancy in punishment for two drug dealers, one white and one African American. How does this information tie in with the "prison" theme of the book, including the notions of who is "good" and who is "bad" mentioned in the book's prologue?

### Critical Writing Prompt

Stanton describes anti-drug campaigns of the 1970s meant to deter the use of "angel dust." Find an anti-drug public service announcement or campaign today and analyze its rhetoric. What is the message and who is the intended audience? How effective is the campaign, in your opinion?

### Creative Writing Exercise

On p. 193, Stanton writes, "I thought the badness was contained behind the cement walls of the prison, but the badness was in us, too, the citizens of the town, its sons and daughters." Write a meditation on the idea of "good" and "bad" within all of us. What makes you feel like you are good person, or a bad person? Tell a story of a time you felt either way.

## Chapter 10

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- ♦ In the final chapter, we see once again the swimming pool that Stanton's mother and her children built the summer her father left. Discuss the symbolism of the pool in the story.
- ♦ What does Stanton learn about her father much later in their lives? How is her father depicted throughout the book, especially in the final chapter?
- ♦ Stanton ends the story with a plea for forgiveness. From whom, and on whose behalf, is Stanton asking for forgiveness? Why? How does ending on this note effect the story overall?

### Critical Writing Prompt

Divorce is a more common phenomenon now than it was in the early 1970s when Stanton's parents separated. Research statistics on families in a particular past decade (the 1970s, or 1980s), compared to today. How has the definition and structure of the family changed over time?

### Creative Writing Exercise

Write a letter to someone asking them to forgive you for something you did in the past, i.e., to a sibling, a friend, a parent, or even a stranger if that applies. Explain the action for which you are seeking forgiveness, and reflect on how you, or circumstances have changed between the time you committed the act and now.

*Alternative:* Stanton lists objects from her childhood that she fears are buried in the former swimming pool. Write about an object from your earlier years that you still have, or that you cherish and keep, or one you lost but remember vividly. Describe the object and how you acquired it, and reflect on why it is meaningful to you.

## General discussion questions for *Body Leaping Backward*

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1. Stanton's narrative is book-ended by the mentions of the house her parents built and the swimming pool. Each appears early in the story, and then reappears at the end. Discuss what how the house and pool give symbolic meaning to Stanton's story.
2. There are two "voices" in Stanton's memoir, the teenage girl's and the adult's looking back at her past self. How do these two voices shape the story? Are there commonalities in Stanton's younger voice/ persona and in her older one? Beside the diary entries, how does Stanton convey the consciousness of a teenage girl?
3. Stanton's personal narrative is interlaced with research on sociocultural, historical, and political events. How does this research give meaning to, or help shape, Stanton's story? Why does Stanton offer this background in her personal story?
4. Describe the economic context of Stanton's story, including the larger cultural economy and her family's financial situation. How does economic status help to shape Stanton's world as a teenager?
5. There is a motif of *voice* in Stanton's memoir; she is called a "back talker" and "fresh." Track this motif in the book and discuss what happens to Stanton's voice as she moves from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Why is this motif important to her story?
6. Toward the end of the book, on p. 204, Stanton writes, "You can't go back and fix things, only go back to understand them." What is Stanton trying to understand by returning to her teenage years in this memoir?
7. Stanton uses the term "delinquent" in the subtitle of her book. Why does Stanton claim this description for her "girlhood"? Discuss the label of juvenile delinquent and what it means to you. Has your notion of delinquency changed or evolved after reading Stanton's memoir?
8. Stanton's coming-of-age story takes place in the 1970s. Daily life was different fifty years ago, but what aspects of adolescence are similar? What parts of the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood resonate across generations? What is the work teenagers must do as they move away from the innocence of childhood and become independent young adults?

## Contact Information

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- ♦ For a complimentary **exam copy** of *Body Leaping Backward*, visit:

<https://www.hmhbooks.com/desk-exam-copies>

- ♦ For discounted **group sales** or help ordering, find your Houghton Mifflin Harcourt sales representative by zip code:

<http://hmhco.force.com/replocator/repLocator>

- ♦ For an in-person or Skype **classroom visit** with the author, use this contact form:

<https://www.maureenstantonwriter.com/contact>