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# Life as we knew it

by Susan Beth Pfeffer

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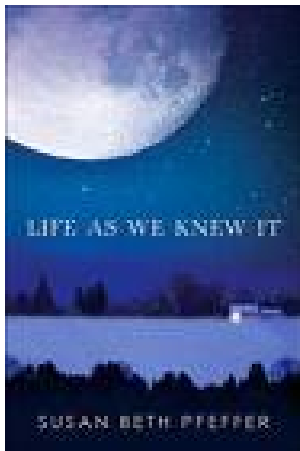
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## Summary

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Miranda's disbelief turns to fear in a split second when a meteor knocks the moon closer to the earth. How should her family prepare for the future when worldwide tsunamis wipe out the coasts, earthquakes rock the continents, and volcanic ash blocks out the sun? As summer turns to Arctic winter, Miranda, her two brothers, and their mother retreat to the unexpected safe haven of their sunroom, where they subsist on stockpiled food and limited water in the warmth of a wood-burning stove. Told in journal entries, this is the heart-pounding story of Miranda's struggle to hold on to the most important resource of all--hope--in an increasingly desperate and unfamiliar world.

**Source:** [http://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm?book\\_number=1928](http://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm?book_number=1928)



## About the Author

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Susan Beth Pfeffer was born in New York City in 1948. She grew up in the city and its nearby suburbs and spent summers in the Catskill Mountains. When she was six her father wrote and published a book on constitutional law, and Pfeffer decided that she, too, wanted to be a writer. That year she wrote her first story, about the love between an Oreo cookie and a pair of scissors. However, it wasn't until 1970 that her first book, *Just Morgan*, was published. She wrote it during her last semester at

New York University; since then, she has been a full-time writer for young people.

She has won numerous awards and citations for her work, which range from picture books to middle-grade and young-adult novels, and include both contemporary and historical fiction. She is also the author of the popular *Portraits of Little Women* series for grades 3-6, and has written a book for adults on writing for children.

To date, she has written more than 60 books. *About David* was awarded the South Carolina Young Adult Book Award. *The Year without Michael* is an ALA Best Book for Young Adults and winner of the South Carolina Young Adult Book Award; it was also named by the American Library Association as one of the hundred best books for teenagers written between 1968-1993.

When she is not working, she enjoys watching movies, both new and old, and collecting movie memorabilia, reading biographies and histories, and eating foods that are bad for her. She lives in Middletown, New York, with her two cats, Alexander and Emily.

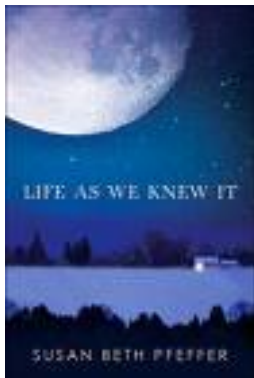
**Source:**

[http://www.bookbrowse.com/biographies/index.cfm?author\\_number=1409](http://www.bookbrowse.com/biographies/index.cfm?author_number=1409)



## Book Review

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*Life as We Knew It* is written as the journal of high school junior Miranda. Life in her small Pennsylvania town isn't perfect- her best friends are bugging her and she's not sure she even likes them much anymore. One has become a born again Christian and the other one is really into boys. Her dad's new wife is pregnant and giddy and that's bugging her too. She wants to start ice skating lessons again but her mom wants her to continue on the swim team. To top it all off, there's this "moon thing". At first it barely gets a mention in her journal, but then her teachers start piling on more homework about the moon. Annoying!

An asteroid is scheduled to hit the moon on Wednesday, May 18<sup>th</sup>, around 9:30 pm. The teachers are all talking about the moon, even her French teacher, and giving out assignments about it. Why are they making such a fuss?

When the big night arrives, Miranda's mom makes a plate of cookies and the family gathers around CNN to see what's going on. Just before the lunar event, they take lawn chairs and the cookies out to their front yard, along with binoculars and a telescope. Neighbors are barbequing and it's a party atmosphere up and down the street. Miranda's brother, manning the binoculars, shouts that the asteroid is coming. A hush falls over the neighborhood as everyone looks skyward and sees it streaking across the sky, smaller than the moon but bigger than anything else they'd ever seen in the sky. There are cheers when it makes impact, but then the cheers stop and there are screams of "Oh my God!"

From Miranda's journal:

*"But the moon wasn't a half moon anymore. It was tilted and wrong and a three quarter moon and it got larger, way larger, large like a moon rising on the horizon, only it wasn't rising. It was smack in the middle of the sky, way too big, way too visible. You could see details on the craters even without the binoculars that before I'd seen with Matt's telescope."*

The moon, pushed off its axis and out of its orbit, wreaks havoc on the earth's environment. Tsunamis destroy the eastern seaboard, killing millions. Terrifying thunderstorms knock out power sporadically. It's hard to get news of what's going on. Miranda goes to school the next day but it's anything but typical. Her mom comes to get her and they race to the grocery store with hundreds of dollars in cash, buying everything in sight that they might possibly need in the foreseeable future, taking purchases to the car then returning for more. The panic is palpable.

As the world changes, Miranda and her family learn to survive with few resources, no heat or electricity, and a dwindling food supply. There are earthquakes and volcanic eruptions in other areas of the country and around the world, with ash traveling for miles and blocking the sun, causing temperatures to plummet and creating an Arctic winter. We hear about many of these things as information from Miranda's mom after she listens to the radio, etc., making it a lot less terrifying to read than it would be if Miranda were seeing things firsthand.

Miranda is forced to grow up quickly. She and her family are strong in the face of enormous challenges. They are determined to survive in a world that has become unrecognizable. They do what needs to be done to take care of themselves and each other. Miranda amazes herself at what she is able and willing to do for the people she loves.

I was totally engrossed in this book. Among many other things, it made me think about how woefully unprepared we are for any sort of major emergency. It made me think about our resources and the food we eat (and waste). It caused me to wonder about the nature of our environment, the delicate balance we take for granted every single day. How one thing, one event, can change our lives permanently. And how through love and determination we can survive just about anything.

I LOVED *Life as We Knew It* and HIGHLY recommend it!! It would be great for book clubs, especially mother/daughter book clubs (if the kids are old enough).

**Source:** <http://lisamm.wordpress.com/2009/01/05/review-life-as-we-knew-it-by-susan-beth-pfeffer/>



## Discussion Questions

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Warning! Some of the questions contain key elements of the plot. Do not read if you don't want to know what happens!

1. Before the meteor strikes the moon, what are the biggest concerns in Miranda's life? How do they change in the months that follow?
2. How does Becky's death affect the friendship among Miranda, Megan and Sammi?
3. After the meteor strikes the moon, services such as telephone, Internet, and television stop, and Miranda writes in her journal that "Civilization has ended." Do you think people are too dependent on electronic gadgets? Would you feel as Miranda does if you could no longer use the gadgets many people have come to depend on in their daily lives? How would you handle this situation?
4. What changes does Miranda notice about people in the days following the meteor strike?
5. What does Miranda experience at the supermarket that makes her realize how things have changed for the worse?
6. How would you describe Miranda's relationship with her brothers, Matt and Jonny? How does this relationship change during the course of the story?
7. Why does it bother Miranda when Megan gives away half her sandwich at lunch?
8. How does Miranda feel about Megan's religious convictions? How does this affect their friendship? Do you think Megan's faith is a good one?
9. How would you describe the relationship between Miranda and Dan?
10. Why is Miranda's mom so angry about her leaving the food line to get Dan? What surprises Miranda most about her mom's reaction?
11. Why does Sammi leave town with forty-year-old George? How does Miranda feel about Sammi leaving?

12. What does Miranda realize about her mom when she visits Megan for the last time?
13. Do you think the reaction Miranda's mother has when she see Miranda eating the bag of chocolate chips is appropriate, or did she overreact? How does her mother's reaction affect Miranda emotionally?
14. Why does Miranda call Reverend Marshall "despicable?" Do you agree with her? Why or why not?
15. After Mrs. Nesbitt dies, Miranda goes through her kitchen cabinets and says doing so maker her "feel like a cannibal?" Why does she feel this way?
16. Why does Miranda call the family's first Christmas after the catastrophe "Absolutely the best Christmas ever?"
17. On New Year's Eve, Miranda wonders if people ever realize how precious life is What events have happened in Miranda's life to remind her that life is precious?
18. What incident happens at the house to make Miranda believe her family will survive no matter what?
19. What does Miranda realize in terms of why she has been keeping a journal?
20. What do you think will become of Miranda and her family and friends?
21. If you were in a catastrophic situation like Miranda, what would you do? What would you be willing to do in order to survive and take care of your family?
22. Miranda and her friends Sammi and Megan have different ways of surviving, Sammi leaves her home with a benefactor; Megan puts her faith in God; and Miranda stays put. Which one of those actions would you take to save yourself and your family, or would you do something different?
23. Several times in the book, Miranda describes her dreams and daydreams. In many of those dreams, Miranda struggles to determine if she is in heaven. Why do you think this is important to Miranda? How do her dreams affect her waking life? Why does she need to daydream? Why does the last dream make Miranda decide she needs to sacrifice herself for her family?

Source:

[http://www.harcourtbooks.com/images/pdf/guides/life\\_as\\_we\\_knew\\_it\\_dg.pdf](http://www.harcourtbooks.com/images/pdf/guides/life_as_we_knew_it_dg.pdf)



# Author Interview

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Born in New York City, and raised on Long Island, Susan Beth Pfeffer moved to Middletown, NY immediately following the publication of her first children's book, *Just Morgan*, and continued to live there as she wrote another 74 books for kids and teens.

Among her many titles are *Kid Power* (winner of the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award and the Sequoyah Children's Book Award), *About David* (winner of the South Carolina Young Adult Book Award), *The Year without Michael* (also winner of the South Carolina Young Adult Book Award and selected as one of the American Library Association 100 best books for young adults published in a 25 year period), and the popular *Portraits Of Little Women* series.

In the winter of 2005, having nothing better to do, Susan wrote the manuscript that became her 74th book, *Life as We Knew It*. After 40 years, she became an overnight sensation. *Life as We Knew It* was her first New York Times best selling title. It was named the young adult selection for One Book New Jersey 2009, and won the 2009 Garden State Teen Book Award. It is also the first winner of the Truman Readers Award.

Following the success of *Life as We Knew It*, Susan has written a companion novel, *The Dead and the Gone*, writing about the same natural catastrophe that is the backdrop for the first book, while focusing on completely different characters. The third book of the trilogy, and Susan's 76th title, *This World We Live In*, is scheduled for publication in spring of 2010.

## **Interview with Susan Beth Pfeffer**

### **How long have you been writing?**

I wrote my first book that got published, *Just Morgan*, during my senior year in college, so I've been a professional writer my entire adult life. It was slightly fluky that it got published, but since my dream had always been to be a writer, I just took it from there. My 76th book, *This World We Live In*, the third in the Moon Crash trilogy, will be published in 2010, and I realized, since *Morgan* was published in 1970, that will make me a four decade writer.

**I remember reading your book *What Do You Do When Your Mouth Won't Open* when I was young. It enjoyed a prominent position in my book collection for years because I really enjoyed the plot and its well defined characters. However, that was the last book of yours that I read until I recently reviewed *The Dead and the Gone*. How do you think your writing has changed and developed over the years, from your older realistic fiction books to your newest science fiction fantasies?**

Writing fiction was a natural evolution for me. There were two themes I consistently returned to, solving problems, and families in crisis. *What Do You Do When Your Mouth Won't Open*, like much of my middle group fiction, is problem solving base. Reesa is phobic about speaking in public, but a situation arises where she has to. Can she learn to cope with her phobia?

**I was looking through a list of your other books, and they all almost all realistic fiction. What motivated you to jump into the science fiction genre with *Life As We Knew It*?**

My young adult books are more family in crisis based, and actually I didn't think of *Life as We Knew It* as science fiction when I wrote it. To me it was a family in crisis book, with a really really big crisis. It wasn't until it got shortlisted for some science fiction awards that I discovered it was thought of as science fiction. A very pleasant surprise, as far as I was concerned.

**What do you think about the reader response to *Life as We Knew It* and *The Dead and the Gone* compared with your many other books for young adults?**

I knew while I was writing *Life as We Knew It*, that it was something special. It was so much fun to write, and it was so involving for me. I had fantasies about it being used for book discussion groups, because it seemed like such a discussable book (these fantasies, I'm delighted to report, have come true). But the response to it has been so much greater than I ever dreamed of. A lot of that is because of the internet. *Life as We Knew It* got a whole lot of blog reviews (it still gets them). There is an audience for young adult science fiction that I never knew existed before.

Because of its success, I got to write *The Dead and the Gone*, which takes the same catastrophe but focuses on a teenage boy and his family in New York City. And I just finished *This World We Live In*, which brings me back to Miranda's diary, but includes characters from *The Dead and the Gone* in it. Since I love learning what happens next, it's been even more fun for me to write these books.

**What gave you the idea to write about the moon being knocked into a closer orbit around earth?**

I got the idea for *Life as We Knew It* from watching a not particularly good movie called *Meteor* one afternoon. It got me thinking about what it would be like to be

a teenager living through a worldwide catastrophe. I then worked through two separate issues: what was the catastrophe and who was the teenager. I spent about three weeks thinking things out, and then I began to write. I decided on moving the orbit of the moon a little closer to earth because I've always been intrigued by the fact that the moon controls the tides.

In addition, I wanted a rolling catastrophe. I wanted things to get worse, then worse some more, and then when you think they can't get any worse, oops, they do. I'm not a big drama writer, so I didn't want any big drama scenes. Just the little stuff, which always intrigues me, but doesn't always get discussed in end of the world stuff. How do you do the laundry? That kind of question.

**Do you have any advice for any aspiring young writers out there?**

I get asked occasionally to give advice to aspiring writers, young and old, and my suggestions are pretty simple. I think the most important thing is to figure out what themes you like the best, and write the stories that best explore those themes. Writing should be fun, not homework. Even rewriting can be fun, if you think of it as solving a problem. I'm my first and best audience; because I tell myself the stories I most enjoy hearing. And I've been doing that now for just about five decades!

**Source:** <http://www.books-for-sale.org/318/interview-with-author-susan-beth-pfeffer/>



## Further Reading

If you liked **LIFE AS WE KNEW IT** by Susan Beth Pfeffer you might like to read the following books, too!

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- SOS TITANIC*** by Eve Bunting  
***GOOD –BYE, CHICKEN LITTLE*** by Betsy Byars  
***OVERBOARD*** by Elizabeth Fama  
***DR. FRANKLIN’S ISLAND*** by Ann Halam  
***FAR NORTH*** by Will Hobbs  
***THE WINTER ROAD*** by Terry Hokenson  
***ESCAPING THE GIANT WAVE*** by Peg Kehret  
***THE WHITE DARKNESS*** by Geraldine McCaughrean  
***SAVING CASCADIA*** by John J. Nance  
***HATCHET*** by Gary Paulsen  
***RISING WATER*** by P.J. Petersen  
***THE DEAD AND THE GONE*** by Susan Beth Pfeffer  
***NATION*** by Terry Pratchett  
***THE TRAP*** by John E. Smelcer  
***THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW*** by Whitley Strieber  
***DEEP*** by Susanna Vance  
***MEMORY BOY: A NOVEL*** by Will Weaver