



Benched

Cristy Watson

Reading Level: 3.8

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AR Quiz # 143241

Book Summary

When Cody and his friends accept a challenge from a local gang to steal a park bench, their main concern is keeping themselves on the gang's good side. Cody learns that the stolen bench was dedicated to the father of the English teacher who sponsors the school newspaper—the paper that Cody just started writing for—and he's worried about the consequences. As the gang applies pressure for more from Cody and his friends, Cody realizes they've crossed a line, and now he has to figure out how to make things right again.

Author Biography

Cristy Watson is a teacher who loves reading and writing poetry and YA novels. She was born in Calgary, Alberta, and has lived in San Francisco, Kamloops, North Vancouver and now resides happily near the beach in sunny White Rock, British Columbia. Cristy hosts open-mike readings at her local coffee shop and likes to enter writing contests, especially ones where there is a challenging time limit. One day while walking around the ponds near her home, she discovered that one of the park benches went missing overnight...and the idea for *Benched* was born. *Benched* is Cristy's first novel in the Orca Currents series.

Connecting to the Text

Character

As a way to connect to the character of Cody, ask students to note, while reading the novel, instances where Cody has a physical response to a situation. These occur throughout the novel, but most tellingly in the early chapters. Examples are given below.

- Ask students: What is happening, and what is Cody's body trying to tell him? Do you sometimes have responses like this? When and how can you "listen" to them?
Option: You may wish to use early examples to lead a discussion on the author's use of foreshadowing.

(ch. 1) *"A lump the size of a grapefruit formed in my throat."*

(ch. 1) *"My gut said this was a bad idea."*

(ch. 2) *"My throat felt constricted."*

(ch. 5) *"My heart felt like it was in my mouth."*

(ch. 8) *"Anger I'd felt. A lot. Especially lately. But loss, this was new, and it sat heavily on my chest."*

Language

In chapter 2, Cody says, "Adults think they have everything covered. That is so far from the truth." Ask students to consider the language that is used by the characters in *Benched*, including Cody, Taz, Bowman, Cassie and Beaker. This novel was written by an adult for a teen audience. Does the language ring true for you and your friends? Why, or why not?

Plot

There are a number of instances in *Benched* where Cody and his friends ask, "Do we have a choice?" when faced with joining in Beaker's plans or not. Ask students to explore one of these scenes in the novel, and follow it through to the end of the novel. What was the impact of their choice, and who did their choice affect? Ask students to imagine how the novel might have progressed differently had they made a different choice. For example:

(ch. 1) Cody: *"I hesitated before answering. Should I tell them?"* What if he hadn't?

(ch. 3) Cody: *"Do you really think we should be doing this?"* Bowman: *"Do we have a choice?"* Do they have choice? What are their choices?

(ch. 5) Cody: *"If we didn't get this bench out tonight, who knows what the gang would do to us? Besides, I didn't want to let my friends down."* What if Cody had called the whole thing off and left the bench? Would that really have let his friends down?

(ch. 6) Cody: *"I could tell Taz was only interested in the cash. Bowman's eyes were fixed on the ground...The only way out was to agree."* Is this true? What if Cody hadn't agreed? What are his choices?

Point of View

1. In chapter 3, Cody and his friends are instructed to remove a park bench as part of an initiation “test” from Beaker. Cody said, “At first I wasn’t sure I wanted to go through with this...Besides, if we took some old bench, who was it hurting?” Ask students to reflect on this in a paragraph, bringing in examples of similar events in their own communities or in school (graffiti, theft, damage to windows, etc.). In the novel, who was affected by the destruction of the bench? How did it impact them? Can you imagine similar impacts in the examples from your own experiences?
2. The man who lives close to the park refers to Cody and his friends as “nothing but stupid teenagers” (ch. 3) and “bloody hoodlums” (ch. 5). Ask students to consider what has led this man to say these things about people he doesn’t know. How could living next to a park where Beaker and his gang hang out have influenced his perceptions of teenagers? What are the other teenagers in the novel doing that would give a different impression? (Prompt: Cassie.)
3. Ask students to draw a mind map based on who has been impacted by the destruction of the park bench, and how. Include: Cody, Taz and Bowman; Beaker and his gang; Mrs. Cindy and her parents; Cassie and the journalism club; the man who lives beside the park; the maintenance worker from the City; and members of the public.

The Writer’s Craft

1. There are a number of examples of the author building suspense in the early chapters of *Benched*. A common technique is foreshadowing. The author provides hints about characters and potential conflicts or threats that might occur. Ask students to identify an example of foreshadowing and explain if and how it helped them engage with the novel’s characters or plot.

Option: Ask students to follow their examples through the novel. What did they guess their example was hinting at, and what actually happened?

Examples could include:

(ch. 1) “*Maybe I could ignore the whole thing, like it didn’t happen.*”

(ch. 1) “*The gang had been cool with my brother. That didn’t mean they’d be cool with us.*”

(ch. 2) “*Beaker’s gang had a reputation for rearranging faces. I just wanted to get out of there in one piece.*”

(ch. 2) “*‘Too bad about Dylan,’ said Beaker. ‘He was a good guy.’*”

(ch. 4) “*Dylan was always into something... ‘Grab life by the horns,’ he’d say.*”

2. Metaphors and similes connect ideas, giving us “pictures” that expand our understanding of situations and characters. Read the following examples aloud to the large group, or write them on the board. After each example, discuss the connection that is being made and how it deepens our understanding of the situation or character. Invite students to find examples of metaphors, similes and vivid images as they read the novel. Ask students to log them, and then share them in a large group discussion.

- (ch. 3) “...any light from nearby houses was shrouded.”
- (ch. 3) “Jumping on the spot like a terrier, Taz said, ‘That was cool!’”
- (ch. 6) “Alarm bells were going off in my head.”
- (ch. 11) “As I ran out into the street, I heard the screech of tires and what sounded like a fist punching the hood of a car.”
- (ch. 11) “Instead of remembering how Dylan always yelled at me and treated me like a kid, I had a flood of good memories.”

Connecting to the Curriculum

Art

Have students create individual art projects using images and quotations from *Benched*. Ideas could include collage, sketching, pastel or paint, or dioramas. Prompts:

- (ch. 6) [In the park] “Geese lounged on the sidewalks and munched grass...[A] quiet heron was standing on one leg. Those birds ought to win awards for patience... ‘Hey, check out the turtle!’”
- (ch. 6) [In the park] “The guys were wearing hoodies that shielded their faces.”
- (ch. 11) [On the plaque] “Beauty is truth, truth beauty...All you need to know.”

Language Arts

- In chapter 7, Cody’s English teacher provides an interesting and thought-provoking discussion topic based on Ray Bradbury’s 1962 novel *Something Wicked this Way Comes*. She says, “[A] circus came to town and you’ve been given free tickets to ride the carousel. Only this carousel makes you older or younger, depending on whether it goes forward or backward. Which way would you choose to ride, and why?”
 - Ask students to reflect on this question and form a response in a journal reflection, poem, short story or paragraph exercise. As a large group discussion, talk about key characters in *Benched*. How do students think Cody would respond to this question? Beaker? Mrs. Cindy?
- In chapter 5 we learn that Cody “really wanted to be a journalist.” He says, “I just want to find the truth and write about it” (ch. 8). Ask students to consider how Cody felt after Dylan’s death was reported in his local paper. Dylan had been having seizures but the paper “made a big deal about teens and alcohol” (ch. 8). Cassie asks Cody, “Would you have written the story differently?”
 - As a creative writing project, ask students to imagine that they are writing the “real” story of what happened to Dylan, using the conventions of journalism (prompt: 5Ws and a How). Careful reading of the novel will provide much of the context.

Connecting to the Students—Ideas for Exploration

1. Schools, clubs, organizations and families all have unique cultures. They include traditions, rites of passage, hierarchies, language, dress, etc. After discussing culture, ask students to consider the culture of Beaker's gang in *Benched*. How do they talk and dress? Where do they hang out, and why? How do they bring new members in? What is their understanding of "family"? (ch. 2). Why is the gang attractive to Cody and his friends?
2. While Cody and his friends are afraid of Beaker, they are attracted to the "adrenaline" and excitement of being involved (ch. 2). Ask students to consider ideas that Cody and his friends could participate in that would give them excitement but without breaking the law or destroying property. Ideas could include rock climbing, sports, long distance running, amusement parks, etc. Ask students which activities Cody and his friends might enjoy.
3. In chapter 13, Taz says, "I couldn't stop thinking about that kid Linden bullied. I don't want to be next on his hit list." Hold a large group discussion about the situation that Cody, Taz and Bowman are in. Now that they're in with the gang, what choices do they have to get out? What is available to students in your school and community, to get out of an association with a gang if they, like the characters in *Benched*, are "in too deep"?

Web Resources

Discussion on the culture of youth gangs

http://people.missouristate.edu/michaelcarlie/what_i_learned_about/gangs/culture.htm

Resources for kids interested in writing and journalism

www.dailywritingtips.com/writing-resources-for-teenagers/
www.writing-world.com/links/young.shtml