



Chat Room

Kristin Butcher

Reading level: 4.0

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Book Summary

Linda is shy and avoids getting involved at school. But when her high school sets up online chat rooms, she can't resist the urge to visit them. Fueled by interest in a student with the nickname Cyrano, Linda participates in online conversations using the nickname Roxane and gains a reputation as the queen of one-liners. Soon Linda starts receiving gifts from a secret admirer who signs his gifts, "C." She is certain that her life has taken a turn for the better until "C" reveals his true identity.

Author Biography

Kristin Butcher, former teacher turned writer and reviewer, is the bestselling author of a number of books for juveniles and teens, including *Cairo Kelly and the Mann* and *Gramma Wars* as well as three books from the Orca Soundings: *The Hemingway Tradition*, *The Trouble with Liberty* and *Zee's Way*. Kristin lives in Victoria, British Columbia.

Connecting to the Text

Plot

The plot tells us the story. Each situation or event occurs, affecting what happens next, until the conclusion. Ask students to brainstorm the succession of events in *Chat Room* and summarize them using the model of a timeline. Provide posterboard and invite students to draw pictures along the timeline.

Theme

Theme, the broad idea of the story, can sometimes be revealed in the lessons learned by the characters. Invite students to work in small groups to brainstorm the lessons learned by the characters in *Chat Room*. Then, ask each group to create a radio jingle to sell one or more of these themes. Ask each group to perform their jingle in front of the large group. Topics might include:

- Internet safety: Linda jumps to conclusions about the chatters she meets in the chat room. What could she do to be safe while in the chat room?
- Internet safety: Linda puts herself in a potentially dangerous position by agreeing to meet her secret admirer at the dance. What could she have done differently?
- Personal growth: Janice acts tough and loud as a way to keep people away. That way, she avoids rejection. How can she change so that she has more confidence and develops more friendships?
- Personal growth: In public, Linda tries to hide and make herself invisible. That way, she avoids being embarrassed or hurt. How can she develop her self-confidence?

Option: Instead of creating radio jingles, have students use posterboard to create advertisements.

Language

1. Verbs such as *read*, *walk* and *jump* are action words. In *Chat Room*, we learn about the characters from the verbs that are used to describe their actions. Invite students to work through the following questions:

- ♦ The following sentences describe Linda at the school assembly. Read the sentences aloud to the group and point out the powerful verbs. Discuss what these verbs tell us about Linda's feelings and attitude. Does she seem confident?

(ch. 1) *So I bumped my way through the line... and shriveled into the seat beside her. "Math," I said, shrinking a little deeper into my chair.*

Early in the novel, Linda feels shy and wants to be invisible. The verbs chosen to describe her actions reflect this. As Linda becomes more confident, her actions are described differently.

(ch. 5) *Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying I'm normally an unhappy person. I'm not. It's just that I felt bouncier...*

(ch. 9) *I mean, here I was floating around in the clouds...*

(ch. 9) *... I couldn't help myself. I started gushing about Cyrano.*

- ♦ Write the following sentences on the board. Invite the students to consider the verbs used in the sentences and then write one word for each sentence that describes how the character feels in each situation.

(ch. 1) ... *Bio-Bernstein [was] droning on about reproduction.* (bored, unmotivated)

(ch. 1) *Janice rolled her eyes and flopped back in her chair.* (tired, bored, exasperated)

(ch. 2) *She lunged at the guy, but he was ready for her.* (angry, upset, furious)

(ch. 2) ...*she wiped her face with a paper towel and stalked out of the washroom* (embarrassed, angry)

(ch. 7) *Part of me was bouncing off the ceiling.* (happy, elated, excited)

(ch. 7) “*Yeah,*” *she drawled.* “*Give me some names.*” (bored, lazy, tired)

(ch. 7) *Stepping over and around the bodies on the rows below, I climbed up and claimed the seat.* (proud, excited, anxious, ready)

Option: Suggest an alternative scenario for each sentence above and ask the students to choose appropriate verbs. For example, ask, How would you change the verb in this sentence (“...Bio-Bernstein [was] droning on about reproduction”) if Linda really enjoyed Bio-Bernstein’s class? Encourage students to be creative and use humor in their responses.

- ♦ Write the following scenario sentences, which use the characters from *Chat Room*, on the board. Ask students to add verbs to the sentences, either working alone or brainstorming with a partner. Invite students to use more than one verb if they’d like.

- Linda felt shy about going to the dance. She _____ up to the gym doors.
- Linda was nervous about using the chat room for the first time. Her heart _____ as she typed her name.
- Janice was angry about Linda using the chat room. Janice _____ her locker door.
- The team won the chain-gang relay race! Everyone _____ and cheered.
- Linda heard her mom coming toward her room. She mustn’t know Linda was using the computer to go to the chat room instead of doing homework. Linda _____ the door shut and _____ onto her bed.

2. Metaphors and similes connect ideas, giving us mental images which expand our understanding of situations and characters.

- ♦ Read the following examples aloud or write them on the board. After each, discuss the connection that is being made and how it lends meaning to the text.

(ch. 1) *I wanted to pretend I didn’t see her, but I knew if I did she’d unleash that bullhorn voice of hers, and in two seconds, I’d have every kid in school staring at me.*

(ch. 1) [*Linda*]...*was built like a wrestler with a voice to match.*

- (ch. 4) *Weekends are supposed to be a time to rest up and recharge your batteries.*
- (ch. 4) *She nodded toward Sheri who was flitting from one kid to another like a crazed hummingbird.*
- (ch. 6) *I'm not a goddess or anything, but I'm not paper bag ugly either.*

- ♦ Invite the students to imagine, in a literal sense, the characters as they are described in the sentences above; for example, imagine Janice with an actual bullhorn for a mouth, or Sheri with a hummingbird body. As an art project, challenge students to create a collage-style portrait of a person using this theme. Students could make a portrait of themselves, one of the characters from *Chat Room* or a celebrity or sports figure. Have a wide assortment of magazines and catalogs available. Display student work and invite students to talk about their choices; for example, I choose to use a mop for my hair because my hair is always tangled.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Vocabulary

In *Chat Room*, Linda is introduced to websites and online chat rooms.

- The following terms are used in the novel in the context of computers, websites and chat rooms. Invite students to define and discuss these terms as a large group or working in small groups, using the novel or outside resources.

Option: Challenge students to use each word in a sentence.

access	icon	personal information	email
hacked	menu	cyberspace	Internet
keyboard	chat room	infected	website
anonymous	identity	search	

- The following words are used in *Chat Room*. Providing clues by reading the sentences, invite students to use the words in sentences, either by writing them individually or discussing them as a group.

abbreviations	(ch. 4)	<i>[In the chat room] I knew who was talking just by what they were saying and the abbreviations they used.</i>
access	(ch. 1)	<i>"Well, for starters, only Wellington students will have access."</i>
anonymous	(ch. 3)	<i>No one knew I was there. How could they know? I hadn't registered. And as long as I didn't, I was anonymous.</i>
anxiously	(ch. 5)	<i>Anxiously I waited for the next few messages, expecting someone to challenge or belittle what I'd said. But it didn't happen.</i>
approach	(ch. 2)	<i>I should have known Janice wasn't finished ragging on me. She was just trying a different approach.</i>
credibility	(ch. 10)	Marc: <i>"But it's got to be our secret. Okay? If word got out, I'd lose all my credibility with the student body—and the teachers."</i>

eavesdropper	(ch. 3)	<i>Feeling like an eavesdropper I scrolled through the page, stopping now and then to read what people had written.</i>
gullible	(ch. 2)	<i>“While you gullible little innocents are blabbing your faces off online, the crazies lurk in the background, taking it all in.”</i>
identity	(ch. 1)	<i>“If your identity is secret, how will anyone know if you’re breaking the rules?”</i>
observer	(ch. 5)	<i>So when I went from being a chat room observer to becoming an actual participant, I didn’t bother telling her.</i>
occasional	(ch. 2)	<i>I have an e-mail address, but, except for the occasional joke from my cousin in California, the only messages I get are advertisements for pre-approved mortgages and cheap meds.</i>
reluctantly	(ch. 6)	<i>Why did they have to show up right when I was having a good time? Reluctantly I put my hands back on the keyboard and prepared to log off.</i>
skeptically	(ch. 7)	<i>Janice eyed me skeptically. “Since when are you a basketball fan?”</i>
smug	(ch. 5)	<i>But then her expression became smug again and she said, “Oh, I get it. You’ve been into the chat rooms. You just haven’t done any talking yet.”</i>

Connecting to the Students—Ideas for Exploration

1. Students who sign in to Wellington High School’s chat room give themselves nicknames. Linda names herself Roxane and Chad names himself Cyrano. Invite students to give themselves nicknames, and then ask them to explain their choice.
2. Wellington High School has strict rules about using the chat room, as Marc states in chapter 1:

Well, for starters, only Wellington students will have access. Secondly, when you enter a chat room you have to use a nickname. And thirdly, you can’t gross out or talk about other students.

As a group, talk about why these rules exist for the chat room. What could happen if these rules were not in place? How do these rules protect chat room users?

3. Use of the Internet for chat rooms, instant messaging, websites and email has inherent dangers. Discuss these dangers. How can students protect themselves? (See Web Resources on the last page of this guide for a list of website resources containing information on privacy, cyber bullying, Internet safety tips organized by age and a “Are You Web Aware?” checklist for pre-teens aged 9–12.)

Using the following model, list reasons and ways to be safe online. Elect or assign two scribes who will record the ideas of the class on the board or on flipcharts. As a group, narrow the list down so that there is no duplication, then post the list on the wall where everyone can see it.

REASONS to be safe online

WAYS to be safe online

4. Kristin Butcher, author of *Chat Room*, is scared of chat rooms. For Kristin, writing about things that make her anxious or uncomfortable helps her to confront her fears. Ask students to write a journal/diary entry or draw a picture about something they fear. It could relate to chat rooms, Internet use, cyber bullying or another issue of their choice (the first day of school, the first day at a job, how to fit in at school, etc.). Does writing or drawing a picture help alleviate our fears?
5. Linda puts herself in a potentially dangerous situation by going to the dance but not telling anyone where she was going. Taking an invitation or gifts from someone you have met through a chat room can be very dangerous.
 - ◆ Imagine you are a close friend of Linda's and she has just received her first anonymous gift. What advice would you give her? What should she do?
 - ◆ Imagine you are Linda at the end of the novel. Everything has turned out all right, although you did put yourself in harm's way. What could you do differently next time?
 - ◆ Research news articles about the dangers of meeting people online. How can people protect themselves while online?
6. Linda's friend Janice has a very tough, loud and pushy personality. We learn that she acts this way to protect herself from being rejected.

(ch. 12) *I know people don't like me. So I act like I don't like them first. That way it doesn't hurt so bad when they reject me.*

 - ◆ Do you know someone who is like this? Write a letter to that person (or to the character Janice). What advice would you give them?
 - ◆ Is Janice a bully or is she just misunderstood? Is Janice someone you could be friends with? Why, or why not?
 - ◆ What other ways do people emotionally protect themselves from others? Write a paragraph describing a person who uses particular behaviors to hide how they really feel. (For example, someone who is always making jokes and funny comments as a way to avoid talking about important things.)

Web Resources

Web/Internet awareness resource which includes safety tips and information on cyber bullying, privacy issues, Internet addiction and more.

www.bewebaware.com

How to keep safe while chatting online. Also has information on mobile phones, emailing, messaging and online games.

www.chatdanger.com

FBI's Parents' Guide to Internet Safety.

www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguidee.htm

US Government White House Kids' Website Article: "Increasing Internet Safety for America's Children."

www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/10/20021023.html

Canadian Government website: Internet safety for kids.

www.safecanada.ca/link_e.asp?category=3&topic=94