



## ***Desert Slam***

Steven Barwin

Reading level: 4.2  
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### **Book Summary**

For spring break, sixteen-year-old Maya travels from Vancouver to Palm Springs to visit her grandparents, soak up the sun and play some tennis. When they surprise her with tickets to the Indian Wells tennis tournament, she can't believe her luck. This is going to be the best vacation ever. But on the way back from the match they get into a fender bender. The other driver suggests they just square up and not involve the police or insurance companies. That seems odd to Maya, especially since the passenger of the other vehicle is visibly pregnant. But because Maya was driving, her grandfather is worried about repercussions and agrees to the deal. Later, Maya and her new friend Ruby discover that similar incidents have happened to others in her grandparents' gated community. They start to investigate, and when they spot the woman from the crash working in a clothing store, and clearly not pregnant, they know they are onto something.

### **Prereading Idea**

Ask students to discuss the connotations and synonyms surrounding the words in the title and predict how they might relate to the book. Have students write an "opening paragraph" to the book that would include one or more of their predictions. Have students revisit their predictions at the end of the novel.

**Connecting to the World—Writing and Research Ideas**

- Ask students to read the first two pages of the book and to notice the use of imagery that captures what Maya sees, feels and hears. Discuss with students the types of imagery the author uses: onomatopoeia, personification, descriptive adjectives and strong verbs. Then ask students to write a descriptive narrative of an event in their life making sure to include elements which create an image for the reader. For example, students could write about a time they went snow skiing, riding a bicycle, running or another activity. Have students share their writing in small groups of four to five students.
- In chapter 3, Ruby says to Maya, “This is just a random incident in the vast universe.” Ask students to think about this statement and to decide if things occur randomly or if fate is involved when unusual things occur. Ask students to write a paper stating their opinion on this topic and, using examples from the book and from their own lives, to support their stance on the topic. Display student writing in the classroom.
- Staged car accidents have become a big business scam around the world. Ask students to research the “who,” “what,” “when,” “where” and “why” of this crime and to create an informative brochure explaining the scam. Have students find local community locations to display and share brochures, such as the police department, community center, senior citizens center, hospital or library.

**Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel*****Conflict***

The title of the book could sum up the conflict of the story. Ask students to make a collage on a poster board with the title in the center of the board. Surrounding the title students should include: (1) excerpts or quotations that highlight the conflict, and (2) illustrations or pictures of events from the book. Display the conflict collages in the classroom.

***Setting***

Setting is the time and place of action in a story. Ask students to think about the setting of *Desert Slam* and to brainstorm a list of facts about the setting. After the list is complete, ask students to determine if each element of the setting is crucial to the story and to explain why or why not. As students share their responses, ask the class to corroborate their reasoning.

***Characterization***

Authors use various avenues to develop a character—through physical description; through the character’s speech, thoughts, feelings or actions; through the speech, thoughts, feelings or actions of other characters; and through a narrator’s direct comments. Ask students to choose a partner and to select one of the characters in the book. Then, have students find an example of at least three methods that the author uses to develop their character. Along with the name of the character, have students display on a poster board the three methods and a quote or paraphrase that illustrates each method. Display the poster boards in the room.

**Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions**

1. What do Ruby and Maya have in common? Why do they become such close friends so quickly?
2. Why is Dale willing to negotiate a settlement so quickly? Why doesn't he want to take his pregnant wife to the hospital?
3. Why is Maya embarrassed when she has the accident? What do her grandparents say about the wreck?
4. Why do Ruby and Maya feel the need to investigate Maya's accident? What do they discover?
5. How does Christina and her cousin, Javier, help Ruby and Maya? What specific role does Javier play?
6. What does the fact that Maya wants to help Laurie out of a bad situation say about Maya's character? Why doesn't Ruby want to help Laurie?
7. In chapter 11, what does the owner of the tow truck, Jerry, have to say about his sons' criminal activity? How do his sons, Dale and Joe, respond to him?

**Writer's Craft*****Imagery—Personification***

The author uses words to paint pictures throughout the story. Below are some examples of personification:

“the eighth hole stretched out in front of us.” ch. 1

“The golf ball jumped ahead...and was swallowed by a small pond.” ch. 1

Ask students to find other examples of personification in the book, and then to find a situation in the book which they can rewrite to include personification. Have students share their rewrites in small groups.

**Author Biography**

**Steven Barwin** writes scripts for television shows and has worked on creating the NASCAR and World Wrestling DVD board games. His sports novels, *Slam Dunk* and *Roller Hockey Blues*, were both Canadian Children's Book Centre Choice selections. He lives in Toronto and is the proud father of twins.