



## **Gravity Check**

Alex Van Tol

Reading level: 3.0

978-1-55469-349-8 PB

AR Quiz # 143870

### **Book Summary**

Jamie is determined that nothing—not even his annoyingly popular younger brother Seth—is going to spoil his fun at a mountain-biking camp in the backcountry. Nothing but stumbling on a giant grow-op in the woods, that is. And watching their fellow campers get captured by violent drug dealers. And working with Seth to figure out a way to save them...without getting caught themselves.

### **Prereading Ideas**

- How does a crisis force people to work together?
- Discuss with your class what you know about illegal drugs and the extent of the drug trade in North America (and possibly the world). Adjust and monitor the discussion for the age of your students. As you see it, is the production and distribution of narcotics dangerous to society's functioning?
- Have you ever been faced with a difficult decision, where there didn't seem to be very good options? How do you figure those kinds of problems out?
- Is there an outdoor sport you have tried or would like to try?
- When things go wrong do you panic, or are you able to focus on finding solutions?

## Connecting to the Text

### *Plot*

- Teach students about plot elements (see web link in Resources, below). These include exposition, rising action, conflicts, climax, falling action and resolution. Working in pairs, have students map out the plot using these elements to guide their writing. Have each pair create a poster showing the plot elements of *Gravity Check*.
- Make an overhead of the following list. Discuss with students some of the things that make a good story:
  - ◆ a plot that is exciting, suspenseful, baffling or extraordinary
  - ◆ interesting situations that are well explained and believable
  - ◆ characters you care enough about to make you want to keep reading
  - ◆ characters you can relate to and who change and grow as they make decisions to solve problems
  - ◆ descriptions that make you feel like you're there
  - ◆ a variety of settings
  - ◆ a fast start—action, danger, humor
  - ◆ situations that provide an emotional response and give you something to think about
  - ◆ a good ending with problems solved and characters getting what they deserve

Using these criteria, have students write a critical review of *Gravity Check*. Students should ensure their review touches on a number of the criteria with examples and reasons for their assessment. Start here for some tips:

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/bookrev>

### *Theme*

- Like plot, setting and characters, theme is an important literary element in any novel. Theme is an idea or message about life revealed in a work of literature. It's not really a moral, but it's kind of a guiding message all the same. Break your class into small groups and have them discuss what they understand to be the theme of *Gravity Check*. Are there more than one? Is one theme stronger than the others?

### *Character*

- Part of making your characters believable is writing realistic dialogue for them. If a character says things that you know nobody would say in the real world, then the story just won't work. Have students read the scene in chapter 7 where the group arrives in camp and gets busy setting up. Is the dialogue realistic? Does it reveal some of the personality traits of the characters? Divide students into pairs and have them search through the text for several other instances of realistic dialogue. What sounds true to life? Can they find any examples of words that teenagers wouldn't use in the real world?

- In chapter 5, at the pump track, Seth and Jamie are keen to go...but Nolan's a little hesitant. Have students read the following sentence:

*Nolan sticks up his hands, palms out, and shakes his head. "You go, Rico," he says. "I'll watch you."*

How does the author use words to show the reader how Nolan is feeling? What clues can you find that tell us how nervous he is? Why is this more effective in telling a story than simply saying, *Nolan was scared*?

- People sometimes speak to each other using sarcasm. Take, for example, this excerpt from chapter 19, where the group is figuring out their escape plan:

*"Let's head 'er," agrees Chase. "If we ride now, we'll be back at the campsite by the time that Deuce guy gets here."*

*"What if he's got infrared scanners in his helicopter?" asks Nolan suddenly. "If he does, he'll be able to find us in the bushes, no matter where we are. We'd need a bunker to be safe."*

*This thought scares me. Seth gives off a little moan.*

*"What makes you so sure he'll come in a chopper?" Rico asks.*

*"Well," Nolan says, "he's a bigtime drug trafficker, right? Do you think a busy guy like that is going to hike in to his grow-op on foot?" He cocks his head and blinks at Rico. "Or maybe he'll ride in on a purple unicorn, Rico." If I wasn't so scared I'd laugh.*

How does the use of sarcasm add to this exchange between the characters? How does it hint at the characters' emotional states?

- Have students draw a character map of Jamie that details his personality characteristics, his fears, and his strengths and weaknesses. Use this as a springboard to teach students how to write a full character analysis (see web link in Resources, below).

### **Setting**

- Read the description of the camp lodge at the beginning of the second chapter. Have students make a list of words and phrases that help to create a picture in the reader's mind. Instruct them to sketch the scene as they see it.

### **Point of View**

- *Gravity Check* is told from Jamie's point of view. Have students write a scene telling the story from another character's perspective. For example, try writing from Nolan's perspective as he's watching the others on the pump track; from Seth's point of view when the brothers are stuck waiting for the others at the campfire; or from Chase's perspective when he sets off to find Nolan and Rico.
- Ask students to consider how the story would be different if it was told from the third person point of view. What are the advantages or disadvantages to using the first person? Third person? Which do they prefer?

**Vocabulary**

- Create a *Gravity Check* lexicon. Have students use a print or online dictionary to find and write definitions for the following words.
- Choose a few of the following words and use them in a sentence.
- Challenge students to use ten of the following terms in a short paragraph describing a mountain-biking experience.

adrenaline	cord (of wood)	overtake	subpar	transition
berm	devour	hydration	petulantly	suppress
captor	momentum	rapt	terrain	
coniferous	negotiate	stoke	traction	

- Just for fun, invite students to create a Wordle™ using some of the mountain biking terms in *Gravity Check*. Head to [www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net). All you do is enter some text into the box, hit *create* and voila! Your very own Wordle! You can change the font style, the colors, the layout...the sky's the limit. While it's fun to Wordle a dozen words, it's even better when you've got more. Try for anywhere between fifty and one hundred. Students can team up to make it even more fun!

**Connecting to the Curriculum****English**

- Authors often use strong verbs. Strong verbs excite the reader and keep the story moving forward. Here are some examples of how the author of *Gravity Check* uses strong verbs to enhance the story:

*I swing my leg over the crossbar and crank on the pedals.*

*I shoulder my bike and we hoof it back up through the trees to the main trail.*

*We blaze along the path, bumping over roots, catching air on little lifts and slogging through more muddy pitches*

- ♦ Have students go through one chapter of the book and find as many examples of strong verbs as they can.
- ♦ Discuss as a class how verbs can change the feel of a passage and how they can be effective at showing the characters' emotions.
- ♦ Select a passage from *Gravity Check* to rewrite, but only using plain, run-of-the-mill verbs. See who can come up with the most boring, flat passage!
- Task students to take a scene from *Gravity Check* and create a Readers Theater for it. Have them work in groups of three or four. Use teacher Aaron Shepherd's website for some tips on how to script a Readers Theater:

[www.aaronshep.com/rt/sheets.html](http://www.aaronshep.com/rt/sheets.html)

- A simile is a comparison using the words *like* or *as*. A good simile conjures an image in the reader's mind. Here are examples of two similes from *Gravity Check*:

*He straightens and wipes his brow with his gauzy arm bandage, like he's just chopped a cord of wood.*

*My chest is tight, like someone has wrapped it in thick rubber bands.*

Why are these similes effective? Have students create five similes of their own. Can they come up with a funny one?

- Invite students to write a different ending to *Gravity Check*—maybe one where Nolan “saves the day,” or where the police never show up. Or maybe even an ending where Jamie and Seth never leave the campground, but choose to wait for Chase to bring the rest of the group back.
- Divide students into groups of three or four.
  - ♦ Have them choose a scene from *Gravity Check* and create a graphic story (kind of like a comic or graphic novel) based on that scene. (It might be helpful to share some samples with them—see Resources below for a few suggestions.) Students can use the scene as the beginning, middle or end of their story. They could even build their story around a specific detail that's *in* the scene! Whatever they choose to do, they *must include the basic elements of a short story*: setting, characters, conflict (problem) and resolution (how the problem is solved).
  - ♦ Remind students to include captions, speech bubbles, sound effects, detailed pictures...all the things you typically find in a comic or graphic novel.
  - ♦ As a group, have students plan and illustrate their story, doing a rough sketch for the first draft and a final copy on posterboard to be shared with the class.

### ***Social Studies***

- Working with a partner or in a small group, have students create a “map of the action” in *Gravity Check*. Include the campsite, the trail leading into the forest, the grow-op, the cabin, and the hill where Jamie takes Warren on a wild ride. Include a legend, title and scale.

### ***Science***

- What makes a pump track work? Investigate and discuss the mechanics and physics with students, starting with a visit to YouTube to watch the following clip of pumping in action:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=fofuwA2iOfE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fofuwA2iOfE)
- At the pump track, Rico says to Nolan: “Your speed determines the nature of the obstacle.” How is this true? Divide students into pairs and have them do a quick brainstorm of where this is true in the world of sports. Can any of them think of how this quote might apply to life itself?

***Health/Personal Planning***

- Jamie observes Nolan during the first meal at camp. While he realizes the kid seems to be a total geek, Jamie's not the kind of person who needs to be unkind to someone just to make himself feel better.
  - ◆ Discuss this as a group. What is it that compels some people to torment, tease or bully others?
  - ◆ Discuss: How can bystanders intervene to shut down a bully? Why don't more people do it? What are some strategies for handling bullying—for victims and bystanders alike?
  - ◆ Challenge students to do a role-play in small groups, where one person takes on the role of the bully, one person plays the victim and the other plays the bystander.

**Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions**

1. Write about a time when you've felt jealous of someone. Why were you jealous? How did you manage these feelings? Were you able to get past them to a place where you could work with that person and not feel resentful? Why do we get jealous?
2. Jamie loves the feeling of freedom and challenge that mountain biking provides. Write about an activity you enjoy doing that makes you feel the same way.
3. When Seth and Jamie go biking in the trees on the first night of camping, Jamie decides not to give Seth trouble when he leaves the main path, because he's having fun on the trails. As you see it, is this an irresponsible decision?
4. Have you ever made a decision that placed you in a dangerous or life-threatening situation? What saved you? What would you do differently if you could go back in time? Have you ever seen someone else take a risk that could have resulted in serious harm? What should you do in such a situation?
5. Can you think of another story you've read that involves sibling rivalry? Write a brief summary of that story. How did it turn out?
6. Are you calm under pressure, or do you crack? Write about someone you know who keeps their wits about them when everything is falling apart.
7. Mitch turns out to be a very different guy than he seems to be initially. Write about another character you've read about who puts forth a false front only to be discovered later on.

**Author's Note**

Dear Reader,

Would you believe it if I told you that Nolan's epic wipeout on the rock stairs was inspired by my own...uh...embarrassing gravity check a few years back? I used to be the director of the Outdoor Education program at the school where I worked. One sunny Saturday in May, a group of students and I met up with a mountain-biking guide at a provincial park for a day of fun on the trails. We learned all sorts of cool things, like how to skid, how to stop, how to climb and how to descend. Apparently the group also learned how to go down a big flight of stairs, although what I was doing at the time the guide explained the bit about staying off your front brakes, I can't tell you. At any rate, being the good teacher, I let all the kids have at 'er first before I took to the stairs. I felt pretty confident that I knew what I was doing. I even felt a bit show-offy. After all, I'd been an outdoor director at a summer camp a few years back and had done tons of mountain biking in the Alberta foothills.

But I'd never taken on a set of stairs.

I'd explain the way things went, but if you've read about Nolan's fall, well, that's pretty much how it all went down (minus the package of Kleenex and the bleeding chin). Ugly. And definitely not something you want your students to witness.

Lucky for me, I survived to tell the tale—literally.

A few other things you should know:

1. I have eaten trail mix. Lots and lots of trail mix.
2. Seth is based on one of my favorite students ever.
3. I have seen bears at close range.
4. Jamie is a mix of several of my students.
5. Everything else in *Gravity Check?* Pure fiction.

Alex Van Tol

**Author Biography**

**Alex Van Tol** lives in Victoria, British Columbia, where she bikes along a very flat pathway to the ice cream store and back again. She will not take her bike down any stairs. Ever. Again. She hopes to write many, many more books for teens, and maybe one day, some books for adults. Alex is one of the lucky ones who gets to do what she loves for a living. Visit her in the ether at [www.alexvantol.com](http://www.alexvantol.com). Better yet? Join her Facebook fan page and send her a message!

## Resources

### *Mountain Biking*

Whistler Mountain Bike Park

[www.whistlerbike.com/index.htm](http://www.whistlerbike.com/index.htm)

North Shore mountain biking

[www.nsemb.com](http://www.nsemb.com)

Mountain biking tips

a) bunny hops

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=8G8C7QMDbO8&feature=list\\_related&playn](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8G8C7QMDbO8&feature=list_related&playn)

b) taking big drops

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=f00f0Qtjf5Q&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f00f0Qtjf5Q&feature=relmfu)

c) riding steep terrain

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNXxu33dx9Q&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNXxu33dx9Q&feature=related)

### *Plot elements*

[http://middle-school-lesson-plans.suite101.com/article.cfm/plot\\_element\\_lesson](http://middle-school-lesson-plans.suite101.com/article.cfm/plot_element_lesson)

### *Books*

Crowther, Nicki. *The Ultimate Mountain Bike Book: The Definitive Illustrated Guide to Bikes, Components, Technique, Thrills and Trails*

Davis, Don and David Carter. *Mountain Biking*

Friel, Joe. *The Mountain Biker's Training Bible*

Lopes, Brian. *Mastering Mountain Bike Skills* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)

Nealy, William. *Mountain Bike! A Manual of Beginning to Advanced Technique*

—*Mountain Bike Way of Knowledge: A cartoon self-help manual on riding technique and general mountain bike craziness*

Overend, Ned. *Mountain Bike Like a Champion*

Weintraub, Aileen. *High Interest Books: Mountain Biking* (Extreme Outdoors)

Withers, Pam. *Adrenalin Ride*

Worland, Steve. *The Mountain Bike Book* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)

Zinn, Lennard and Todd Telander. *Zinn and the Art of Mountain Bike Maintenance*

### *Graphic Novels*

O'Donnell, Liam and Mike Deas. *Media Meltdown*

—*Ramp Rats*

—*Power Play*

—*Food Fight*

—*Soccer Sabotage*

—*Wild Ride*

### *Film*

*Fundamentals Mountain Bike Technique DVD*

Overend, Ned. *Performance Mountain Biking DVD*