



On Cue

Cristy Watson

Reading level: 2.8

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Book Summary

Randi wants to be an actress and is excited about practicing her craft in drama class. She is devastated to learn the drama class has been cut. When her friends put together a successful proposal to have drama class offered as an extracurricular activity, Randi is thrilled. Then reality sinks in. Extracurriculars are scheduled after school, and after school Randi is expected to take care of her brother who has special needs. Can Randi find a way to make it all work out?

Author Biography

Cristy Watson is a teacher who also hosts open-mic readings at her local coffee shop and likes to enter writing contests, especially ones where there is a challenging time limit. The author of the Orca Currents titles *Benched* and *Living Rough*, Christy lives in White Rock, British Columbia.

Connecting to the Text***Character and Novel Study***

To engage students with the main characters in *On Cue*, use the following prompts as large group discussion topics, individual novel study or paragraph-writing exercises:

1. Discuss Randi's experiences and how she feels about herself, her brother, Toby, and her mom.
 - ch. 2 *I'm usually shy, but I've found in school plays that it's a lot easier when I play a role. I'm more confident when I'm being someone else.*
 - ch. 6 *Why can't I ever come first in our family?*
 - ch. 8 *Do I argue with [Mom]? No. Do I say anything in my defense? No.*
 - ch. 13 *I'm tired of missing out on things that I want to do.*
2. At first Randi thinks Isabella is just mean, but in chapter 12, Randi gets to see a bit of Isabella's personal life. Isabella's mom is "nasty."
 - ◆ Do you think Randi and Isabella will become friends? What do they have in common that they could talk about? Consider their families and interest in theater.
 - ◆ What advice would you give Randi about beginning a friendship with Isabella? Could Isabella learn how to deal with her mother from Randi?

The Writer's Craft

1. Writers choose words carefully and intentionally to evoke feelings and responses, and to create specific images. Ask students to consider the following examples, and then find more powerful and descriptive sentences and phrases in the novel. How does this writer's craft lend meaning to each scene?

You may wish to use this as an opportunity to talk about metaphor, simile and symbolism.

- ch. 4 *I realize my nerves are heating up.
Being in the same room as he is causes a full gymnastics routine in my stomach.
How is Randi feeling about drama class?*
- ch. 10 *The sun burns the top of my head, and my brain feels like it's on fire.
Panic explodes inside me.
My ankle burns.
Electricity bounces through my body.
How does Randi feel after Toby runs out of the theater?*
2. Consider the words used to describe Isabella in chapter 9. To what is Isabella being compared? How does this help readers understand the character of Isabella and how she feels about Randi?
 - ◆ Twice I bump into Isabella. She *sneers* both times.
 - ◆ "Are you even ready?" She *smirks*.
 - ◆ "Focus on your lines," *snarls* Isabella.
 - ◆ Before I can say or do anything, Isabella jumps in front of me...*Her words bite...*
[Her] *spit lands on my face*.

Ask students to write creative sentences to describe other characters. For example: Randi, when she lies to her mom; Toby when his routine is upset; Josh, when he's with Bruce.

3. Writers often choose character names intentionally and with humor. *On Cue* is a novel about an actress playing a role in a Shakespeare play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Interestingly, Miranda (or Randi, for short) is a character in *The Tempest*, and Isabella is a character in *Measure for Measure*, both Shakespeare plays. Invite students to find examples of Shakespearian names, phrases or plays in other novels or in popular culture.

Building Vocabulary

Randi loves the extracurricular drama class and wants to be a professional actress. The following vocabulary words are chosen in the context of theater and acting.

audience	costume	lines	practice
backstage	emotion	memorize	recite
career	fantasy	monologue	rehearsal
center stage	feedback	perform/ance	remember
character	improve	portrayal	theater

Invite students to write descriptive paragraphs about the novel, incorporating at least five words in their responses. Ideas, to get students started:

- Being an actress is demanding. Before performing, what does Randi do to prepare?
- Mr. Dean shares feedback with Randi, Isabella and Josh, based on their performances. Sometimes it's hard to hear another person's responses or judgments about our work. What makes this situation different?
- Imagine you are Toby, sitting off stage and prompting the actors during a performance. What does he experience and see around him?

Connecting to the Curriculum

Drama

1. In chapter 8, Mr. Dean leads an activity which helps the students become aware of their bodies when they're acting. He calls out a type of bean and the students respond with certain actions. For example, a broad bean means stretching one's arms as wide as possible. Ask students to lead this activity with another class, explaining what it's for.

Prompt: string bean, jelly bean, French bean, frozen bean, jumping bean, Navy bean, kidney bean, coffee bean, climbing bean, dried bean, bean soup.

2. In chapter 15, Randi prepares and memorizes what she'll say to her mom. Through drama class, she's learned how to breathe and control her emotions. Can you think of other ways actors can utilize their skills outside of theater?

Prompt: public speaking, taking direction from someone in charge, practicing until you get more confident, receiving feedback to improve yourself or a situation, having a difficult conversation with someone, standing up for yourself, being comfortable with your body, being comfortable working with others on a shared task or goal.

Connecting to the Students

1. Randi's starting her first year of high school alone because her best friend, Laurel, moved to Calgary. Sometimes it's hard to face a big change, like transitioning from elementary to high school. Ask students to think of a big change in their own lives (such as learning to drive, starting at a new school, getting a part-time job, family changes, joining a team).

Ask students to reflect on and discuss what can make change easier or more comfortable, noting that everyone responds to change differently and that's normal. Examples, if students are "stuck" for ideas:

I need to find out things ahead of time so there are no surprises. Before I started high school, I walked around it, found my classrooms and checked out the school's website.

I feel most comfortable if I don't have too many changes going on at once. When I had to find a part-time job, I needed to put other things aside for a while.

I get nervous and feel sick when a big change happens, like when my parents separated. I hung out with my friends and they really listened. That helped a lot.

When I'm freaked out because I have try something I've never done before, like trying out for a team, I write myself a letter from my future self. It may sound strange but it works!

- ◆ If students are comfortable, encourage them to share responses with the larger group so everyone can learn from each other.
 - ◆ Ask students to write their strategies for coping with change on an index card and keep it with them as a reminder for the next time a big change or challenge comes along.
2. Randi struggles socially because of Toby. Some kids make fun of him and "judge me by my brother." She has no chance to be "normal" and "stand on [her] own" (ch. 1). Sadly, Randi's mother does not recognize how stressed and unhappy Randi is.
 - ◆ Imagine Randi is a student at your school. What resources are available to support her? Where could she go for help? (**Prompts:** school counselor, community resources, school library, teen support groups, website or help lines, anti-bullying help, etc.)
 - ◆ Randi is usually shy but feels confident when she's playing a role—when she's "someone else." She doesn't tell her mom how she feels because it's clear Toby comes first. How can Randi use what she's learned in drama class to talk to her mom?

Connecting to the Wider World

Toby has autism, a wide spectrum neurodevelopmental disorder. Encourage students to learn about some of the characteristics of autism while making connections to the novel. Ideas and examples are below.

- Toby is most comfortable with solid routines and consistency. What happens when his routine is broken, like in chapters 5 and 10?
- Why is having respite, or a time away, important for families who have a child with autism or Down's syndrome? Consider that Randi's mom is exhausted and short

tempered, and what Josh says about his cousin Bruce in chapter 10.

- In the theater, Randi tells the family who are talking about Toby not to refer to him as “an autistic kid,” but rather a boy who is “affected by autism” (ch. 16). What’s the difference?
- Toby has strengths other kids don’t, like his ability to play the *Plants vs. Zombies* game (ch. 3), or his ability to memorize and prompt the actors when they forget their lines. What strengths and abilities are found within the spectrum of autism?

Orca Currents titles with Similar Themes

1. In *Hate Mail* by **Monique Polak**, Jordie’s cousin Todd has moved back to Montreal and is attending Jordie’s high school. Todd has autism and requires an aide. Todd has not been welcomed in the school. He’s known as a freak, and even other parents seem to resent Todd’s special needs. Jordie does everything he can to distance himself from his cousin, fearful of what his friends might think. Inspired by real-life events, *Hate Mail* examines the transformative power of speaking out against prejudice.
2. In *Queen of the Toilet Bowl* by **Frieda Wishinsky**, Renata is chosen to play the lead role in the school musical. Now students who used to ignore her start saying hello and congratulating her. She is happy until it becomes evident that Karin, a wealthy girl who expected to get the lead role, will go to great lengths to ruin Renata’s reputation. Born in Sao Paolo, Brazil, Renata must face Karin’s bullying and be proud of who she is.