



Pyro

Monique Polak

Reading level: 2.7

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Book Summary

Ever since he was small, Franklin has been soothed by fire. Staring into the flames helps Franklin forget his problems. And right now, he's got a lot to forget. Franklin's mother has left the family home to be with her hairdresser boyfriend. Franklin's father, the mayor of Montreal West, is too busy worrying about his public image to do anything about the family. As a rash of local fires competes with upcoming elections for media attention, Franklin's father has to work hard to keep the public happy. And Franklin has to reconsider his romance with fire.

Author Biography

Monique Polak has written many novels for young adults, including her historical novel, *What World Is Left*, which won the 2009 Quebec Writers' Federation Prize for Children's and Young Adult Literature. In addition to writing award-winning books for youth, Monique Polak teaches English and Humanities at Marianopolis College in Montreal, Quebec, and also works as a freelance journalist. Monique lives in Montreal with her husband, a newspaper man. Students interested in reading other novels by Monique Polak will enjoy *121 Express*, *Finding Elmo* and *Junkyard Dog*, all in the Orca Currents series.

Connecting to the Text

Character and Theme

1. In chapter 1, we learn that Franklin is upset because he knows his mom is having an affair and his dad seems oblivious to it. Franklin says:

I hate how she calls me “honey.” That’s what she calls him too. The guy she’s been getting it on with. I’ve read the emails. It didn’t take a genius to figure out her password...I’ve followed her a couple of times at night too. She says she wants exercise, but I know better.

In a group discussion, ask students to consider Franklin’s choice to hack his mom’s password, read her emails and follow her.

- ◆ Why did Franklin want to find out where his mom was going, or what emails she was sending, and to whom? What was in it for Franklin?
 - ◆ How did knowing his mom was having an affair affect his attitude toward his mom—and his dad?
 - ◆ Is it ever “okay” to read someone’s password-protected emails, or to follow them without their knowing?
2. Franklin has a lot to cope with. His parents’ marriage is rocky and his dad is away much of the time. When he is anxious or upset, Franklin finds comfort by lighting fires. As he explains in chapter 3, watching a fire has always relaxed him. As a way to connect to the character of Franklin, the following topics can be used for writing prompts:
 - ◆ Imagine that you are a close friend of Franklin’s and you know about his family troubles. Write a script for a conversation. What would you suggest he do to relax instead of lighting fires? What works for you when you’re stressed or anxious? How do you think Franklin would respond to your advice?
 - ◆ Franklin says that Jeff is “like the big brother I never had...I took it hard when Jeff moved to Toronto for university.” Knowing that Franklin misses Jeff and Jeff knows about his obsession, why do you think Franklin chose not to tell Jeff about lighting fires? Instead, Franklin says, “I’ve told him what he wants to hear” (ch. 2).

Metaphor

In *Pyro*, Monique Polak uses a fire metaphor to illustrate Franklin’s feelings. After reading the quotes below aloud, ask students to reflect on this technique for readers. With each, are we reminded that fire is an obsession for Franklin?

- *Honey must be burning up waiting for her phone call.* (In chapter 1 when Franklin’s mom leaves for her nightly walk to talk to her boyfriend.)
- *I take a deep breath. “Fire away.”* (In chapter 1 when Jeff wants to talk to Franklin about the fires in Montreal West.)
- *The argument starts almost instantly. Then it builds in intensity the way some fires do...I’ve never heard Mom and Dad fight like that. Usually they let things smolder.* (In chapter 4 when Franklin’s dad confronts his mom about the affair.)
- *Look at what I’ve done! Me, Franklin Westcott! So what if I’m not big or built like a fire truck?* (In chapter 7, Franklin’s reaction after starting a fire.)

Connecting to the Curriculum

Leadership and Life Skills

To engage students with the theme of personal responsibility, introduce the concept of “above the line” thinking (use any search engine to find colorful eye-catching graphics and further description on this leadership model). You can draw this model as a box with a line drawn horizontally across the middle. In the top half, write “personal responsibility.” In the bottom half, write “blame, deny, avoid, make excuses.” Simply put, when a person takes responsibility (or is acting “above the line”), they are honest about what is happening to them and they can deal with their challenges more readily; in contrast, when someone is acting “below the line,” it’s more difficult to focus on positive change and action.

Following an introduction to this model, bring the discussion back to Franklin and the choices he makes. Is he acting above or below the line in these examples?

- Franklin reads his mom’s emails and follows her on her walks, rather than talking to her about what is troubling him. (ch. 1)
- Franklin doesn’t tell Jeff about starting fires. Instead, he tells Jeff “what he wants to hear.” (ch. 2)
- Franklin says it was his Dad, “Mr. Mayor himself,” who got him “hooked” on starting fires. (ch. 3)
- Franklin says, “I’ve never been good with feelings. Maybe it’s in my genes. I mean, look at my dad.” (ch. 6)
- Franklin imagines he is on a reality show while he is sitting in the Greek restaurant: *Your Mother’s a Dummy. And Your Dad’s No Better. No Wonder You Start Fires.* (ch. 8)
- Franklin says he never starts a fire where someone could get hurt but he also knows that for a pyromaniac, the fires get bigger each time. Because of this, he says, “I need to catch the pyro.” (ch.14)
- Franklin acknowledges he has a problem and so he agrees to see a psychologist. Terry is sent to jail and Franklin says, “I know that if I don’t get the fire starting under control, I could end up there too.” (ch. 16)

Language Arts

The following quotes are taken from *Pyro*. Once students have finished reading the novel, invite them to describe their reactions to each. How does knowing what happens in the novel help deepen our understanding of these early quotes?

- There have been eight fires over the summer in Montreal West. Franklin’s dad, the mayor, says, “Whoever’s been lighting these fires is a heartless monster.” (ch. 1)
- Jeff is impressed by his friend Terry because he joined the volunteer fire brigade. “He’s aiming to get a job with the Montreal Fire Department. It’s all he talks about. The guy’s obsessed!” Franklin responds, “Pretty cool!” (ch. 2)
- When Franklin was very young, he loved watching his dad start a fire in the fireplace. His dad said, “Fire’s a powerful thing, Franklin. It creates, but it destroys too.” (ch. 3)

Connecting to the Students—Ideas for Exploration

1. Franklin notes in chapter 1, “Our community has one of the best volunteer fire brigades in the country.” As a way to link the novel to citizenship and life skills, invite students to complete the following:
 - ♦ Make a list of at least two services or agencies in your community that are run by volunteers. Ideas to get students started include Boy Scouts, St. John’s Ambulance, fire services, Block Watch, SPCA, food banks and shoreline or roadside clean-up.
 - ♦ For the two items you chose, write a short paragraph describing the benefits of volunteering—to the volunteer and community. Why might someone decide to volunteer? Consider that people volunteer for different reasons at different times in their lives (a student may need work experience, where a retired person may want to stay active and “give back” to their community). Terry volunteers with the fire brigade in hopes that he will be hired on with the Montreal Fire Department.
2. Students may be interested to learn that there are different kinds of fires. They are classified by their heat sources: ordinary combustible materials, flammable liquids and gases, electrical equipment, combustible metals, and cooking oils or fats. As a research project, invite students to learn about fire classification. Create an eye-catching poster for your school or classroom. On it,
 - ♦ List the classifications and their names, the fuel or heat source, and extinguishment for each.
 - ♦ Include three ways to be “fire safe” in your home and school.

Option: Arrange to have a fire fighter visit your classroom to talk about fire prevention and safety. Have students think of questions ahead of time, and prepare a card to give as a “thank you” gesture.

Web Resources

www.usfa.fema.gov/citizens/home_fire_prev/extinguishers.shtm
www.usfa.fema.gov/kids
www.nfpa.org/index.asp
www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin594.shtml