



## **Queen of the Toilet Bowl**

Frieda Wishinsky

Reading level: 3.6

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AR Quiz # 87347

### **Book Summary**

When Renata, an immigrant from Brazil, is chosen to play the lead role in the school musical, 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. Renata must face Karin's bullying and be proud of who she is.

### **Author Biography**

Born in Germany, **Frieda Wishinsky** was raised and educated in New York City. She knows what it feels like to be an immigrant child. Frieda is the bestselling author of many books for children, including *Just Call Me Joe* and *Each One Special*, both available through Orca Book Publishers.

## Connecting to the Text

### Theme

Some of the themes in *Queen of the Toilet Bowl* are injustice, prejudice and bullying. We find these themes in Renata's school life, her mother's work life, and in the French Revolution, which Renata is studying. Invite students to work in small groups to brainstorm some of the key themes in the novel. Ideas for prompting students might include:

- Darleen and Karin make rude comments about Renata's mother:
  - (ch. 2) *"Ohmygod! Her mother's a cleaning lady?...How can her mother stand cleaning other people's dirty toilets? I'd rather be shot dead than clean my brother's bathroom. It's not fit for pigs."*

Why do Darleen and Karin make these comments? How does Renata react? How would you react in this situation?
- Karin and her friends make remarks about the other kids who audition for the play:
  - (ch. 4) *Sure enough Karin and her friends were sitting behind Liz and me. And sure enough they whispered and pointed at each person who tried out. I could hear their comments. "She hasn't got a chance," and "Did you see how fat her stomach is" and "Pimple Boy will never get a part with that face."*

Why do Karin and her friends make comments like this? Is this fair? What would you do if you heard someone making comments like this?
- Renata finds a parallel between her own experience and that of "Queen Marie Antoinette of France":
  - (ch. 7) *...she never said those famous words, "Let them eat cake," when she was told that the peasants had no bread...she wasn't evil but was caught up in rumours and the revolution that was sweeping across France.*
  - (ch. 9) *Marie Antoinette was hated not just because she was a rich aristocrat but because she was a foreigner...*
  - (ch. 3) *The French aristocrats were like Karin—confident, only thinking of themselves and looking down on the poor. Maybe they didn't deserve to be guillotined, but they deserved something. After all, poor people were just as important as rich people.*

Renata sees a similarity between herself and Marie Antoinette, and between Karin and the French aristocrats. How are Renata/Marie Antoinette and Karin/French aristocrats alike? What happened to Marie Antoinette? Was it fair? How does Renata respond to what she learns about Marie Antoinette's experience? What does she do?

- Renata is judged because she is poor and an immigrant. Her mother says:  
(ch. 8) *You have to be careful...When you're poor and an immigrant you have to be especially careful of your behavior. People make judgements.*  
What does Renata's mother mean? Is this fair? How does Renata react to this? Can you respond to this from your own experience?
- (ch. 8) *Just because you have money doesn't mean you won't steal. What about those heads of companies who take huge salaries and bonuses when their companies are losing money and lower level employees are being fired? Isn't that stealing?*  
What do you think of what Renata has said? Is this stealing? Can you think of examples that are similar to this, either from the news or in your social or school life?

### **Character**

We can learn about each character's motivations, feelings and experiences by looking closely at the story from their point of view. In a large group, discuss key elements of the story from each character's point of view. Ask students to take turns pretending to be the main characters; then ask the other students to question them (remind the acting students to stay in character). For example:

- Mr. Bowman: Why does he call Renata to the office? Could he have done things differently?
- Liz: Karin used to bully Liz but she doesn't now. Why? What advice could Liz give Renata?
- Karin: Why is she so mean to Renata? Will she ever change? Do you think she learned her lesson? Will she and Renata ever be friends?
- Renata's mom: Her life is hard in America but she says she's "lucky to be here". Why does she feel this way? Is there a way to make her life easier?
- Renata: Renata gains confidence as the story progresses. What does she do to change things for herself for the better? Will she and Karin ever be friends?

### **Connecting to the Curriculum**

#### **Language Arts**

1. Because English is an additional language for Renata, she must learn its "weird expressions." Idioms are expressions whose meanings cannot be understood by literal translation. They are understood by their figurative/metaphoric meaning, within an historical/cultural context. Some of the idioms Renata learns (and finds humor in) are:

- (ch. 2) *she laughed her head off*
- (ch. 3) *bite her head off*
- (ch. 4) *you'll knock their socks off*
- (ch. 5) *I had a crack at the part*
- (ch. 15) *break a leg*

- ♦ Ask students to keep a log/diary in which they write down all the idioms and “crazy expressions” they use, hear or read in one day. Ask them to collect at least 15 each. Then ask students to name their favorites.
  - ♦ What do the idioms mean? When are they used? Can you imagine where or why they started? Encourage students to find idioms from popular culture (such as “don’t have a cow”) as well as more traditional examples (such as “burning the midnight oil”).
  - ♦ If there are students for whom English is an additional language, ask them to share their experiences learning English idioms.
2. Renata and her mother and brother came from Sao Paolo, Brazil. When they were in Sao Paolo, they spoke Portuguese, Brazil’s official language. Two Portuguese terms from *Queen of the Toilet Bowl* are: *boa sorte* (good luck) and *biscoito de nata* (a special cookie). Portuguese is spoken by over 200 million people worldwide and is the sixth most common language in the world. Sao Paolo, has the largest number of Portuguese speakers in the world and is home to the Museum of the Portuguese Language. To build awareness of the Portuguese language, invite students to complete one of the following, either working alone or in pairs:
- ♦ Research and learn ten Portuguese words or expressions you would be likely to use in a usual day (hello, goodbye, the days of the week, my name is..., etc.). See the resources list on the last page of this guide for free online translation dictionaries.
  - ♦ Do you have someone in your school who speaks Portuguese? Ask them to teach you some common Portuguese expressions or idioms.
  - ♦ Portuguese originated in Galicia (now Spain) and northern Portugal. Find these countries on a map of the world. Then find the areas of the world where Portuguese is spoken now. Can you see how the language spread across the world? See the resources list on the last page of this guide for online resources on the Portuguese language.
3. Renata, playing the role of Maria in *The Sound of Music*, must sing many famous songs. Particularly poignant is the song, “Climb Every Mountain,” since Renata must work hard to overcome her fear of Karin to reach her goal. Ask students to reflect on the lyrics to the song:

*Climb every mountain, search high and low  
 Follow every byway, every path you know.  
 Climb every mountain, ford every stream,  
 Follow every rainbow, till you find your dream!*

- ◆ As a group, talk about the metaphor of “climbing every mountain.” What does it mean? What other metaphors could have a similar meaning? (For example, go the distance, ride the wave, bloom where you’re planted, reach for the stars, etc.)
- ◆ Challenge students to write a short, four-line poem with a similar inspirational theme. If students are comfortable using a rhyme scheme, you may wish to demonstrate AABB, as is used in the song.

**Option:** Incorporate the student poems into an art project, such as a poster, scrapbook, book sleeve, collage, etc.

4. Discuss situations from *Queen of the Toilet Bowl* that contain contrasting elements. For example, Renata’s mother says, “We’re lucky to be here” (ch. 2), but the people she works for all look down on her, and her life is hard. Encourage students to find examples, either working alone or in small groups. Some examples could be:
- ◆ Renata chose her new high school because it was “better” and offered “more opportunity,” but it is also very difficult for her because some of the students laugh at her behind her back and bully her.
  - ◆ Sao Paolo’s streets “were always crowded with beggars and little kids without shoes” but the people there all helped each other and were kind; Karin is pretty, wealthy and privileged but is also mean-spirited and a bully.
  - ◆ Renata has an “amazing” voice and loves to sing, but also wants to be “invisible” and not draw any attention to herself.

**Option:** You may wish to use this discussion to introduce the literary conventions of paradox and irony.

### *Vocabulary*

The following words or terms are used in *Queen of the Toilet Bowl* and are organized into three categories or contexts, based on Renata’s experiences: theater, the French Revolution (which she is studying in history class), and bullying. Invite students to use the words in sentences or paragraphs, either by writing them individually or working in the large group.

#### Theater

audience	lines	audition	musical
rehearsals	showstopper	auditorium	on the set
stage	cast	on stage	talent
costume	tryouts	props	understudy

#### The French Revolution

aristocrats	complexity	injustices	beheaded
con artist	oppressed	branded	flogged
revolution	Cardinal	guillotine	

**Bullying**

accusations	evidence	perpetrator	alibi
rampage	guilty	regret	confess
suspended	consequences	offense	

***Drama***

1. Ask students to work in small groups to create skits based on key scenes from *Queen of the Toilet Bowl*. Have students improvise their own scenarios or choose from the examples below:
  - ♦ Renata has just been called into Mr. Bowman's office. He asks her about Karin's watch. How does Mr. Bowman feel? How does Renata respond? Imagine that she tells him what she is thinking and feeling rather than keeping it inside.
  - ♦ Marie Antoinette is talking to the French aristocrats after the "diamond necklace affair." The French aristocrats hate her and have spread vicious rumors about her. She must convince them she isn't who they think she is. How can she defend herself?
  - ♦ The school assembly has begun. Ms. Watson speaks first and then Renata speaks. Both speak about bullying—Ms. Watson from the point of view of the school, and Renata from the point of view of the person who has been publicly humiliated.
2. Invite your students to put on a play for another class (or have small groups prepare a skit or short play for the large group). Make a "to do" list of all the necessary steps to organize this initiative. For example: obtaining permission; agreeing on the play you'll do; arranging for rehearsal space; coordinating a rehearsal time that will suit everyone, etc. Be sure that students answer the following questions:
  - ♦ What play will you do? Where will you get the script?
  - ♦ Where will you meet to rehearse?
  - ♦ When will you meet to rehearse, how often and for how long?
  - ♦ To put on a play, everyone will need to help. Make a list of the jobs that need to be done and then agree on who will do each job (for example, you may need directors, assistants, actors, set designers, stage hands, people to arrange advertising, etc.) How will you decide who does each task?
  - ♦ When will the performance be? Do you need to ask permission to use space or equipment?
  - ♦ How will you know if your play was successful?
  - ♦ Does your school or community have a drama club? If you were interested in joining, what would you need to do?
3. Rent the movie *The Sound of Music*. Discuss its story, musical numbers and actors. Ask students which roles seemed fun or challenging to act. Discuss the many people behind the scenes who must work together to make a movie (or a live theatrical performance).

## Connecting to the Students—Ideas for Exploration

### *Bullying*

1. When Renata is nervous or stressed, particularly when Karin is mean to her, she uses a mantra to calm herself and refocus:

(ch. 5) *Don't let her bother you. Don't let her bother you.*

In the face of Karin's bullying, Renata reminds herself:

(ch. 9) *You did nothing... There's nothing to be ashamed of. You're innocent. Act innocent. Don't feel embarrassed.*

(ch. 15) *Knowing I had a plan helped. Knowing Liz was on my side helped. And knowing I hadn't done anything wrong helped even more.*

- ◆ Ask students: Are these effective strategies for coping with a bully? Why?
  - ◆ Ask students to brainstorm ways to cope—and appropriately respond—when another student is bullying them. What helps you cope? What is the best way to respond?
  - ◆ Does your school have a Code of Conduct, guidelines or rules which deal with bullying? Where are they published or posted? Does your classroom have a copy?
2. As a group, brainstorm a checklist of students' rights in the classroom. Assign a student to write the suggestions on the board or a flipchart. For example: all students have the right to learn; all students have the right to be heard; all students have the right to be safe; etc. Once complete, as a large group, make a poster using the list. Illustrate with eye-catching, colorful images, such as students' drawings or images cut out from magazines. Hang the poster in a prominent place in the classroom.
  3. As a group, discuss the different kinds of bullying (verbal, social, physical, cyber-bullying).
    - ◆ What are the differences between these types? What are examples of each? What determines if an act is bullying? (For example, consider that playfully shoving someone or giving someone a nickname in fun can be perceived as bullying).
    - ◆ Ask students to respond to the character of Karin. Why does she harass and bully Renata? Is the fact that her dad ran away with a woman who was an immigrant any excuse for her behavior?
    - ◆ Ms. Long calls what Karin did on the Internet “horrible” and “completely unacceptable.” Are there rules or a Code of Conduct at your school regarding behavior while using e-mail, chat rooms or the internet?



**Web Resources**

Anti-bullying websites

[www.b-free.ca/home.html](http://www.b-free.ca/home.html)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese_language)

Canadian Government website: Internet safety for kids

[www.safecanada.ca/link\\_e.asp?category=3&topic=94](http://www.safecanada.ca/link_e.asp?category=3&topic=94)

Canadian Government website: "Are You Web Aware?" A checklist for pre-teens aged 9-12

[www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/tip\\_sheets/internet\\_checklists/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=27798](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/tip_sheets/internet_checklists/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=27798)

Government of Alberta cypberbullying website

[www.bullyfreealberta.ca/teens\\_cyber\\_bullying.htm](http://www.bullyfreealberta.ca/teens_cyber_bullying.htm)