



Topspin

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Reading level: 4.2

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Book Summary

Kat is thrilled to be competing in her first junior tennis championship at Melbourne Park. But things are off to a horrible start. Her doubles partner, Miri, is sneaking around at night, showing up late to practice and jeopardizing their matches. Miri's boyfriend, Hamish, is too focused on his own game to notice. Then strange things begin interfering with Hamish's performance, and Kat suspects Miri may be involved. Who is trying to sabotage Hamish? And can Kat put a stop to the plot before it's too late?

Prereading Ideas

- How do you manage your reputation online?
- Have you ever felt so much pressure to succeed that you were tempted to do something unfair or illegal to reach your goal?
- How far would you go to investigate a problem that was affecting a friend's wellbeing?

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 *Topspin*.
- Discuss with students the idea of a book's *premise*. The premise is a one-sentence summary of the main idea of the story. It's a statement of what happens to the characters as a result of the actions in the story. It's a bit different than plot, which is a listing of the events in the story. It takes a bit of practice to figure out the premise of a story. You might want to start by discussing the premise of some familiar stories, such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Three Little Pigs*, *Toy Story* or *Cinderella*. Divide students into pairs and see whether they can develop a clear statement of the premise of *Topspin*.

Plot

- *Topspin* is told from Kat's point of view. Have students write a scene from the story from the point of view of a different character. Try writing as Miri after she realizes Dray is going to blackmail her; as Hugo as he wonders what the heck is happening to his star players; or as another character.
- Ask students to consider how the story would be different if it was told in the third person point of view. What are the advantages or disadvantages to using the first person? Third person?

Character

- Kat is a strong character. Have students draw a character map of Kat that details her personality characteristics, her fears, her weaknesses, her physical traits and her beliefs. Use this as a springboard to teach students how to write a full character analysis.
- Good stories involve complicated, layered characters who have strong motivations to do the things they do. Think about Harry Potter, Katniss Everdeen or even Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Much of the time, the way they behave can be linked to what they *want*. Discuss with students:

Motivations are the reasons characters act the way they do. Motivation directs their choices. It guides their actions. Motivation isn't what a character does; it's why he/she does it. It's all about desire. Examples of common character motivations in literature include the desire to:

1. avenge something bad that happened in the past, or to another person
2. stay alive
3. destroy evil
4. make amends or right a wrong
5. rescue or protect someone or something

Some characters' motivations are made clear through the storyline, such as Dray Yule. With the above list in mind, have students assess what they consider to motivate each of the main characters in *Topspin*. What is Kat's main motivation? Hamish's? Miri's?

- Have students think about Colby Barrett, and consider which other characters they know who have also been motivated by the desire to win no matter what the cost. (These characters can be from movies, folk tales, books or even religious texts.) Ask students to write a paragraph describing one of these characters. Include their identity and which story they come from, as well as a complete description of how the need to win motivates them to act the way they do. Does this motive help or hinder these characters in the end?

Theme

The theme is the “big idea” or message in a book. Often books can have more than one theme. Have students determine the theme of *Topspin*. Is there more than one?

Vocabulary

- Have students find and record definitions for the following words. Where else have they seen these words used other than in the world of tennis?

backhand	clandestine	conspicuous
courtside	incriminate	tramline
crosscourt	rally	volleyed
deuce	slice	
forfeit	topspin	

- Assign students to choose a number of the above words and use them in a sentence. Can they use five of them in a short paragraph about fighting?

Connecting to the Curriculum

English

- Kat describes winter in Australia as being cold and wet, similar to Vancouver—not the always-hot illusion we believe in North America. Have students write a descriptive paragraph about winter where they live.
- Challenge students to write three new titles for the story that would give a good idea what it is about.
- Have students compare *Topspin* to another sports-related story they have read. They may use a graphic organizer such as a Venn diagram to do this, or simply write their comparisons in paragraph form. Share the students' responses with the class.
- In chapter 1, when Kat thinks about how she came to be partnered with Miri for the doubles in the tournament, she reflects that “beggars can't be choosers,” and that Miri would be stuck with her relative inexperience for the duration of the

tournament. “Beggars can’t be choosers” is an example of an *idiom*. Illustrate a couple more idioms so students understand the concept, then, in partners, have them record several idioms that they have come across, both in life and in literature. Can they write what each idiom means? Have the students share their idioms with the class or with another partner group.

- In chapter 4, upon first meeting, Dray Yule looks Kat up and down, then lets his gaze slide away. “Like slime sliding off a rock,” says Kat. This is an example of a *simile*—a comparison using the words “like” or “as.” Have students look through *Topspin* for other examples of similes. How does this literary device help the story come alive in the reader’s mind?
- Put students into groups of three or four. Give them 15 minutes to figure out a few Big Questions from *Topspin*. Model effective discussion moderation for the students, then invite each group to lead a class discussion about one of their Big Questions.

Health/Personal Planning

- Before a competition, Kat prepares herself by getting her bearings and by checking a place out. Have students talk about or jot notes about their strategies for gearing themselves up for challenges and/or competitions. Guide them in experiencing and experimenting with mind-body preparations, such as deep breathing, visualization and meditation.
- Kat plays one match without having eaten anything beforehand. As a result, she nearly passes out: her body doesn’t have any nutrients to draw from to provide her with enough power to get through the set. With students, talk about the importance of proper nutrition before competitions—or even tests. Discuss the ideal breakdown of fats, carbohydrates, protein and vegetable matter for a performance athlete versus for a non-athlete.
- Miri finds herself in a tricky situation when she realizes Dray Yule has taken photos of her when she was drunk at a party. With students, discuss what is meant by the term *digital footprint*. In small groups, or as a class, answer the following questions:
 1. Do you know of any people (politicians, celebrities, etc.) who have run into trouble because of questionable content in their own digital footprints?
 2. Why is it important to keep your digital footprint in mind as you go about your day-to-day business?
 3. Discuss the risks and drawbacks of living in a world where other people can not only take photos and video of you, but post them publicly.

Social Studies

- Mapping is an important skill. Not only cities and countries need to be mapped: often large buildings do too. Have students create a map of the arena where the Australian Open is played, and where Kat tries to keep ahead of Dray as he chases her at the end of the book. Maps should be detailed and accurate, with a legend, a title and a scale.

- Have students research the history of tennis and prepare a brief presentation about it. Where did tennis originate? To which other game(s) can it be traced? How was it first played? How has the game evolved with technology?

Physical Education

- Have students brainstorm everything they know about tennis, from the uniforms to the equipment to the places it's played.
- Watch some of the games in the Australian Open (January) or the French Open (May-June).
- In *Topspin*, Kat and Miri are faced on a number of occasions with the choice of playing hard, or playing with an orientation toward good sportsmanship. But if you're playing by the rules, isn't it okay to absolutely hammer your opponent with whatever tactics are at your disposal? Have students divide into teams to debate this topic.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. In chapter 1, Kat reflects on how hard it is to fit in when you're new to a place. "Instead of mountain biking down Whistler Mountain, I'd landed at Rothmore High, repeating half of grade eleven and getting laughed at every five minutes for things I'd never even known existed." Think about a time when you were new to a culture or a uniform group of people. What frustrated you most about this situation? How did you feel like a misfit?
2. In chapter 2, Kat checks out the courts before her matches begin. She looks at the electronic score board above the backstop, and is amazed at the speed of the other players' serves. She doesn't, however, think she'll give it a try. "No need to demoralize myself this close to the tournament." Do you think she's too modest? Or too hard on herself?
3. Miri sneaks out at night and leaves Kat with no choice but to be evasive when Hugo comes to check on them the night before the tournament is set to begin. She ends up having to lie to cover for Miri. Think or write about a time when a friend put you into a similarly tricky situation. How did you cope?
4. When Kat feels the pressure mounting, she goes for a run. This is a healthy way of dealing with stress. When you feel stressed out, what do you do? Would you consider this a healthy reaction?
5. In chapter 4, Kat is angry that Miri stayed out until very late the night before a significant match. She bottles it up all day, and then finally tells Miri how angry she is. "In case you're wondering," she says, "I'm still mad about last night. And no, I don't want to talk about it. I've got to play soon." As you see it, is it fair to bring up a grievance and then forbid discussion of it? What does this do to the power dynamic in a relationship?
6. Prior to a match, Kat asks Hamish to wish her luck. But then her coach, Hugo, says, "Luck has got nothing to do with it" (ch. 5). What's your stance on luck? Does it exist? Does it shape our lives? Or is it nonexistent?

7. In chapter 6, Miri is furious with Kat for not performing well in the qualifier. “You pull something like that tomorrow, and you’re dead,” says Miri. Kat is shocked: Miri had as much a hand in her loss as she herself had had, she reasons, because of her crazy antics the night before. As you see it, how much blame can we assign to other people for our own performance? When does it make sense to include other people in the reasons for our failure? When is it not right?
8. Before the tournament, Kat spends a restless night in strange dreams. Do you dream? Are your dreams connected to your emotional states (e.g. elation, nervousness, depression)? What do your dreams tell you about your fears and hopes?
9. Dray Yule uses fear and coercion to get what he wants. What do you know about blackmail? How is it used in this story? What makes blackmail such an effective technique for coercing people and keeping them quiet?
10. Kat is surprised that Miri ever connected with Dray Yule in the first place. “I could tell he was a sleazebag the first time I set eyes on him,” says Kat (ch. 12). Kat listens to her intuition when it comes to other people’s personalities. What purpose does your intuition serve? Do you listen when it speaks?

Author’s note

Dear Reader,

Topspin arose from a conversation in a café with my editor, thousands of kilometres from Melbourne Park where the story is set. She asked me if I wanted to try my hand at writing an Orca Sports book, and I thought, “Sports? Me? I’m not a sporty person.” I knew two people who were, though: my two teenage daughters. Put any sport in front of them and they’ll try it: basketball, netball, European handball, swimming, ice skating, rock climbing, horseback riding, badminton, even touch football. But the thing they’d stuck with year after year was tennis. We all loved tennis, the whole family. It was the one game I truly enjoyed watching on TV, and would even get out on the court and hit a few balls on a Sunday afternoon. I’d spent years standing on the tennis court retrieving balls and listening to the girls’ coach drilling them week after week, and then watching on the sidelines on Saturday mornings as their matches unfolded. I saw the frustration of days when nothing went right, the disappointment of a close match lost and the elation at a well-placed shot or a tricky volley. So I must acknowledge my daughters, their coaches, and my husband Russell for teaching me about the tennis world and the fine points of the game.

Melbourne Park seemed like the perfect setting, having watched the Australian Open Tennis Championship year after year and walking the grounds with the action unfolding around me. Kat appeared on the page as a hopeful newcomer, not perfect by any means, just passionate about the game, and Miri developed as the seasoned professional with issues of her own. As I wrote, the mystery unfolded, Hamish, Dray and Colby came into being and the story came to life.

Sonya Spreen Bates

Resources

Plot elements

www.middle-school-lesson-plans.suite101.com/article.cfm/plot_element_lesson_a42842

Tennis

Tennis Canada

www.tenniscanada.com/index.php?title=HOME%20PAGE&pid=3

Tennis Equipment and History

www.olympic.org/tennis-equipment-and-history

Tennis—Encyclopedia Britannica

www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/587387/tennis

Relaxation Techniques

General Relaxation Techniques

www.slideshare.net/pdhpemag/relaxation-techniques

Breathing Techniques for Athletes

www.thesportinmind.com/articles/relaxation

Books

Fiction

Clippinger, Carol. *Open Court*

Corbet, Robert. *Fifteen Love*

Jaimet, Kate. *Break Point*

Padian, Maria. *Jersey Tomatoes Are the Best*

Seles, Monica. *Game On* (The Academy)

Nonfiction

Agassi, Andre. *Open*

Gallwey, W. Timothy. *The Inner Game of Tennis: The Classic Guide to the Mental Side of Peak Performance*

Parsons, John, Henry Wancke and Tim Henman. *The Tennis Book: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of World Tennis*

Roza, Greg. *Venus and Serena Williams: The Sisters of Tennis*

White, Steven. *Bring Your Racquet: Tennis Basics for Kids*

Whitfield, Simon and Clive Dheenshaw. *Simon Says Gold: Simon Whitfield's Pursuit of Athletic Excellence*

Author Biography

Sonya Spreen Bates is a Canadian writer living in Australia. As a child, when she wasn't riding horses, she loved to read, daydream and scribble down short stories that she never dared to show anyone. She dreamed of traveling to Australia, but never imagined she'd be living there one day. Sonya obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in Linguistics from the University of Victoria and a Master's degree in Speech Pathology from Dalhousie University. She has spent many years working with children with communication disorders, both in Canada and Australia, and often writes her own stories to use in therapy.

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