



Whiteout

Becky Citra

Interest level: ages 8–11

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AR Quiz # 130752

Consider the following as you read *Whiteout*:

Robin loves traditions. How are traditions important in your life? What traditions does your family have and where did they come from?

Story

Robin is devastated when an accident on a snowy highway disrupts her family's Christmas traditions and sends her aunt to the hospital with serious injuries. When arrangements are made for Robin's cousin, April, to live with Robin on their ranch while Aunt Liz is recovering, Robin is thrilled. However problems quickly arise when Robin discovers that April has changed and would rather be with her mother. A dangerous cross-country ski trip in a blizzard helps the girls understand each other better.

Author

Becky Citra was born in Vancouver, British Columbia. She lives on a ranch in the small community of Bridge Lake with her husband and daughter. Becky is the author of fourteen books for children, including the Ellie and Max historical series and the Enchanted Theater series. Becky enjoys visiting students at schools and libraries to talk about her books and to share her love of reading and writing.

Author Website

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Connecting to the Curriculum***Language Arts***

- Assign students to search for vegetarian recipes on the Internet. Ask a few volunteers to prepare and bring in a vegetarian dish to share with the class. Ask students: for what reasons might April have chosen to become a vegetarian?
- In *Whiteout*, we never have a chance to read the rest of April's letter to Stephanie. Assign students to write an ending to April's letter. Then, have students write a letter back from Stephanie.
- Imagine that April and Robin keep journals. Have students write an entry of about 250–300 words for each girl that explains the fight from her point of view. Encourage students to “get into character” and write the entries as though they really *are* that character.
- On different days, have a student read an excerpt from *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen. Alternatively, your class could watch the movie. Discuss with students why this book appeals so much to Robin.

Social Studies

- Family is important to Robin. Have each student make a family tree. To do this, students should interview family members. They may also wish to do a bit of genealogy research on the Internet with the help of a family member.
- Families have traditions. One tradition in Robin's family is for the children and their father to find a “perfect” Christmas tree somewhere on the ranch. Discuss with students why this tradition is so special in Robin's family. Ask students to write a paragraph about a tradition that's special to their family.
- Have students make a story map of the ranch. Include the horse corrals, the lake, the beaver lodge, the ski trail, the pond and the trapping cabin. Maps should be drawn to scale as much as possible, and should include a scale, a legend and a title.

Science

- In pairs, have students research hypothermia. Why is it such a deadly condition? What are the treatments?
- Discuss the importance of survival kits. How would a survival kit from British Columbia differ from somewhere like Phoenix, Arizona? Guide students in a brainstorm of all the things that should go into a survival kit for your geographic location.
- Invite a speaker into your class who can teach students how to use a compass. In small groups, have students design an orienteering exercise using their new knowledge.

Mathematics

- Have students design and administer a questionnaire to determine several different options for “the perfect birthday party.” Make a class graph where each student can show his or her first choice. In groups, investigate several other ways that the data can be represented visually.
- Robin’s very worst thing in math is story problems. Have students create several word problems using information from *Whiteout*. They might use distance (e.g., Bridge Lake from the ranch; Bridge Lake to Vancouver), time, temperature—or even slices of pizza! Students can trade their problems with a partner to solve.

Art

- Design a KEEP OUT sign for your bedroom door.
- Robin notices that there are a lot more happy faces than sad faces in magazines. Have students choose a face from a magazine and create a reflection drawing of it by cutting it in half vertically and carefully drawing the mirror image on a sheet of white paper. Large images will work best for this activity.
- Using images from magazines, invite students create a collage of things that matter to them and to their lives. Alternatively, you can provide students with the option of doing this for Robin or April.

Drama

- Divide the class into groups of four. Assign students to create a tableau of a scene in the book. Groups should be prepared to explain to the rest of the class why they chose to create a tableau of their particular scene.
- Assign students to choose one character from the book and write a one-minute monologue from that character’s point of view. April’s monologue might be about the accident; Robin’s might be about how she goes about training a horse; Molly’s monologue might be about how excited she is that April is coming to stay. Provide students with ample opportunity to create and rehearse their monologues. Students should deliver their speeches with good volume and moderation, as deeply in character as they can.

Health/Personal Planning

- Have students research the sport of cross-country skiing (Nordic skiing) and share their findings with the class.
- Have students interview students who are new to the school. What are some of the greatest challenges for newcomers? Have students brainstorm ways to help new students feel more at home when they first arrive.

- Vegetarianism is a completely healthy lifestyle as long as care is taken to ensure the proper nutrients are eaten. Even vegans can get all the vitamins and minerals they need through their diets. In pairs, assign students to find out how vegans and vegetarians can make sure they get all the nutrients they need to stay healthy.

Connecting to the Text

- As Robin's teacher says, we sometimes use imagery to convey meaning. The kind of imagery we call *idioms* mean something completely different than the words they're actually composed of. Ask students to brainstorm a number of idioms, such as *it's a tough pill to swallow*, *it's raining cats and dogs*, *a frog in my throat* or *making a mountain out of a molehill*. Have the students illustrate or make models of the images provoked by these idioms.
- Guide students to understand the difference between dialogue and narrative. Often an author will use dialogue to advance the story quickly, or to give the reader a particular insight into a situation. Consider the following exchange between Robin's mother and father, right after Robin has asked permission to stay at the trapper's cabin overnight with April:

Mom sighed. "Do they have to do this now, with everything that's been happening?"

"That's exactly why they should do it now," said Dad.

As you see it, why does Robin's father think the girls should go to the cabin? Discuss why dialogue is a more effective vehicle for conveying this information than narrative.

- Have students create a timeline of the story arc to show the major events in *Whiteout*.
- Ask students to define *setting* and to describe the setting of *Whiteout*. How important is the setting to the story in this case? Is setting always this important to a story? Invite students to think of other stories that do and do not depend on setting to the same extent. Can they think of any stories that lack a setting?
- Invite students to choose a main character (either Robin or April) and create a character web. Webs should include personality traits, physical characteristics, likes or dislikes, habits and whatever other information students can dig up about the character. Encourage students to make as detailed a web as possible for their chosen character. Share these with the class.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. Sometimes it's easy to blame ourselves when things go wrong—even if events are totally out of our control. Robin blames herself for how things turned out with her Aunt Liz; after all, she was the one who begged Liz and April to come up to the ranch despite the snowstorm. Have you ever blamed yourself for a situation that you felt partly responsible for? Explain.
2. Have you ever felt like you're growing away from a friend or family member who you used to feel close to? Explain why this can be an upsetting experience.
3. In math class, Robin gives April her fraction sheet to copy. What is her motivation for doing this? Discuss whether it's ever okay to cheat.
4. Robin feels that she has to choose between April and Kim. What advice would you give Robin?
5. Why does Molly play hospital with her dolls? How does this help her understand her family's situation?
6. Think about a time when you had a fight with someone close to you. Close your eyes and imagine the way your body feels when you're upset. What happens inside your mind? How does your heart feel? What feelings do you get in your legs, chest or hands? Write a paragraph describing how you feel inside when you have a fight with someone you care about.
7. Robin avoids telling Kim that she is not coming to her birthday party. Tell about a time when you put off doing something you didn't want to do. Look up the word *procrastination* in the dictionary. Why do you think people procrastinate?
8. Describe the relationship between Robin and April at the end of the novel. Do you feel that either girl has changed? How? What do they know now about themselves that they didn't before?
9. How does Robin's relationship with her little sister develop over the course of the book? Provide examples of how Molly's behavior helps Robin learn more about herself.
10. As you see it, why doesn't Robin ask April about the accident, or about how Aunt Liz is recovering? Robin says it's because she didn't want to make April upset, but is that the whole story? Why or why not?
11. In the final scene of the book, Robin is looking at the ice castle. She thinks to herself: *It was perfect for as long as it lasted.* What does this mean? How does this message apply to the rest of the story?

Author's Note

Dear readers,

As I sit here at my laptop computer writing this letter, I'm looking out the window at the same frozen lake where I imagined Robin and April setting out on their desperate search for Molly. There's not a blizzard today but it's very cold, way below zero, and a fresh blanket of glistening snow covers everything.

My family lives on a ranch, just like Robin and Molly, in a tiny community called Bridge Lake in British Columbia. The snow gets deep in the winter and the lake is frozen. We have lots of fun cross-country skiing and snowshoeing on trails through the snowy forest. When the ice is thick enough, we clear snow off the lake and make a skating rink. But when the thermometer dips below minus twenty-five, we stay inside near the wood stove and sip hot chocolate!

Many winters ago, when my daughter Meghan was young, we had an exceptionally cold, snowy winter. We were all ready for Christmas and Meghan was waiting eagerly for the arrival of her cousins from Vancouver. The snow fell and fell and fell for days and the highways were a nightmare. Our relatives turned back and decided to come by train instead. A few hours out of Vancouver a snow slide covered the train tracks and they had to give up. Later we heard of many accidents caused by the weather.

What if our relatives had tried to drive to the ranch? What if they had been in an accident? Those thoughts gave me the idea for *Whiteout*. It was amazing how fast Robin and April came to life for me, quickly followed by Molly, Kim and Mom and Dad.

Whiteout is a story of friendship and adventure. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. I've just looked up from my laptop and an enormous icicle outside my window is dripping. Spring is on the way!

Have fun reading!
Becky Citra

Resources

Books

Fiction

- Bemelmans, Ludwig. *Madeline*
Brooke, Lauren. *Heartland: Coming Home*
Craighead George, Jean. *Julie of the Wolves; My Side of the Mountain*
George Speare, Elizabeth. *The Sign of the Beaver*
Lowry, Lois. *Number the Stars*
O'Dell, Scott. *Island of the Blue Dolphins*
O'Donnell, Liam. *Wild Ride*
Paulsen, Gary. *Hatchet*
Rawls, Wilson. *Where the Red Fern Grows*
Steig, William. *Abel's Island*

Nonfiction

- Campbell, Guy and Ecob, Simon. *Boys Book of Survival: How to Survive Anything Anywhere*
Roth, Ruby. *That's Why We Don't Eat Animals: A Book About Vegetarians, Vegans and All Living Things*
Whitefeather, Willie. *Willie Whitefeather's Outdoor Survival Handbook for Kids*

Online

Introduction to cross-country skiing
www.xcski.org/ski_snowshoe_info.php

Introduction to orienteering
www.active.com/outdoors/Articles/An_Introduction_to_Orienteering.htm

The Mayo Clinic on hypothermia
www.mayoclinic.com/health/hypothermia/DS00333FLUSHCACHE=0&UPDAT EAPP=false