



121 Express

Monique Polak

Reading level: 3.9

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AR Quiz #122464

Book Summary

The students of the 121 Express are infamous for bad behavior, and Lucas knows his role on the bus will determine his social standing at his new school. Lucas is tired of being one of the nerds. When he attracts the negative attention of the cool trouble-makers, he saves himself by teasing another kid. His ploy works, and soon Lucas is right in the center of the mayhem on the bus. He loves his new-found popularity, but when the fun and games push the bus driver to a nervous collapse and hospitalizes an elderly lady, Lucas begins to question his choices.

Author Biography

Monique Polak lives in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, where she spends her days doing her two favorite things: writing and teaching. In addition to being a frequent contributor to *The Gazette*, Montreal's English-language daily newspaper, Monique is the author of novels for young people, including *Finding Elmo* from the Orca Currents series. Monique lives with her husband and her daughter Alicia (who was named after Alice in Wonderland—the subject of Monique's master's thesis). If she could give aspiring writers one tip, Monique says it would be, "Never give up! If writing makes you happy, keep at it!"

Connecting to the Text

Plot and Character

1. The plot tells us the story. Each event affects what happens next, until the conclusion. Ask students to work in small groups and brainstorm the succession of at least four key events in *121 Express*. Have students choose one key event and draw a timeline indicating the succession of events that followed. Encourage students to include pictures in their timelines.
2. Lucas's mom said that "...life is all about defining moments, only most people miss them" (ch. 1). Lucas had two significant "defining moments" in the novel: first, when he deflected attention away from himself by saying, "What are you looking at, raghead?" (ch. 1) to Sandeep; and second, when he decided that he "couldn't let [his] friends go ahead with their plan" (ch. 13) to cut Sandeep's hair. Hold a group discussion with students, responding and brainstorming on the following.
 - ◆ Looking at each of these defining moments, what was Lucas's motivation?
 - ◆ After each defining moment, how did Lucas's life change?
 - ◆ Did he get what he wanted?
3. Read the following scenes from early in the novel and brainstorm answers to the questions that follow.

From chapter 1:

I turned to Sandeep. "What are you looking at, raghead?" I asked in a loud voice. Sandeep squirmed, but the kids at the back cracked up. At least the pressure was off me.

What if Lucas had instead said, "Hi, Sandeep. Can I sit with you?" How would the story have changed?

From chapter 2:

Kelly and her friends were dancing, and Pierre punched one of the nerds in the stomach. The kid was lying on the ground moaning, but he stopped when Mr. Adams walked by.

"Everything okay?" Mr. Adams asked as he helped the kid up from the sidewalk.

"You look a little winded."

"Yup, everything's fine."

What if one of the students instead told Mr. Adams what Pierre had done? How would the story have changed?

4. Ask students to choose another scene from the novel, create an alternate ending and discuss the possible outcomes. For example:

In chapter 3, Jake “head-butted the soccer ball halfway down the bus.” The ball missed the driver, but if it had hit the driver, the bus could have gone out of control, and the kids, driver and other people driving could have been in danger...We propose that the story would have changed because...

5. As a writing assignment, ask students to reflect on the following scenes in the novel, completing the questions that follow.

(ch. 3) *For me, being called a total imbecile was a compliment.*

(ch. 13) Pierre: “You’re a loser, man.”

Lucas: “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

- ♦ At first Lucas didn’t want to be with the nerds and losers, but later he was happy to be with them. Write a paragraph that describes why Lucas changed his mind. Use references from the novel to back up your answer.
- ♦ Can you think of experiences from your own life that helped you grow as a person, like Lucas did? Write a paragraph about one of those experiences, comparing it to Lucas’ experience.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Language Arts

1. *121 Express* begins and ends with a letter. Ask students to work in pairs to re-search the parts of a letter and envelope, using the two letters in *121 Express* as examples.

Parts of a letter should include:

heading address	body text
date	closing
inside address	signature
salutation	post script (optional)

Parts of an addressed envelope should include:

sender’s name and return address
recipient’s name and address
stamp

- ♦ Provide each pair with one sheet of plain paper and an envelope, and ask them to write a letter to a recipient of their choice. Ideas could include: a letter to a musician, movie star, politician, pen pal, friend, family member, etc.
- ♦ Many countries have guidelines about how addresses are written on envelopes, including the order and positioning of apartment or suite numbers, street addresses and zip or postal codes. Invite students to research two of the following:
 - What are the guidelines for addressing envelopes in your country?
 - What is the price of a domestic and an international stamp? How can you tell how much a letter or parcel costs to mail?

- How is mail delivered to your school? Who delivers it and how often?
- Research two special-issue stamps that commemorate events or famous people.
- Find the street address, including zip or postal code, of the leader of your country, state or province, and city or town.

Option: Before students begin their research, challenge them to hold a class fundraiser to pay for the cost of the stamps. Ideas could include: holding a bake sale, a bottle drive or a bike washing service.

2. Lucas is new to his school, and he's anxious to make friends with "the cool guys." He says, "This was my new beginning—my second chance. I was going to get in with the cool guys—no matter what. It was just a matter of making my personal life my top priority" (ch. 1). Ask students to choose one of the following writing exercises.
- ♦ Can you think of a time when you were the new kid like Lucas? Perhaps you were new to a school, classroom, club, team or social group. Write a journal entry, reflecting on Lucas' or your experience. Include three tips for coping in this situation. For example: *If you're the new kid in the after-school club, it really helps to...because...*
 - ♦ When Lucas made his personal life his "top priority," what happened to his marks in school? Write a letter to Lucas, giving him advice on managing his priorities. Refer to the novel in your letter. For example: *Dear Lucas, Here's some ideas on how to make new friends and do well in school too...*
 - ♦ In his previous school, Lucas was one of the nerds, and his nickname was Brainiac. Imagine that you are Lucas. Write a journal entry that describes your old school life and why you want a fresh start now. Did you fit in at your old school? How did you get your nickname? Did you get good grades? Were your parents proud of you?

Drama

At the end of the novel, Monique Polak has included a letter from the Hot Dog Haven. As a creative project, challenge students to write a short skit which picks up the story of Lucas, Sandeep, Jake, Georgie, Pierre, Kelly, Jewel, Quack Quack and Marie Therrien, the owner of the Hot Dog Haven. What happens next to the kids from the 121 Express?

Art

One of the advertisements on the 121 Express bus says “Paix sur l’autobus. Paix sur la terre,” which is French for “Peace on the bus. Peace on earth” (ch. 5). Ask students to create advertisements with similar themes for your classroom. Encourage students to create colorful eye-catching posters. Should students wish to use similarly-themed slogans, translated into French, some examples are listed below.

- Always respect other people’s things. (Toujours respecte le propriété des autres.)
- Act with trust and integrity. (Avoir la truste et l’integrité.)
- Try your best. (Avoir de l’effort!)
- Don’t gossip. It hurts us all. (Ne cancaner pas, ca nous tous blesse.)
- Keep your work area tidy. (Essayer de garder ton bureau nettoyé.)
- Reduce, reuse, recycle. (Réduire, reutilise, recycle.)
- What kind of person would I be if I couldn’t keep a promise to myself? (Quel type de personne serai-je si je ne pourrai pas garder un promesse a moi-même?)

History

Lucas’s English class is assigned a project where they must pick a modern-day hero. A number of heroes are mentioned:

- Charles Darwin (ch. 4)
- Mahatma Gandhi (ch. 1)
- Lance Armstrong (ch. 10)
- Tenzing Norgay, Edmund Hillary (ch. 10)
- Rosa Parks (ch. 12)

Invite students to choose one of the historical figures mentioned in the novel and report on their life, answering the following questions:

1. What is his/her birthday and where was he/she born?
2. What are they famous for? Describe what makes them a hero.
3. Did his/her actions affect others around them? How?
4. If you had one question for this hero, what would it be?
5. How do you think this hero would respond?

Geography

Using a map of the world, have students point out the cities identified in *121 Express*. For each city, have students list three interesting things about that city. Prompts could include climate, language, food, etc. The cities mentioned are:

- Ville St. Laurent, Quebec (his new school is here)
- Lasalle, Quebec (his old school is here)
- France and sometimes neighboring countries (the Tour de France)
- Mount Everest (Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary reached the summit)
- Montgomery, Alabama, USA (home of Rosa Parks)

Health Sciences

Georgie had a serious asthma attack, which could have been deadly had Sandeep not known what to do. Invite students to study asthma and answer the following questions:

1. Which system of the human body is affected by asthma?
2. What are the symptoms of asthma?
3. Why is it dangerous?
4. What are two ways to treat asthma?
5. What is one way you can help someone who has asthma?
6. Compare your findings to the description in chapter 14 of *121 Express*. Was Georgie having an asthma attack? How do you know?

Connecting to the Students—Ideas for Exploration

1. Sandeep and Lucas had trouble deciding on which hero to choose for their English assignment. Sandeep said, “Heroes don’t take drugs...They don’t have to be perfect; they have to be decent—and fair” (ch. 10). As a group discussion topic, ask students to comment on the following questions:
 - ♦ What makes a hero or a heroic act?
 - ♦ Can small acts be considered heroic, or do only large-scale acts count?
 - ♦ Identify a hero from the characters in the novel. What makes them a hero? Some ideas, to get the students started, could include:
 - Was Lucas a hero when he stood up to Pierre and defended Sandeep’s right to his religion? (ch. 13)
 - Was Sandeep a hero when he took control and saved Georgie during his asthma attack? (ch. 14)
 - Was the bus driver a hero because he “was a real fighter in the bus drivers’ union. [The other drivers] could always count on him to stand up for the rest [of the drivers]”? (ch. 11)

2. The students from Lucas' school do not treat their bus driver well. As a result of their disrespectful (and dangerous) behavior, their driver suffers a nervous collapse.
 - ◆ As a group, brainstorm a checklist of bus drivers' rights while on their job.
 - ◆ Assign a student to write the suggestions on the board or a flipchart. For example: *All bus drivers have the right to: a safe ride on a bus that is in good operating condition; a respectful environment where they are free of distractions; appropriate training to drive in all kinds of weather, etc.*
 - ◆ Once complete, make a poster using the list. Illustrate with colorful eye-catching images, such as students' drawings or images cut out from magazines. Ask the students to share their poster with the local bus drivers' depot or union.
3. Pretend you are in the advertising business and it's your job to make a powerful anti-bullying campaign for your classroom or school—something kids will really connect with. What will be your campaign's message? Be sure to write a catchy slogan. How will you get your message across? Think of methods that kids will respond to. It could be a poster, a brochure, a flyer, a jingle for the daily announcements or a skit.