



Edge of Flight

Kate Jaimet

Reading level: 3.4

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Book Summary

Edge of Flight is the toughest rock-climbing route Vanisha has ever faced. She has one last chance to conquer it before she moves to Vermont to start university. University is a sore point for Vanisha, who yearns for a career in the outdoors but feels pressured by her mother to earn an academic degree. Trying to put school out of her mind, she heads to the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas with her buddies Rusty and Jeb for a final weekend of climbing and camping. Deep in the woods, they stumble on an illegal marijuana plantation, and the gang of bikers who guard it. When Jeb is shot by the bikers, Vanisha alone must get help—and to do so, she must climb Edge of Flight. As she confronts her insecurities on the cliff face and in the woods, Vanisha gains a new resolve and the self-confidence to choose her own path in life.

Prereading Ideas

- Is there something you want to do, but that you think others won't approve of?
- How do we grow as individuals when we're faced with physically dangerous situations?
- How do friends help you to understand yourself better?

Connecting to the Text

Plot

- Invite students to write an epilogue for *Edge of Flight*. Remind them to stay in character, asking themselves as they write: What would Vanisha do next? Chapters should advance the plot and develop character where possible. (As an alternative challenge, invite students to write the next chapter from a third-person point of view.)
- Have students create a story map that shows the crises that the characters in *Edge of Flight* face as the story progresses. They could do it as a timeline, or as a jagged ascending line for an even more effective visual display. (As an example, read the end of chapter 18 to students, then read the beginning of chapter 19. How does Kate Jaimet keep the pace fast and the tension high? Discuss the effectiveness of ending chapters with a cliffhanger.)

Character

- In *Edge of Flight*, Rusty and Jeb speak in an Arkansas dialect that's specific to the region they grew up in. Have students find several examples of this. How does this technique add to their experience of the text?
- Conflict is what keeps a story moving along. It's what makes things interesting! Typically, story plot follows one of four basic patterns of conflict:
 1. *Person against nature*. Tension comes from the character's battle against strong forces of nature.
 2. *Person against person*. Tension comes through the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist.
 3. *Person against society*. Tension comes from the main character's struggle against some societal factor that must be overcome.
 4. *Person against self*. Tension is created as the protagonist faces internal conflict; the hero has two or more courses of action and must decide which course to take.

Guide students in a discussion of the kind of conflict pattern in *Edge of Flight*. Are there more than one, depending on which part of the story you look at? Which one predominates?

- *Edge of Flight* is written in first person point of view. Poll the class to find out their preferences. Who likes first person? Who likes third? Who likes omniscient? Discuss the advantages and drawbacks of each. Which pov is most relevant to an action/adventure story such as this one? Challenge students to rewrite a section of *Edge of Flight* in a different pov.
- Discuss the word "stereotype." Have students create a character sketch or map of Loretta. How does Loretta fit a certain stereotype? How does she differ from it? Have students provide specific examples from the story to support their reasoning.

Theme

- Like plot, setting and characters, *theme* is also an important literary element in any novel. Theme is an idea or message about life revealed in a work of literature. It's not really a moral, but it's kind of a guiding message all the same. Break your class into small groups and have them discuss what they understand to be the theme of *Edge of Flight*. Have them go through the book and flag at least three areas where the theme is very apparent.
- The title *Edge of Flight* doesn't just refer to Vanisha's big climbing challenge. Invite students to discuss what other meanings the book's title holds. Using examples such as *An Inconvenient Truth* by Al Gore, *Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper or *Something From Nothing* by Phoebe Gilman, guide them in understanding that often, but not always, a book's title reveals or reflects aspects of its theme. Can they think of any other books they've read (or movies they've seen) that have such titles? Challenge students to come up with a new title for Kate Jaimet's book.

Setting

- Getting Jeb out of the cave, through the Chimney and over Edge of Flight is a huge feat. Invite students to sketch these scenes as they see them.
- Discuss with students the importance of setting, especially for a story like *Edge of Flight*. As they read the book, have them create a list of words and phrases that help to create a clear picture of the setting in the reader's mind.

Literary Devices

- A *simile* is a comparison using the words "like" or "as." It's a literary technique that gives the reader a compelling image to help broaden his or her understanding of the text. Here's an example of a simile from when Jeb admires Rusty's new camming device:

He reaches out to hold it, *like it's a precious gemstone.* (ch. 4)

Here's another, from when Jeb is at the crux of Edge of Flight and is preparing for his final few moves:

He peers down, then turns to face away from us, *like a diver about to attempt a backflip.* (ch. 4)

As students read *Edge of Flight*, have them look for other similes. Discuss: How do these comparisons help you get a better picture of what's happening in the story? Have students write two similes about something that's familiar to them (the shape of their feet, the color of a friend's hair, etc.).

- In chapter 13, Vanisha is halfway down a cliff, clinging to a ledge of rock that hangs over a river. She's terrified, but she knows she has to push herself in order to help Jeb. *Jeb*, she thinks. While not strictly a literary device per se, the author chooses to repeat Jeb's name in a single paragraph, in italics. Discuss with students why this is an effective technique for moving the plot forward and keeping the tension high. What does this single word say about Vanisha's character?

Vocabulary

- Author Kate Jaimet provides a glossary of climbing terms at the back of *Edge of Flight*. Have students write about their use of glossaries. Do they appreciate having that tool? Do they use it? How does a glossary improve or change the reading experience? For what reason are the words in a glossary typically arranged in alphabetical order as opposed to in the order they appear in the text?
- Have students create a glossary of their own, using terms that are new to them as they read *Edge of Flight*.

Connecting to the Curriculum

English

- Read the following passages from *Edge of Flight* aloud to students:

The moon, nearly full, floats above a mass of thick gray clouds. Mosquitos throng around us. (ch. 3)

I crawl up the slab, first on all fours and finally squirming on my belly as the slab angles closer and closer to the rock ledge. At last, I wriggle my head and shoulders through the hole, flip over and haul myself on top of the ledge. (ch. 7)

Have students jot down the verbs they hear as you read these passages. When you finish, have students share their verbs. What do they notice about them? (Many of them are strong verbs.) Discuss how strong verbs make a passage much clearer and livelier. Have students go back through *Edge of Flight* and find other passages where the verbs are similarly strong. Challenge them to find a sentence with only "so-so" verbs, and have them replace the mediocre ones with strong verbs.

- As Jeb lies in the cave, shot, no one knows whether he will survive. But what—besides football—is Jeb thinking all this time? What if he were to die? Have students choose one of the following activities:
 1. Write an end-of-life letter from Jeb. Who would he write to? What would he say?
 2. Write a string of 20 tweets that Jeb might send as he lies there in the darkness (assuming he had a phone and cell coverage down in the cave).

- Have students consider Loretta, Vanisha and the deputy as not only characters, but as human beings with histories and motivations. Ask students to create a short list of open-ended questions that they might ask of one of these characters. What would they ask their chosen character if they were given the chance? (This is a great opportunity to provide a mini-lesson on asking powerful questions.)
- Read Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken." Ask students (or have them answer in writing): What does this poem mean to Vanisha? What does it mean to you? What is your road less travelled?

Physical Education

At the beginning of chapter 1, Vanisha mentally runs through the moves of how to conquer Edge of Flight—and she does it in great detail. Have students similarly describe, step by step, the motions use to complete a particular manoeuver in a sport they enjoy.

Health/Personal Planning

- Vanisha and her mother have moved all over the place as a result of her mother's profession and the fact that she's always looking for a better position as a poetry professor. Discuss with students the challenges for children when they move around a lot. What are the advantages of not always staying in the same place? Have students write about the moves they have done as they've grown up. Which ones were hardest? Which ones were the best, in hindsight? (If students haven't moved, invite them to write about the experience of changing schools—or ask their opinion about whether they're content with having never moved house.)
- Vanisha doesn't particularly want to go to university and study philosophy, but she feels it's something her mother wants her to do. Ask students to think about what career(s) they'd like to have when they're out in the working world. Have them create a job description for their ideal job. Here's an example of a fairly simple job description for a police officer, which includes a brief summary, a few bullet points about main duties, and a few more bullets about the requirements to get such a job. www5.hrsdc.gc.ca/noc/english/noc/2011/ProfileQuickSearch.aspx?val=0&val1=0431&val65=
- In chapter 6, Jeb urges Vanisha and Rusty to go down the hill to check out the field of marijuana, even though both of them don't want to. Engage students in a discussion about peer pressure. What causes it? Why do we feel it? Why is it so difficult to say no in the face of intense peer pressure?
- In chapter 12, when Vanisha is running toward town to get help for Jeb, she comes across a group of hunters near a campfire. She pauses for a moment, thinking to herself that they might be able to help. But then she decides against it, thinking: *What if they're drunk? What if one of them grabs me?* Lead a discussion with students about the very real risk of sexual assault for girls. Then discuss the fact that boys are also

at risk. From whom are we at greatest risk? Why are assault figures overwhelmingly larger for females than for males? And finally: How does this reality make the world a different place for girls than it is for boys?

- At several points in the story, Vanisha reminds herself to focus on her goal—whether that be choosing her career path (a long-term goal), getting help for Jeb (a medium-term goal) or getting up to the steel beam on the bridge (an immediate goal). Ask students: Is this helpful in achieving her goals? How? Discuss the implications of this kind of practice for their own lives. Follow this conversation up by having students lay out a long-term goal and break it down into several medium-term goals. Can they break it down even further into immediate or short-term goals?
- When Vanisha asks Rusty to help her write an essay for her application to be a Search and Rescue Technician in chapter 20, he says that no one else can decide for you what your path should be—because you're the one who has to walk it. Have students write about why Rusty's words make sense.

Social Studies

- The Ozark Mountains carry a bit of mystery with them. Have students investigate this part of the United States, using the following questions for guidance (if you want a shorter research project, break groups up according to the question(s) they will research):
 1. Where are the Ozarks located?
 2. Create a map of this area using paper and markers, a mapping program or clay. Be sure to include a scale and legend to help viewers understand and read your map.
 3. Historically, what was the economic driver for the region? (i.e. What did people do for a living?) Discuss changes to the area's industry over time.
 4. What are the current challenges to the economy in this area?
 5. Describe the natural habitat and ecology of the Ozark Mountains. How has this had an impact on the economy and the way people traditionally made their living? Does it have as much of an impact now?
 6. How did the name "Ozark" come about? Why?
 7. Describe some of the cultural history of the Ozarks' inhabitants, especially music. How does music help to preserve culture?
- Engage students in a discussion of post-secondary education. What is its value to the individual? What is its purpose on a societal scale? Is a degree the only way to find rewarding work? Can they think of any others? Invite students to browse several college and university calendars, making notes on courses of study. Have them select two or three possible majors that interest them, and ask them to write a short paragraph about each, explaining what piques their interest about the program.
- In chapter 8, Rusty teases Jeb for his bun-toasting rack that he makes for the fire. Jeb, however, tells him he knows what he's doing: he's got Cherokee ancestry.

Whether or not that's true, we all have ancestors, and they all come from one part of the world or another. Challenge students to create a family tree that traces their roots (to keep it simple, have them focus on their nuclear family instead of including aunts, uncles and cousins). How far back can they go?

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. In chapter 3, Vanisha reflects that her mother would look down on her if she didn't get a real university degree. How much are other people's opinions of us a factor in the decisions we make about our own lives? Why do we take them so seriously? Why do we seek to please others so much?
2. In chapter 7, Vanisha feels nervous about possibly having to spend the night in the cave, where it's pitch dark—and underground. She reflects that it would be like being buried alive, which points to a possible fear of enclosed spaces (claustrophobia). What fears do you have? Do you know why you have them?
3. Vanisha left ballet because she was tired of performing routinized steps over and over, just in different combinations. The thing she loves about climbing is that you have to think about every move: “each new route is a puzzle to be solved. There is no single, right way to get from the bottom to the top” (ch. 8). What activity in your life do you feel the same way about? Explain.
4. In chapter 9, Vanisha is climbing Edge of Flight. She takes a slight rest partway up, but then realizes she can't stay there for long. “Even staying still takes energy and strength,” she thinks. “I have to keep moving.” How is this a metaphor for life? (i.e. How is this true for the other parts of life?)
5. At the end of chapter 13, the corrupt deputy and his biker sidekick finally give up the chase, and Vanisha can draw a breath. She finds herself alone “and shaking with exhaustion and betrayal.” Sometimes we're surprised and disappointed by our elders' failure to keep us safe. Write about a time when you were let down by an adult who was supposed to be looking out for your wellbeing. How did you manage this situation?
6. In chapter 17, when Vanisha and Rusty are preparing to pack Jeb out of the cave, they leave him with a flashlight until they return. “At least he won't be alone in the dark,” Vanisha thinks. “Where there's light, there's hope.” How have you felt this to be true in your own life? Why are we so afraid of the dark? And on a deeper level: is there a hidden metaphor in Vanisha's observation?
7. Because of Rusty's first aid training, he and Vanisha are able to rig up a stretcher and secure Jeb for the journey toward the surface. Do you have first aid training? Why is this such an important life skill?
8. Vanisha becomes overwhelmed with emotion when she sees her mother, who, until her ordeal in the woods, was driving Vanisha crazy. Why does it often take us a crisis to appreciate what—and who—we have?

Author's note

Dear Reader,

When I was a university student, I was offered a spot in a program to study literary translation at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. At the time, I was dating a guy who, for various reasons, my mother did not approve of. I didn't want to move thousands of miles away from my boyfriend, and I wasn't at all sure I wanted to study literary translation, but my mother pressured me to accept. In the end, I did.

I was miserable in Arkansas. It was scorching hot; I felt like an outsider; and I knew from the very first weeks in the program that I did not want to become a literary translator. But I didn't want to go home, because I was mad at my mother. I was broke, except for my scholarship, which would be revoked if I quit the program. I didn't know what to do. So I stayed for one full school year, while I tried to figure things out.

I spent a lot of time that year blaming my mother for my situation. Then, at some point, I realized that blaming her wasn't doing me any good. Yes, she'd pressured me. Yes, she'd given me her advice. But she hadn't held a gun to my head. By blaming her, I was saying to myself that she had the power to control my life. The only way I could take that power back was to stop blaming her. I had to realize that ultimately, it was my life. I'd made the decision to come to Arkansas and I had to be responsible for it. I knew, as well, that I had to take responsibility for the decision about what I would do next with my life. It was a very powerful insight.

One good thing did happen to me in Arkansas: I met three rock climbers named Michael, Chris and Rusty. I hung out with them at the climbing gym and they took me to climb at Sam's Throne in the Ozarks. A lot of the themes in this book are based on my experiences in Arkansas. Not just the climbing, but the growing up that I did there. Like me, Vanisha feels pressured by her mother to take a certain direction in life. Like me (but much sooner) she realizes that she has to make her own decision about her future.

In climbing, the "crux" is the name for the hardest part of a route. It's the problem you have to solve to get to the top. Sometimes, in life, we hit a mental crux: a problem we have to solve in our minds, before we can keep moving forward.

I hope that the insights you read in this and other books can help you at times in your life when you hit a crux. And by the way, I still love my mother. That's why this book is dedicated to her.

Kate

Resources***Rock Climbing***

www.rock-climbing-for-life.com/rock-climbing-101

www.climber.co.uk

www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLfvk2SSj1c

Career Choices

www.bls.gov/k12

www.bls.gov/ooh

www.kids.gov/6_8/6_8_careers.shtml

Books

Fiction

- Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*
Carbone, Elisa. *Jump*
Ely, Scott. *The Elephant Mountains*
Muller, Rachel Dunstan. *Squeeze*
O'Donnell, Liam and Mike Deas. *Wild Ride*
Paulsen, Gary. *Hatchet*
—*Brian's Winter*
Van Tol, Alex. *Gravity Check*

Nonfiction

- Bolles, Richard N. and Carol Christen. *What Color is Your Parachute? For Teens*
Hague, Dan. *The Self-Coached Climber* [With DVD]
Lore, Nicholas. *Now What? The Young Person's Guide to Choosing the Perfect Career*
Stone, William; Barbara am Ende and Monte Paulsen. *Beyond the Deep: The Deadly Descent into the World's Most Treacherous Cave*

Author Biography

Kate Jaimet is an author and journalist who recently began a freelance career after many years as a daily newspaper reporter for the *Ottawa Citizen*. Her first book in the Orca Sports series, *Slam Dunk*, was selected by the Junior Library Guild and the Canadian Children's Book Centre as a Best Book for Kids & Teens. Kate learned to rock climb in Germany, and now has a bouldering wall in her basement in Ottawa, Ontario.

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