



Fly Away

Nora Rock

Reading level: 3.9

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AR Quiz # 138921

Book Summary

After a member of her competitive cheerleading team is injured in practice, sixteen-year-old Marnie is asked to be a flyer—the most coveted role in cheerleading. The Soar Starlings have a real shot at the provincial championship, and Marnie has only a few weeks to prepare. While she scrambles to polish her lifts and throws, Marnie's personal life begins to unravel, and she realizes that, to be a leader, you have to let go of old alliances to make room in your life for new ones.

Prereading Ideas

- When you think of cheerleading, what comes to mind? Did you know that the competitive sport of cheerleading is very different from the style of cheerleading you see performed, for example, during an NFL football broadcast?
- Did you know that some studies suggest that in terms of likelihood and severity of injuries suffered, cheerleading is the number one most dangerous women's sport?
- Did you know that competitive cheerleading teams are now only rarely associated with a school or community sports team? Modern competitive cheerleading is a sport in its own right, with its own competitive structure.
- Have you ever studied dance, gymnastics, or figure skating? Many cheerleaders participate in these other sports before trying cheerleading.
- Did you know that boys and men can be cheerleaders too? Many competitive teams have male members, and boys and men join school-based teams too, though mainly in the US.

Connecting to the Text

Plot

- 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 *Fly Away*.
 - Have students write an epilogue for *Fly Away*. They should address Arielle's decision (does she stay with Benedict or leave?) and look ahead at how and whether Marnie and Arielle's friendship develops. Students may also want to write about how Marnie and Liam go forward.
 - Make an overhead of the following list. Discuss with students some of the things that make a good story:
 - ◆ a plot that is exciting, suspenseful, baffling or extraordinary
 - ◆ interesting situations that are well explained and believable
 - ◆ characters you care enough about to make you want to keep reading
 - ◆ characters you can relate to and who change and grow as they make decisions to solve problems
 - ◆ descriptions that make you feel like you're there
 - ◆ a variety of settings
 - ◆ a fast start—action, danger, humor
 - ◆ situations that provide an emotional response and give you something to think about
 - ◆ a good ending with problems solved and characters getting what they deserve
- Using these criteria, have students write a critical review of *Fly Away*. Students should ensure their review touches on a number of the criteria with examples and reasons for their assessment.

Theme

- An important theme in *Fly Away* is “growing out of” sports participation. There are very few opportunities for competitive cheerleaders over the age of nineteen, just as there are few opportunities generally for adult women to play sports. What, besides an easy way to stay fit and healthy, do women lose when they “grow out of” team sports?
- Why does Marnie feel so betrayed when Arielle abruptly leaves the team? Do you think Arielle’s departure makes Marnie question whether cheerleading is a valid activity for serious girls?
- What is the message of *Fly Away*?

Character

- What do you think of Marnie in the first few chapters of the book, especially when she is feeling sorry for herself for losing first Liam, and then Arielle? Is Marnie too dependent on her friends? While it’s difficult to lose a close friend, how do these losses impact our independence? What do we learn about ourselves when we cope with the loss of a friend?
- Arielle has some excellent leadership qualities. Complete a character sketch of Arielle that shows all of these skills. Include other aspects of her personality, such as her dedication to her art. What do you think is Arielle’s strongest quality? Why?

Point of View

- *Fly Away* contains a mystery, and is told from Marnie’s point of view. Would it still work as a mystery if it were told from the point of view of an “all-seeing” narrator?
- Have students rewrite a selection from *Fly Away* from another person’s perspective. One good scene for this activity is where Shona and Marnie come upon Arielle watching TV in Benedict’s house. Another is where Marnie and Arielle argue about how Liam treated Marnie by leaving her on the side of the road.

Connecting to the Curriculum

English

- Explore with students how to write a screenplay. Watch a section of *Stand By Me*, *E.T.* or *Edward Scissorhands*. Discuss setting, dialogue and the importance of stage direction. Have students choose a section of *Fly Away* and adapt it for a screenplay (see Resources, below, for information about writing screenplays).
- Study several magazine profiles of people the students know well (politicians and celebrities are good for this exercise). Discuss journalistic integrity and impartiality in preparation for students to tackle this assignment. Have students choose a sports figure they admire and write a feature magazine profile about that person. Be sure to include biographical and historical information, as well current events in the subject's life, and quotes from the subject.

Social Studies

- Most police forces consider young people to be adults when they reach the age of eighteen. When eighteen-year-old Arielle disappears, the search that follows is much less intensive than the search that would be conducted for a missing child. Do you know any eighteen-year-olds? Do you consider them to have the same judgment as adults, even in dangerous circumstances? Why might even a sensible teenager struggle more than an adult would in an unfamiliar situation?
- Why do some cheerleaders get teased about being silly, or too girly, or dumb? Which aspects of the sport of cheerleading do you think help support these criticisms? What could a cheerleader or a cheerleading team do to help counter these criticisms?
- How does competitiveness in stunt-based sports boost the rate of injuries? Is there anything unethical about rewarding dangerous stunts with high marks? At one point in the story, when the team is short on members, Marnie suggests reducing the numbers in the stunt groups from four to three because it "looks less cluttered." Smaller stunt groups are also less safe. Do you think that taking risks in order to win is an acceptable part of serious competition?

Health/Personal Planning

- Body size can be a sensitive issue for many teens these days. There is no room for discrimination based on body size in activities such as music, or debating, for example. In cheerleading, however, being the “wrong” size has practical and safety consequences: if a flyer is too heavy, it is difficult to throw her; if she’s too tall, she may not get enough height to complete rotations. If a base is too short or lacks strong legs, she may not provide enough support to her teammates. For this reason, cheerleading is sort of like football: there is an optimum size for each position. What are the positive and negative implications, self-esteemwise, of sports that “sort” participants based on body size?
- Do the uniforms worn by cheerleaders discourage larger girls’ participation? Should they?

Physical Education

- Cheerleaders face a high rate of injury. What do sports organizers do to try to limit injuries in sports?
- Visualizing is a powerful way for athletes to prepare themselves for competition. Why do athletes do this? How is it helpful? In Chapter Ten, Marnie concentrates on her moves, ignores the images of Emma falling—and has a great routine as a result. Have you used visualizing to prepare yourself for an athletic event? Try it next time you’re about to do something that makes you a bit nervous. Write about your experience, explaining whether your prior visualization helped.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. Marnie has difficulty acing her stunts once she’s made flyer. It’s frustrating to her that, no matter how much she practices, she just can’t master it. Have you had a similar feeling, where you just weren’t able to nail something no matter how hard you tried? Explain.
2. Marnie’s boyfriend breaks up with her by abandoning her by the side of a country road in winter. Should she ever take him back as a boyfriend? Why or why not?
3. On her way to the championships in Toronto, Marnie muses that if you want top marks, you’ve got to try the toughest stunts. She says you need to take the risks if you want the glory. How has this been true in your own life?
4. Do you agree with Marnie that it’s more important to focus on being part of a team than it is to focus on your own performance? What are the advantages of each approach?

5. Arielle felt that the only way she could get what she wanted—a mentorship with Trey Benedict—was to conceal her plans from her parents and her best friend. Do you agree that this was Arielle's only option? What would have happened had she tried to negotiate permission to get what she wanted? Do older teens have an obligation to negotiate their life choices with their parents, or can they, as legal adults, do whatever they want?
6. If you disappeared shortly after your eighteenth birthday, and the police told your parents that they would conduct only a limited search because you left of your own volition, how might your parents feel?
7. Near the beginning of the story, Shona Bart acts like the only thing that matters to her is being a provincial champion. Do you believe that this is the only thing that matters to Shona? What else do you think matters to her? Does her bravado conceal any insecurities? Have you ever acted competitively or aggressively to conceal fears or doubts?
8. How would you react if you learned that your best friend had been keeping a huge secret from you for months?

Author Note

Dear Reader,

When I was thirteen, a friend asked me to try out for cheerleading with her because she didn't want to go alone. I made that team, and stayed in cheerleading for five years, eventually competing in the "second annual" edition of the Great Lakes Championship mentioned in this book.

As a straight-A student and the daughter of a feminist mother, I was teased a lot about being a cheerleader. Back then, and to some extent now, people thought cheerleading was a non-sport, and that cheerleaders are airheads. Of course, anyone who has ever tried this sport knows differently. I've even read that cheerleading is the number one most physically dangerous "women's sport." When I went to a regionals competition last year, it seemed like every single team had at least one member watching from the sidelines in a cast!

But what I remember most about cheerleading was not the stunts or the competitions; it was being a member of a team. Just like in any other sport, a cheerleading team depends on every member to work hard, and hold up her end of the pyramid! One girl's bad day can mean another girl's broken arm, or the whole team's loss; and so you learn how to be dependable and put your problems aside when the time comes to perform. "Team thinking" is an important life skill. I've noticed that after college, very few women play team sports of any kind, and that's too bad. Maybe if we treated girls' sports participation with more respect, adult women would be more likely to demand opportunities to play sports.

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Resources

Writing Screenplays

<http://www.screenwriting.info>

Writing Critical Book Reviews

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/bookrev>

Cheerleading

Provinces of Canada: Cheerleading Associations

<http://www.ocfcheer.com>

<http://www.bccheerleading.ca>

<http://www.sca.ca>

<http://www.cheerquebec.com>

<http://www.nsclubcheer.com>

<http://www.nlcheerleading.com>

Cheer Alliance

<http://www.cheeralliance.ca>

Books

Carrier, Justin. *Complete Cheerleading*

Gassman, Julie A. *Cheerleading Really is a Sport*

McElroy, James T. *We've Got Spirit: The Life and Times of America's Greatest Cheerleading Team*

Mullarkey, Lisa. *Cheerleading Stunts and Tumbling*

Scott, Kieran. *Ultimate Cheerleading*

Wilson, Leslie. *The Ultimate Guide to Cheerleading: For Cheerleaders and Coaches*

Author Biography

Nora Rock is a freelance writer and a college professor. She's an avid fan of hockey and football, both the professional kind and the kind her sons play. Nora played high-school football herself and was a cheerleader for many years. She lives in Ajax, Ontario, with her husband and two sons.