



High Wire

Melanie Jackson

Reading level: 4.0

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AR Quiz # 154744

Book Summary

Zack Freedman has complete control and feels a sense of calm on the high wire. If only he could say the same about the rest of his life. His fellow youth circus performer and roommate, Cubby, hates him, and his aunt dumps a yappy, excitable dog on him. When a necklace is stolen during a circus performance and the victim of the theft threatens to shut down the circus, Zack is desperate to solve the mystery so he can keep his place on the wire.

Author Biography

Scottish-born and mystery-minded, **Melanie Jackson** is the author of Orca's Dinah Galloway Mystery series for eight-to-eleven-year-olds, and three books in the Orca Currents Series: *High Wire*, *The Big Dip* and *Fast Slide*. Melanie, who lives in Vancouver with her family, is a business/advertising writer and editor—a Mad Woman! A book reviewer for the *Vancouver Sun*, she is also a member of the *Sun's* Book Club. Melanie volunteers as a writing mentor with the Vancouver School Board.

Connecting to the Text***Plot and Character Study; Vocabulary***

The following words and terms at the bottom of the page are used in *High Wire* in the context of Zack, Whitney and Cubby's experiences in Circus Sorelli. Words are arranged alphabetically from left to right. Invite students to write sentences or short paragraphs using the words below that describe something interesting about the characters or plot. For example:

- When Zack *walks* on the *wire*, he must transfer his *weight* away from his chest. It takes a lot of *practice* and *self-control*.
- Cubby the *clown* wore a *costume* when he worked at the *circus*. He enjoyed being in the *spotlight* and hearing the *audience cheering*.
- Zack was *curious* to find out who stole the necklace. He *watched* the *performers* on a DVD in his *trailer* in the *darkness*.

Students may also benefit from prompting questions:

- How do you think Cubby felt when he found out Zack was the new high-wire walker, and not him?
- When Zack was on the high wire and heard Mrs. Boothroyd's scream, what went through his head?
- Whitney wanted to try out for the Olympics. What did she do to try and make that happen?
- The circus has many superstitions. Can you describe two noted in the novel?
- Many circus acts are described in the novel. Which one seems the most appealing to you, to watch or to learn?
- Zack had the wrong idea about Cubby—and of Whitney. How did his opinion of each change? What happened that changed his mind?
- In chapter 1, Zack said he liked being alone and doing his own thing. Reflect on the last chapter, where Zack is selling oranges and juggling. Did he get his wish?

acrobat	adoration	applause	asleep	audience
bad luck	balance	big top	bleacher	bowling pins
cheering	circus	clown	costume	curious
dangerous	darkness	distracted	dream	dropped
leash	leather	ledge	lingers	mistake
performance	performer	placard	practicing	precision
safety net	self-control	souvenir	spotlight	superstitions
thrill/ed	trailer	training	trapeze	travel
watch/ing	walks, walker	weight	whistle	wire

Connecting to the Curriculum

Language Arts

Zack knows a lot about walking the high wire because he's been practicing a long time. He knows how to hold his weight to maintain balance. In chapter 1, he says:

The secret to high-wire walking is to place your weight at your sides. It takes a lot of practice and many falls into the safety net to get it right. By nature, people bend their weight forward when they move.

As a sentence-writing exercise, ask students to compose three sentences similar to Zack's, based on an area of their own expertise. Ideas to get students started are below.

- *The secret to a great ollie is...* (skateboarding trick)
- *The secret to a great boneless is...* (skateboarding trick)
- *The secret to getting ready for a rap battle is...*
- *The secret to getting up on time on Monday mornings is...*
- *The secret to flawless nail polish is...*
- *The secret to making a great pizza is...*

Art, Music

As individual art projects, invite students to respond artistically to a scene from *High Wire* that interested them. Once complete, invite students to share their artwork and comment on what they found interesting about the scene they chose. Ideas are below.

- *As I walked forward, I imagined how Petit must have felt. The sun above, the sky all around. The clean, sweet air. For the minutes it took him to cross, he'd been alone, hassle-free.* (ch. 1)
 - ◆ Imagine, as Zack does, that you are Philippe Petit in 1974, walking the high wire between the World Trade Center buildings. What piece of music might best accompany this experience? What about it made it a "fit" for you?
- *The ringmaster and circus owner, Mr. Sorelli, stomped into the room, his black eyebrows smashed into a scowl...He wore a glittery red duck-tail jacket with matching jodhpurs and a top hat.* (ch. 2)

The ringmaster loomed over me...[There was a] massive cartoon of him on a billboard. The effect was scary. (ch. 6)

- ◆ Create a collage of images that capture the essence of Mr. Sorelli. Use an online image search or piece together pictures from magazines. Is Mr. Sorelli scary or silly, or both? Can you create a collage that shows both?

- *All the circus performers and crew lived onsite. The crew had set up the big top in Vancouver's Vanier Park near Kits beach. The huge tent would be a red-and-white-striped city landmark until Labour Day. Concession and souvenir stands crammed the field in front of the big tent.* (ch. 2)
 - ◆ Create a picture of this scene using media you've never used before. For example: use postage stamps and a white index card (inexpensive bulk postage stamps can be purchased in many hobby shops); try chalk on the side of a cement step or piece of sidewalk; or create an edible circus treat with icing, food coloring and candies on a graham cracker.

Connecting to the World

Circus acts have changed a lot over the years. As Zack knows, there are “fewer and fewer circuses these days [featuring] animals,” and it's not because of the animals, but the humans: “There were hundreds of horror stories about animals being mistreated, like getting whipped or jammed into too-small cages. In the United Kingdom, they've passed a law banning animal acts in circuses” (ch. 2). As a research project, ask students to learn about Animal Defenders International, the American Humane Society, or the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

- Why are animals rarely featured in circuses anymore?
- How have cultural values changed from earlier times, when animals were circus attractions?
- What are these organizations doing to protect animals?

Connecting to the Students—Ideas for Exploration

1. Zack was inspired by Philippe Petit, a French high-wire walker who gained popularity through many dangerous high-wire performances held at famous buildings and bridges, including the Eiffel Tower, the Louisiana Superdome, the Sydney Harbour Bridge and—perhaps most notably—the World Trade Center. As a research project, invite students to learn more about Philippe Petit, answering the following:
 - ◆ Where was Philippe born? What hobbies did he have as a teen?
 - ◆ When did he start walking the high wire? How did he learn to do it so well?
 - ◆ Choose two places where Philippe completed a high-wire walk. How high up was he, what was the distance of his walk, and how long was he walking on the wire?

Note: There are many photographs, YouTube videos and full-length film documentaries about Philippe Petit online. You may wish to preview before presenting in classroom as they contain footage of risky behaviors that may not be appropriate for all students.

2. Philippe Petit became famous because he was an expert at walking the high wire. Challenge students to think of other people who worked hard, practiced, and became experts in their chosen fields. How are their experiences similar to Philippe's? Where did they learn, how long did they need to practice? What made them successful?

Examples to get students started could include: Tony Hawk, Steve Caballero, Andy Mac and Bert Lamar (skateboarding legends); Terry Kidwell, Craig Kelly and Jeff Brushie (snowboarding); and Travis Pastrana, James Stewart and Chad Reed, (dirt biking, motocross and supercross).

Option: In chapter 3, Zack said, “You don’t need a costume to live out a dream. You need what’s inside you. Determination. Self-control.” In chapter 5, Whitney said that Zack was “a natural on the wire.” Ask students to reflect on how the expert they chose lived their dream, and how determination and self-control contributed to their success. Was the person they chose a natural, or did they have to work at it to become great?

Web Resources

www.ad-international.org/adi_home

www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/01/laws-ban-wild-animals-circus