



Running Behind

Sylvia Taekema

Reading level: 2.9

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Book Summary

Even though he was once his biggest rival, Jake Jarvis is thrilled when Spencer Solomon agrees to join the Diamonds cross-country team to compete in the Barry's Bay provincial championships. Everyone is pumped, everyone is focused, and Jake has to admit, he really likes their chances. At the last moment, Spencer informs the team that he can't go. Jake is furious. But when Spencer explains that he's worried about leaving his wheelchair-bound father alone, Jake gets to work on finding a solution to get Spencer and the Diamonds back on track.

Author Biography

Sylvia Taekema's first novel, *Seconds*, was voted a Silver Birch Express Award Honour Book. Sylvia enjoys visiting classrooms and libraries and meeting with readers and writers of all ages. She also loves to read, bake cookies and go on camping adventures with her family. She lives in Chatham, Ontario. For more information, visit sylviaetaekema.wordpress.com.

Connecting to the World—Writing and Research Ideas

1. The plot of this story would be effective as a movie screenplay. As a class, determine which famous actors would play the roles of Spencer and Jake. Then divide the class into seventeen pairs and assign each pair a chapter to rewrite as a movie script. When the chapters are completed, combine them to make one script, and have the students perform the screenplay.
2. Working in partners, students will create a poem for two voices featuring any two of the characters in the book. Poems should alternate between lines read in unison and lines recited by each of the two individual characters. Students can use a particular scene in the book or create a conversation that could have taken place. Have students practice and perform their poems for the class.
3. Paul has to remove himself from the race because he has chicken pox. Divide the class into groups of three and ask them to investigate chicken pox—the symptoms, treatment, stages and causes of the infection. Then have each group create a media presentation, including a case study, to present to the class.

Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel***Theme***

The theme is the main lesson or takeaway of the story; it is not the subject of the work, but rather an insight about life or human nature. Based on this definition of theme, ask students to write a one-sentence theme for the novel. Have students write their one-sentence theme on 8 ½ x 11-inch poster board and include an illustration. Have students share their thematic posters in small groups and then display their work in the classroom.

Plot

Ask students to create a plot line of story events based on cause and effect, starting with Paul dropping out of the race because he is sick with chicken pox. The plot lines should include brief explanations of how one event leads to other events in the story. Display the plot lines in the classroom.

Conflict

Jake and Spencer both experience internal and external conflicts, and their reactions to the conflicts are what move the story forward. Ask students to select either Jake or Spencer and then make a list of the internal and external conflicts experienced by that character, explaining how he resolves each conflict. Working in small groups, have students write a skit depicting one of the conflicts Spencer and/or Jake experiences. Students may incorporate drama, exaggeration, humor, sarcasm or other elements to highlight the conflict. Have students practice and perform their skits for the class.

Point of View

This story is told from Jake’s point of view, so the only way readers know what the other characters do and say is through what Jake tells them. Have students work in pairs. Ask them to choose a scene involving Jake and another character and rewrite that scene from the other character’s point of view. Then have students perform their new scenes for the class.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. Why does Jake recommend Spencer to the coach to fill the empty spot on the team?
2. Why is Jake so excited about the race? How does his excitement affect the other team members and the coach?
3. Why does Spencer feel so guilty about his father’s accident? What does Spencer think he could have done to prevent the accident?
4. What is Coach Dave’s philosophy on running? How has his philosophy affected the team?
5. What is Simon’s role on the team? How do the other team members respond to him?
6. What contribution does Jake’s dad make to help the team compete in the race?
7. After the team arrives for the race, why is Spencer so uneasy, not wanting to run the race at all?
8. The unsportsmanlike behavior of one of the Ravens almost costs the Diamonds the race. How do Spencer and Jake handle the situation after the race?
9. How does the title *Running Behind* relate to both Spencer and Jake?

Writer’s Craft***Imagery***

The author uses similes, metaphors and figurative language to help readers form a picture in their minds as they read, as well as to allow them to experience the emotions of the characters. Ask students to find examples of a sentence or a passage where the author uses imagery to elicit a response from the reader. For example:

...hot as lava, cool as ice cream. (ch. 1)

His whole body felt like it was buzzing. (ch. 1)

The dark was just dissolving into gray. (ch. 4)

Dave’s van was packed tighter than a can of Pillsbury dough. (ch. 7)

...followed the trail down as it curved around giant boulders and scraggly trees. (ch. 8)

Let it melt away like all this rain. (ch. 11)

Divide the class into small groups. Have students share their examples and discuss the connections evoked by the images. Then ask students to practice using imagery by writing a descriptive paragraph about something that happened to them or to a friend, a place that evokes a favorite memory or a situation that might occur after the ending events of the novel. Have them share their paragraphs with their small group.