



Skylark

Sara Cassidy

Reading level: 4.1

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Book Summary

Angie's once-perfect world comes crashing down when her father leaves town to find work and her family gets evicted from their apartment. Angie, her brother Clem, and their mother live in a Buick Skylark moving from one location to another to avoid the police. However, they all do their best to keep their lives together and to maintain normalcy while they wait for their name to move to the top of the subsidized housing list. In spite of their circumstances, Clem competes in BMX racing, Angie discovers slam poetry, and their mom works as much as she can. They hear from their dad often, and they are hopeful—hopeful that one day soon they will be reunited in a family home.

Prereading Idea

Show students the following YouTube video of slam poet Taylor Mali (link below), or find another appropriate slam poet video. Based on what they see, ask students to define slam poetry. Then read students the definition of a poetry slam from the Urban Dictionary or Wikipedia (links below). Have students discuss the talents of performing and writing required to be a successful slam poet.

Taylor Mali: www.youtube.com/watch?v=mksQ-8IG1WQ

Urban Dictionary: www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=poetry%20slam

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetry_slam

Connecting to the World—Writing and Research Ideas

- Low income housing programs, food pantries, and homeless shelters are available for families, like Angie's, that fall into hard times and need help. Ask students to investigate the programs available to families in their communities that help the homeless. After developing questions, ask students to interview people who run the programs and/or volunteer to work in the programs, to discover what type of help they need to operate. Then ask students to select a program need and organize students to help meet the need.
- Ask students to read the poems in the chapter "Electrified." Have each student select one poem and cut the poem apart keeping each line of poetry intact. Working with another partner with another poem (also cut apart), have students write a collaborative poem using lines "found" in the original two poems. Students may rearrange lines in any order, use some lines and omit others, use lines more than once, and add original lines of their own. Students should give the new poem a title and share and post in the classroom.
- Clem is passionate about being a competitive BMX rider, and he is known as The Star or The Champ at the bike park. In small groups, ask students to investigate what is required to compete at a BMX national level competition. Students should answer questions such as the following: What type and brand of bikes do the winners ride? How much does a bike cost? How many lessons are necessary and what do they cost? Is a coach needed to help train? How much travel is involved? What is required to make it to a national level competition? Each group can then present their findings to the class in a media presentation. Students should be sure to include clips of an actual BMX competition.

Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel

Tone

Even though Angie's family is homeless, the tone of the novel is not hopeless. Ask students to define the word "tone" and how it applies to writing in general. Then ask students to define the tone of *Skylark* and to select a short passage of one to four paragraphs from the novel that best exemplifies this tone. Have each student write a two-to-three paragraph explanation of why they selected the particular passage they chose. In small groups of four to five, have students share and discuss their passages and explanations. Post passages and explanations in the classroom.

Character

Although Clem and Angie have different interests, they are supportive of each other. Ask students to compare what Clem does on a bike to what Angie does with her words. Ask students to address the following questions in their comparison: How do they use similar tactics to achieve success? Why are they both successful in spite of their living situation? What role do their parents play in their success? Working in groups of three, have students write an interview where both Clem and Angie are being interviewed regarding their desire to be "the best" at what they do. Focus on the things that are common to both of their processes. Have each group practice and present their interview.

Setting

The action of the story takes place in three distinct locations: the Skylark, the Spiral, and the bike park. Ask students to select one of these three places and to write a slam poem about the setting or an event that happens in that place. Then set up a poetry slam for students who want to perfume their poems.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. What do the readers learn about Angie and Clem's mother in the first chapter, "Backseat Dreams"? What words would describe the mother's character?
2. What does the social worker mean when she tells Mom, "That'll make a through-line"? How does the family follow the social worker's advice? What do they keep doing that they have always done?
3. When Clem and Angie would go on their bike runs for returnable bottles, Clem would borrow a rich kid's bike, but he always returned it. Why did Clem return the bike instead of selling it for money his family so desperately needed? What does this say about Clem's character?
4. Why does Angie and Clem's dad leave home? What do readers know about him based on the notes he writes? What does Angie reveal about the character of her father?
5. How do Angie and Clem feel when they learn that their father has a new apartment and a job? What is their concern?
6. What do Angie, Clem and their mom miss most about having a home? What lessons do they learn from their experience?
7. How does the title relate to the story literally and figuratively?

Writer's Craft**Imagery**

The author uses similes, metaphors and figurative language to help the readers imagine a picture in their mind and to experience the emotions of characters as they read. 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,

<i>...like fish in an aquarium—</i>	"Through-Line"
<i>blurry, bleary, unwary, swimming in our sleep.</i>	
<i>Everyone's pretentious! Precious! Puffed up. Preening.</i>	"Pity"
<i>...wring your poem...squish the water out...boil it down</i>	"Skylark"

In small groups have students share their examples and discuss the connections evoked by the images. Have students practice using imagery by writing three to five paragraphs about an event that happened to them or a friend or a place that evokes a favorite memory. Upon rereading their first draft, have students create and incorporate one or more similes or metaphors to more vividly describe the event or place. Have students share their writing in small groups providing positive feedback to each other on the imagery each writer has included.

Author Biography

Sara Cassidy has worked as a youth hostel manager, a newspaper reporter, and a tree planter in five Canadian provinces. She has lived in a logging camp, a ten-by-ten foot survival shelter, a refugee camp as an international witness, youth hostels, and big comfortable homes. Everywhere she lives, she has a pen and journal to guide her through and to record her experiences. She writes fiction, poetry and nonfiction; teaches creative writing; and works as an editor. Her poetry, fiction and articles have been widely published, and she has won a Gold National Magazine Award. Sara lives in Victoria, British Columbia, with her three children.