



The Snowball Effect

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RL 4.2

9781554693702 PB

9781554693719 LIB

AR Quiz # 140890

Book Summary

Dylan and his friends snowball cars for entertainment on the weekend. When they don't get enough reaction from passing cars, they put rocks in the middle of their snowballs. Their first attack with the loaded snowballs causes a car crash. Dylan's friends flee, but Dylan goes to the scene of the accident to make sure the driver is okay. He runs off when he knows help is on the way. Dylan is sighted, and rather than being punished, he is lauded as a hero. As his lies pile up, so does the hype about his heroics, and along with it, Dylan's guilt.

Author Biography

Deb Loughead is the author of twenty books for children and young adults. She completed an English degree at the University of Toronto before working as a copyeditor. She turned to creative writing after deciding to stay home to raise her three sons. Deb's books have been translated into Swedish, Norwegian, German and French. In addition to having extensive experience with educational writing, Deb has conducted workshops and held readings at schools, festivals and conferences across the country. She has written and directed children's plays and taught creative writing classes for adults in Toronto. Her award-winning poetry and adult fiction have appeared in a variety of Canadian publications. Deb likes to spend her non-writing time reading, knitting or hanging around horses as a therapeutic riding volunteer. She lives with her family in Toronto, Ontario.

Connecting to the Text

Character

1. Dylan sometimes reacts physically or emotionally when Garrett suggests ideas for activities. In chapter 1, Dylan says his “stomach twisted” and he “cringed”; and, later, that Garrett “made me uneasy.” As a way of engaging students with the characters of Dylan and Garrett, ask: What do you think Dylan’s gut is trying to tell him? As a reader, are you curious about Garrett and the impact he has on Dylan and his friends?
2. Dylan said that throwing snowballs at cars was a “lame pastime...But when that’s what your friends do for fun, either you go along with it, or you get called a wuss” (ch. 1). Ask students to write a description of Dylan using this quote (or another of the student’s choice) as a reference point to demonstrate his development throughout the novel. For example: *This quote demonstrates how Dylan feels early in the novel, but that changes when... I know this because... By the end of the novel...*
3. Garrett doesn’t appear to be a good friend; he enjoys dangerous activities and is a bully. Dylan said Garrett “always seemed to have a new surprise up his sleeve when he was looking for fun” (ch. 2). Ask students to reflect on the character of Garrett. What is he like? What is attractive about him? Why do nicer kids, like Dylan and Cory, chose to hang out with Garrett?
4. Ask students to compare and contrast the characters of Dylan and Garrett. How are their motivations different? Use the scene in chapter 2, where Garrett’s rock-filled snowball cracked the windshield of the car below, sending the car into a spin, as an initial example to explore. What choices did Dylan and Garrett make, and why? Encourage students to cite quotations in their responses. For example, Garrett said, “Let’s get out of here” where Dylan said, “We can’t just run away and leave that car! What if somebody got hurt?”

Theme

1. A theme in *The Snowball Effect* can be illustrated by Dylan’s comment in chapter 1 when he says, “all for one and one for all.” Ask students to consider when this adage serves Dylan and his friends, and when it doesn’t. Encourage students to cite examples from the novel. For example, Dylan and his friends hang around together, giving Dylan something else to do on Friday night besides playing solitaire with Gran; but when the snowball game becomes dangerous and it looks like someone is hurt, Dylan makes an important decision to break away from his friends and go it alone.
2. Another theme is that of Dylan’s compounding lies. The author uses the image of a snowball to illustrate this: “I felt rotten to the core about the trail of lies I’d left behind me all evening. Like a snowball rolling downhill, my lie kept growing bigger and bigger. I wondered where it would stop” (ch. 5). Using a timeline, ask students to follow the “lie” from beginning to end. What are key events that occur along the way? Where does Dylan make things worse for himself, and where is his turning point?

3. A third theme is heroism. In chapter 8, Dylan says to Monica, "I couldn't walk away from something like that. I had to check on her." Invite students to consider what it takes to be a hero and then decide if Dylan is a one. *Prompt:* A student may say a hero makes a sacrifice, stands up to a bully or puts other's needs before his own. Does Dylan do these things? Provide examples from the novel.

The Writer's Craft

- Personification is a figure of speech where things are given human or animal qualities. Discuss the examples of personification provided, and encourage students to find more examples in the novel. How does personification expand our understanding of how Dylan feels about winter?
 - (ch. 1) *Winter had already set in with a vengeance, and it was only the beginning of December.*
 - (ch. 1) *Old Man Winter sinks his teeth in early and stays late.*
- As readers, we know how Dylan feels about different situations because we "hear" his thoughts through first-person narrative. Have students choose one chapter and pick out examples from the text that demonstrate this. For example, in chapter 5, how can we tell how Dylan feels when he runs into Sergeant Vance? Have students consider how the novel might be different had the author written it using third-person.
- There are many powerful examples of simile and metaphor in *The Snowball Effect*. Ask students to find examples in the novel and connect examples to key themes, such as compounding lies, guilt, heroism and friendship. Examples include:
 - (ch. 3) *The front end on the driver's side was crumpled up like a crushed pop can.*
 - (ch. 3) *When I looked back, paramedics were already swarming to her rescue.*
 - (ch. 6) *How could I face anyone with this guilt gnawing like a rat at my guts?*
 - (ch. 10) *All that guilt was making me feel like a lit firecracker—any second I might explode!*

Connecting to the Curriculum

Art

A prominent theme and recurring image in *The Snowball Effect* is the winterscape. Dylan says “it’s like living in a snow globe that someone’s constantly shaking.” Ask students to choose a scene from the novel which incorporates winter imagery and depict it visually, using media of their choice. Encourage students to share with the larger group why they chose the scene they did, what is happening, and how the wintry backdrop plays a role.

Prompts:

- In chapter 1, Dylan talks about how sliding on sidewalk was the closest he ever gets to skating because he “doesn’t have a dad to teach [him].” He avoids the skating rink and instead hangs around at Matt’s place.
- In chapter 2, Garrett drops “snow bombs” or “frosty rockets” on unsuspecting cars. He says, “Don’t fire till you see the whites of their eyes!”
- In chapter 7, Dylan described the Boy Scout Christmas tree lot: “It was hard choosing a tree because so much snow had fallen that they were all buried and looked like a bunch of white diamonds.”
- Throughout the novel, Dylan’s lies take the shape of a snowball getting bigger and bigger. In chapter 9, Dylan says “My lie was so big now it had a life of its own.”

Citizenship

Sergeant Vance spoke at Dylan’s school assemblies about boat and snowmobile safety. He said, “In a resort area, something nasty happened to somebody every single summer and winter.” Invite students to explore safety concerns that exist in their communities and collect information on them from local government offices or agencies, either by mail or online, to share with the class. Examples could include water safety in lakes or public pools, clearing sidewalks and driveways when it snows, controlling pests during different seasons, or public vaccination programs.

Geography

Dylan describes the setting of his hometown in chapter 1. He says, “We get lake-effect snow, which happens when cold wind scoops moisture off the warmer lake water and dumps snow on us. A few inches of snow can fall in an hour... We find plenty to do for fun on a Friday night in the ice-cold darkness.” Given his description, where do you think Dylan lives? Give two examples of places he couldn’t be from, and why.

Language Arts

1. Although Dylan calls Garrett's snowball game "a totally lame pastime," he also says, "at least I was there, playing along with them." He dislikes it when Garrett calls him a wimp and "Dillweed." Ask students to write a letter to Dylan, offering him advice on how to handle his situation. He doesn't always want to go along with his friends when they go "snow bombing," but perhaps he can't think of other options since he doesn't skate, must live on a tight budget, and only has his Gran at home most of the time. Encourage students to cite quotes from *The Snowball Effect* in their letters. Prompt: What if Dylan joined the Boy Scouts?
2. Dylan decides to tell the reporter more of what really happened. He says, "So it's like this." After reading chapter 9, ask students to write what Dylan told the reporter, keeping in mind that Dylan "left a lot out, especially the part about who was involved with the snow bombing." Ask students, How do you think Dylan felt once he finally came clean? Encourage students to incorporate those feelings into their writing.

Vocabulary

Invite students to create a log of similarly-themed vocabulary throughout their reading of *The Snowball Effect* and have them write a descriptive paragraph using at least five words or terms. Students may wish to describe a scene from the novel or create a new scene. For example:

- Winter: balaclava, curlers, freezing, sleds, shivering, snowmobile, wind-chill
- Accident: air bags, ambulance, crushed, damage, sirens, paramedics
- Guilt: attention, fake, feelings, guilty, guts, reactions, rotten, sleep, sweating, winced, worry
- Illness: antibiotics, clinic, contagious, fever, forehead, joints, prescribed, strep throat

Web Resources

www.caringforkids.cps.ca/keepkidssafe/snowmobiles.htm

http://kidshealth.org/teen/safety/safebasics/water_safety.html

www.scouting.org

www.scouts.ca/dnn

www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cp/res/bully-eng.aspx#a06