

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Almost Starring Skinnybones by Barbara Park

Book Information

Barbara Park, Almost Starring Skinnybones
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Book Level: 4.0
Interest Level: MG

Irrepressible twelve-year-old Alex is convinced that he will be a star and impress his schoolmates when, as the winner of a cat food essay contest, he is asked to make a commercial for national television.

Topics: Community Life, School; Humor/Funny, Funny; READNOW - Demco Media
Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8

Main Characters

Albert a schoolmate of Alex's who gets the lead in the school play

Alex Frankovitch the main character who desperately wants to be popular at school

Annabelle Posey Alex's classmate who thinks she's popular because her father has a local TV show

Brian Dunlop Alex's best friend

Ernest a pre-school age neighbor boy who follows Alex around

Vocabulary

ad-libbing improvising or doing things on the spur of the moment

celebrity a famous person

crank-calling telephoning strangers with silly messages

Synopsis

Alex Frankovitch desperately wants to be popular, at least more popular than Annabelle Posey. He thinks making a national cat food commercial will make him popular. He even practices being famous by wearing sunglasses and signing autographs. Alex starts to doubt the probability of popularity when the

commercial makes him look like a six-year-old boy.

Alex's disappointment begins with the very first broadcast of his commercial, when even his best friend laughs at him and says he looks like a wimp. The devastation continues at school when classmates don't even recognize that he is the boy in the commercial. Crushed by the taunts, Alex heads home where he imagines that his cat is laughing at him.

A few weeks later, Alex finds himself at the center of attention when he volunteers to be an assistant for a magician during a school assembly. He catapults himself into popularity with the funny things he does behind the magician's back. Hoping to continue his new-found fame, Alex decides to try out for the school play. Thinking that he is sure to get the lead, he decides to ad-lib during the tryouts and ends up with a minor speaking role as Tiny Tim. He continues to get attention by ad-libbing during rehearsals.

When the night of the performance comes, Alex rattles Albert, the boy playing Mr. Cratchit, by telling him he's going to ad-lib on stage. Albert is so upset that he can't go on, and the director asks Alex to fill in for him. Just before the play is about to start, Alex feels sorry for Albert, and he talks Albert into going on stage, thus killing his own opportunity to be popular for playing the lead in the play. After the play, Albert takes Alex's place as the most popular boy in school and doesn't even thank Alex. Alex's feelings are hurt, and he decides to stop seeking the spotlight at school and be happy with who he is--at least temporarily.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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Initial Understanding

When Alex won the commercial contest, he did it by being honest. The company thought it was refreshing that he was honest. Discuss situations where honesty is the best policy and where it isn't.

Honesty is usually the best policy, especially if someone will be physically hurt by not knowing the truth.

Literary Analysis

Alex's character was a humorous boy. He found many ways to get attention by being funny. Find some examples of this in the story.

He goofed off on stage with the magician. He signed autographs and wore sunglasses as if he were a movie star. He ad-libbed in play practice.

Inferential Comprehension

Based on what you know about Alex, try to predict what he might become as an adult. Explain your reasoning.

He might become a comedian, actor, director, or social worker.

Constructing Meaning

Which character did you like the most and why?
Which character did you like the least and why?
Were there any characters that you sometimes liked and sometimes didn't? Why?

Answers will vary based on students' choices and reasons.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Alex and his classmates attended a school assembly where they saw a magician. Think of an assembly you'd like to see at your school. Describe it in detail and have a student volunteer to go on the stage.

Understanding Characterization Alex said that because he was small he had to use his brain more than most people since he wasn't likely to win a physical fight. This is a stereotype of small

people, who may compensate for certain physical attributes by competing in mental battles. The opposite is a stereotype of larger people. They may be viewed as less agile mentally and more likely to fight with their fists than their minds. Find some people who don't fit these stereotypes and why they don't. Discuss the shortcomings of these general descriptions.

Understanding the Author's Craft *Almost Starring Skinnybones* is a humorous book. Think of another humorous book you've read and compare the two. Identify the things that make the book funny. Try to write your own humorous story about something that has happened to you.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning At the beginning of the story Alex was in a cat food commercial and had to repeat the slogan of the product. Think of a product that you like and make a commercial or advertisement for it. Create a catchy jingle for it or design a new logo or poster for the product. Create a video commercial for the product. Analyze other commercials and ads to understand what makes them successful.