

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Banner in the Sky by James Ramsey Ullman

## Book Information

James Ramsey Ullman, Banner in the Sky  
Quiz Number: 207  
Harper & Row, 1954  
ISBN 0-694-05623-5; LCCN  
285 Pages  
Book Level: 5.1  
Interest Level: MG

Rudi's father had been killed trying to climb the Citadel, a dangerous Swiss mountain. Now it is Rudi's dream to make that climb.

**Award:** Newbery Honor

**Topics:** Adventure, Trials/Tribulations;  
Countries/Regions, Switzerland; Natural  
Environments, Mountains; READNOW -  
Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now  
Grades 9+; Recommended Reading,  
YALSA Popular Paperbacks;  
Sports/Recreation, Extreme

## Main Characters

Captain John Winter a well-respected English climber who is determined to climb the Citadel

Emil Saxo a brave but arrogant guide from the town of Broli who agrees to lead the Captain to the top of the Citadel

Franz Lerner Rudi's experienced uncle, who does not believe the Citadel can be climbed

Frau Ilse Matt Rudi's mother, who lost her husband to the Citadel and tries to keep Rudi from climbing

Rudi Matt the young son of a famous climber, Josef Matt, who had died trying to climb the Citadel; he is also determined to climb to the top of the Citadel

Teo Zurbruggen a former guide who was crippled on the fatal climb with Josef Matt; he is now a chef at a local hotel

## Vocabulary

**indelibly** in a way that cannot be erased or eliminated

**obliquely** in a slanting direction

**paroxysms** sudden, serious fits of coughing

**reconnoitre** to survey or scout an area

**spectre** a vision of a ghost

## Synopsis

The Citadel is the only remaining mountain peak in Switzerland whose peak has never been reached. The farthest anyone has climbed is to the massive cliff named the Fortress. That man was Josef Matt, and he died attempting it. This convinced the people of Kurtal that the mountain is the home of demons. One of the only people who does not believe this is Josef's son, Rudi.

As a young boy, Rudi spends many days sneaking off on mountain trails searching for the route past the formidable Fortress. He needs to sneak off because his mother will not allow him to climb under any circumstances. She instead plans for him to become a hotel man, a much safer profession. One day while he is scouting the mountain, Rudi hears the voice of Captain John Winter, a famous English climber, in the depths of a crevasse. Rudi saves the man's life by creating a make-shift rope of his clothes and lowering them down to the man with his climbing stick.

Captain Winter had been visiting Rudi's town of Kurtal in search of a guide to lead him to the summit of the Citadel. Since no villagers in Kurtal will climb the mountain because of their fear of demons, Captain Winter is forced to find a guide from the neighboring town of Broli. With his guide, Emil Saxo, Captain Winter begins scouting routes up the mountain. Hearing that someone is in the hut on the mountain, Rudi sneaks off to join the Captain in his attempt to climb the Citadel.

Rudi eventually convinces the group to allow him to climb with them since he had found a way past the Fortress. Rudi's uncle, Franz Lerner, also joins the group ostensibly to protect Rudi, but really so that the Citadel is not mounted first by a man from Broli. The climb is long and arduous. Near the top the Captain becomes too weak to continue, and Franz says the climb must be called off. Emil Saxo is too

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stubborn to be stopped so he goes on alone. Seeing this, Rudi too sets out to mount the summit of the Citadel. Upon discovering that Rudi and Emil have gone on, Franz and the Captain, who has regained his strength, set out to search for the men.

In his arrogance to reach the top first, Saxo tries to push Rudi away but instead falls off a ridge and is badly injured. Rudi, knowing his obligation to help a fellow climber, gives up his dream of reaching the top in order to help the man. The other men continue to the top despite finding Rudi's abandoned backpack along the route. Knowing that Rudi intended to plant his climbing staff and his father's red shirt on the summit, Franz takes the items to the top for Rudi. Rudi is given credit for being the "conqueror of the Citadel" even though he did not actually reach the summit--at least not yet.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

When the men reach a very high altitude and stop to cook their supper, they have to wait a long time for the water to be ready even though it begins to boil almost instantly. Why do they have to wait?

*Altitude affects the boiling point of water. The higher one gets above sea level, the lower the temperature at which water boils. The men had to wait for the water to accumulate enough heat.*

### Literary Analysis

Yodeling is a popular activity in the Alpine countries of Europe. In this story Rudi happily yodels into the air when he is climbing. What makes this such an enjoyable and popular thing to do in these places?

*The mountains are quite rocky, and this allows the voice to carry and echo in wonderful ways. Yodeling has been used for expressing joy and for conveying messages across long distances, much the way smoke signals are used. The sensation of hearing one's voice travel like this is apparently quite powerful and exhilarating.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Each of the four men who attempt to climb the Citadel in this story have slightly different motivations for joining the group. Who was each climber and what was his motivation?

*Rudi is motivated to conquer the mountain by an inner strength he seems to receive from his father. Captain Winter is motivated by the sheer magnitude of the challenge. He had completed all the easier climbs, and this was the only one that remained. Emil and Franz were mostly motivated by their pride. Neither wanted to be beaten by the other.*

### Constructing Meaning

When Teo speaks to Franz about Rudi, what does he mean when he says, "You cannot put out a fire by wishing it out. You cannot bottle the wind"?

*He means that what drives Rudi to climb is a desire that burns inside his soul, and that no matter how hard Franz wishes for it to go away, it will not. Rudi's need to climb will not be diminished by merely telling Rudi to stop.*

## Teachable Skills

**Identifying Reasons** There are many occasions in this story when someone lies to Frau Matt. Have the students list each occasion in which someone lied for Rudi or in which Rudi lied himself. Have them state the reason why the person telling the lie felt compelled to do so.

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**Recognizing Details** The author of this story is clearly familiar with the sport of mountaineering. He knows the type of equipment that is used, the history of the sport, and the techniques and principles involved in climbing. This knowledge makes the story more believable and realistic. Have the students research a sport they are familiar with or interested in and write a short story involving that sport, using factual information in the storyline.

**Recognizing Feelings** Throughout most of the story, Rudi battles with his mother and uncle over his being forbidden to climb or become a guide. Both Rudi and his mother have legitimate reasons for their positions on the subject. Have the students summarize Rudi's motivation to climb and his mother's motivation for preventing him from doing so.

**Responding to Literature** At one point in the story, Rudi thinks to himself that Captain Winter deserves to reach the summit because he was most responsible for organizing the climb. Have the students write position papers stating who they believe should get the most credit for conquering the Citadel. (The likely choices are Rudi, Captain Winter, Emil Saxo, Teo Zurbriggen, or Franz Lerner.)