

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Flying Solo

by
Ralph Fletcher

Book Information

Ralph Fletcher, Flying Solo
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Interest Level: MG

Rachel, having chosen to be mute following the sudden death of a classmate, shares responsibility with the other sixth-graders who decide not to report that the substitute teacher failed to show up.

Topics: Behavior, Misc./Other; Community Life, School; Emotions, Misc./Other; Family Life, Death; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Take a Stand: Leadership; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5

Main Characters

Bastian Fauvell a boy who is worried about losing his puppy when his family moves to Hawaii
Christopher Ransom a wise-cracking student whose mother is the president of the P.T.A.
Irwin Peacock the principal at the elementary school
Jessica Cooke a cautious girl who wants to be a lawyer some day
John LeClerc a close friend of Bastian
Karen Ballard a smart student who is the leader of her sixth-grade class
Missy an overweight girl who is good friends with Rachel
Mr. Fabiano a popular teacher at an elementary school
Peggy Ransom the pushy mother of Christopher
Rachel White a girl who stops speaking after one of her classmates dies
Sean O'Day a quiet student who likes to dream and imagine
Sky Reed a student who likes to surf
Tommy Feathers a student who was often teased; he died in his sleep

Vocabulary

Air Force brat a slang term referring to a child of a parent who serves in the Air Force
commissaries grocery stores for military personnel and their families
PXs Post Exchanges; these are department stores found on military bases
ritual a ceremony or observance
trauma injury to body or mind

Synopsis

This story centers around Mr. Fabiano's sixth grade classroom. Rachel, a student who has not spoken since classmate Tommy Feathers died, harbors guilt because Tommy had a crush on her and she repeatedly rejected him. She also feels responsible for her father leaving her family. Before her parents were separated, they argued a lot. Once, Rachel told them to stop arguing, and the next day her father left for New Mexico. She misses him and hopes to learn to fly airplanes one day so she can see him anytime she wants to.

Another student, Bastian, is a self-proclaimed "Air Force brat." He has lived at eight different Air Force bases, and now he and his parents are about to move to Honolulu, Hawaii. He faces a dilemma involving his puppy, Barkley. In order to take the dog to Hawaii, the dog must first be quarantined for four months to ensure he has no communicable diseases. Bastian knows this is unfair for his puppy, but cannot bear to give him away.

The sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Fabiano, plans to be absent Friday, so a substitute is called. The substitute, however, is ill on the day she is supposed to teach and cannot make it to school. Due to an oversight in the office, her message is never received, and Mr. Fabiano's class is alone for the day. The class president, Karen, takes attendance and helps run the class. Karen has the class do schoolwork instead of letting them goof off.

The class wonders if they can last an entire day with

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no teacher. Soon, a student from another class learns that Room 238 has no teacher. At lunchtime, the class decides they must share their secret with the other students, reasoning that nobody will betray them if the entire school feels responsible for the secret.

This is Bastian's last day of school, so the class decides to do the rock ritual for him. In the rock ritual, each student shares a memory of Bastian. Sean tells Bastian he is saving money for a puppy just like his, and Bastian realizes he must give Barkley to Sean. Rachel, who communicates by writing notes, remembers how Bastian teased Tommy. Bastian accuses her of the same thing, and an argument ensues. A bit later, the students write down their feelings about Tommy Feathers.

During a school assembly it is revealed that Mr. Fabiano's class does not have a teacher. Karen admits the truth, and things become frantic. Mostly, the students are proud of how they did their work and behaved themselves. Karen feels if it were not for that day by themselves, the students never would have found any closure regarding Tommy. Mr. Fabiano returns on Monday and asks each student to write him a letter explaining what happened on Friday. Rachel speaks for the first time in months, and she writes that she has forgiven herself for everything that has happened.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Rachel finally speak at the end of the book?

At the end of the book, Rachel has closure regarding Tommy's death and her part in teasing him. After the class argument with Bastian, she realizes what she did, and she is able to forgive herself. Rachel used to feel that her words were the source of her problems. She blamed herself for her father leaving and Tommy's death. Rachel realizes in the end that she has the right to speak and that she is not a terrible person.

Literary Analysis

Although Mr. Fabiano is absent from much of the story, the reader still learns a lot about his character. What events in the story help the reader understand Mr. Fabiano?

From Rachel, the reader learns that he is attractive, and most of the sixth-grade girls have a crush on him. Mrs. Ransom informs the reader that Mr. Fabiano stresses reading and writing over spelling and grammar work. From the way the students behave when Mr. Fabiano is gone, the reader can tell that he follows a strict class routine, yet is very much respected by his students.

Inferential Comprehension

Why does Bastian tease the other students?

Bastian is always moving around because his father gets stationed at different military bases. He does not have a lot of time to get close to people and, even if he does, he knows that he will soon be leaving them behind to move to a new place. He probably feels like an outsider because he is always the new kid at school. His teasing is most likely a defensive shield for him. It keeps people from getting too close, and it keeps him from getting hurt by others.

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Constructing Meaning

Which character do you most relate to and why?

The answers will vary depending on each student's perspective of a character as well as their own personalities. Some students may identify with Sean because he is a dreamer, Karen because of her leadership skills and take-charge attitude, or Rachel because she is sensitive and insightful.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Bastian moves around quite often because his father is in the Air Force. He has lived in many states and even a foreign country. Ask students to share their experiences with living in a different city, state, or foreign country. What was life like there? How was life different from where they currently live? Do they miss their old homes? If students have never lived anywhere else, ask them to talk about where they have vacationed, or where they would like to move to if given the chance.

Extending Meaning When Mr. Fabiano finds out that his students were alone all day, he asks each of them to write a letter explaining what happened. Have students imagine that they were the teacher of Mr. Fabiano's class. What would the students, as teachers, do about the situation when they returned to school the next day? Would they punish the students? If so, how? Have the students write a letter to the superintendent explaining what actions they took to deal with the class's misbehavior.

Recognizing Details One of Mr. Fabiano's projects for his class is "My Future Profession." The students are supposed to consider what careers they will choose in the future. Jessica discusses her desire to be a Supreme Court justice. Karen wants to become a doctor. And Rachel is interested in aviation. Have students research what they would like to do in the future and write about their findings or discuss them with the class. Things to consider are job skills, educational requirements, job demand, practicality, duties, and so on. Also, students

should include their reasons for wanting a job in that particular career field.

Responding to Literature In *Flying Solo* the students are left without any adult supervision for an entire day. The class members handle themselves quite admirably. Have students write a short paper about what they would do if they were left alone for one day. Encourage students to be honest about what they would do if they were without a teacher. Would they goof off? Would they do work or study? Would they socialize or play games? Would they just go home? Would they tell an adult?