

Stargirl

by
Jerry Spinelli

Book Information

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In this story about the perils of popularity, the courage of nonconformity, and the thrill of first love, an eccentric student named Stargirl changes Mica High School forever.

Award: ABC (Assoc. of Booksellers for Children) Choice Aw; Book Sense Book of the Year Award/Honorees; Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book; Parent's Guide Book Award/ Honor Book; Publishers Weekly Best Book; State Award; YALSA Top Ten; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

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Main Characters

Archibald Hapwood Brubaker a retired paleontologist who lives alone in the desert near the high school; some students, including Leo and Kevin, seek him out for his wisdom

Dori Dilson a girl who befriends Stargirl and remains loyal to her

Hillari Kimble a popular girl at school and Wayne Parr's girlfriend, who claims Stargirl is a hoax

Kevin Quinlan Leo's best friend; the on-camera host of a school TV show called <I>Hot Seat</I>

Leo Borlock the narrator of the story; a junior at Mica High School who is fascinated with Stargirl and experiences the trials of his first love relationship with her

Mallory Stillwell the cheerleading captain, who invites Stargirl to join the cheerleading team

Stargirl Caraway a previously homeschooled girl who enrolls in high school and captivates the student body's attention by her odd ways; she becomes popular but then is shunned for her differences

Wayne Parr a gorgeous yet uninvolved student at Mica High School who sets the tone for student fashion and behavior

Vocabulary

improvise to make up something spontaneously or on the spur of the moment; to do something that is unrehearsed

oratorical referring to effective public speech

paranoid referring to feelings of extreme fear that one is being persecuted or being given focused attention

parquet referring to a pattern made by the arrangement of various wood pieces

shunning to avoid and ignore someone as if he or she did not exist

ukulele an instrument that looks like a small guitar with four strings

Synopsis

On the first day of fall classes at Mica High School, the hallways are abuzz. A previously homeschooled student who is utterly different has enrolled. She dresses in a long flowing dress. She wears no make-up. She strums a ukulele. She carries a sunflower tote bag with a pet rat inside. She calls herself Stargirl. Hillari thinks she's part of a faculty hoax. Kevin is anxious to put her on the *Hot Seat*, a popular student TV show. Leo is not so sure. Even though she has no friends at school, she seems the friendliest person at the school, acknowledging birthdays with a song while strumming her ukulele

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and leaving students little gifts on holidays. Most think she is a homeschool experiment gone amok.

But things change nearly overnight. Kevin calls Leo to go over to the football stadium in a hurry. When he arrives, he sees Stargirl performing various antics on the field, leading the usually silent fans in a cheer and causing a delay in the game so that the refs become involved. She has started a revolution. A school with previously little school spirit has become energized. The cheerleading captain approaches her and asks her to join the team. Everyone befriends her except Hillari. Hillari warns Stargirl not to sing Happy Birthday to her. Stargirl obliges, and instead sings it to Leo, while still using Hillari's name. Kevin and Leo think its time to discuss Stargirl with Archie, a retired paleontology professor who serves as a teacher/mentor for many kids. He affirms that Stargirl is indeed real, and perhaps the most human among them all. By Thanksgiving, Stargirl is the most popular student at the school. Participation in all activities has skyrocketed. In January, she agrees to be on *Hot Seat*.

But her popularity cannot be sustained. Her cheering for both teams during the basketball season is seen as disloyal. The panel on the *Hot Seat* show question her rudely and become an angry mob. She is blamed later for the basketball team's loss at a playoff game.

Then Leo gets a personal card from Stargirl on Valentine's Day. He falls in love, and he and Stargirl spend much time together. She opens his eyes to ideas and experiences that he never knew existed. Then Leo realizes that Stargirl is being shunned by the whole school, and so is he whenever he is with her. Leo asks Archie what he should do, and Archie responds that he must decide whose affections he values more. Leo, instead, asks Stargirl to change: to become normal and care what others think. And she does. She becomes Susan, and wears normal clothes and makeup because she wants to please him. Leo is proud, but the shunning continues, and Stargirl is unhappy. When she wins the State Oratorical contest, she is expecting a big crowd to

greet her when she returns. Instead, there is only her faithful friend, Dori. When school starts on Monday, she is back to being Stargirl. Leo is disappointed. They drift apart. When the fancy school dance occurs, Leo stays home, and Stargirl goes alone. At first no one will talk to her, but eventually they all warm up, and she leads them in the bunny hop, which becomes the talk of the class reunions well into the future.

Stargirl still has a legacy at the school fifteen years later. Leo still thinks of her fondly, and in fact, receives a gift he recognizes as hers a day before his birthday.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Stargirl performed many acts of kindness to people she did not even know personally. Have you ever been the recipient of an anonymous or unexpected kind act? What was it, and how did it make you feel? On the other hand, have you ever performed an anonymous act of kindness toward a stranger? What did you do, and how did it make you feel?

The students should write or talk about kind gestures they gave or received and the feelings generated by their actions.

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Literary Analysis

Archie Brubaker is an interesting old man. A retired professor, he has made his home near a school and serves as a mentor to many youths. Why is having an adult mentor so valuable? How does Archie guide Leo?

An adult mentor is valuable because of his or her experience, wisdom, and objectivity. Mentors are often not under the same pressures that a youth is experiencing and not as swayed by popularity or other youthful values. Archie guides Leo by giving some insight, but ultimately leaves the decision up to Leo without expressing anger. Archie knows that young people have to learn through experience but sometimes make the wrong choices or let something that is very good get away, but he does not judge. He is there to support.

Inferential Comprehension

Why is Leo reluctant to put Stargirl on the *Hot Seat*? What does this say about Leo?

*Leo is more perceptive than the others. He somehow feels that Stargirl, although she seems unreal, might be hurt. Although he cannot verbalize it, Leo knows that Stargirl is special, and he does not want to treat her like an object. So he tries to sidestep the pestering he receives from the other students to put her on the *Hot Seat*. Leo wants to understand her, and so he does his best to look for her or follow her in order to observe her.*

Constructing Meaning

Stargirl is shunned, partly because students feel she does not choose sides but cheers for everyone. What does this say about how people view competition and loyalty? Are there enough opportunities in school and outside of school for students to enjoy learning or physical activity without the stress of competition?

Children learn, even in recreational leagues, from a very young age that winning is important. If there is a winner, it follows that there are losers. Spectators are also expected to choose sides. In school, children are not only given grades, but often ranked in comparison with their peers. Stargirl has not been exposed to or does not believe in all of this competition. She roots for everyone, not only on the playing field, but in the hallways of the school. It shocks people, and then it angers them. They consider it treason. Some activities in and out of school are non-competitive. However, once people achieve skill in these areas, such as art or music, they often enter competitions, too.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Groups exert a huge amount of pressure on people to conform to what is considered "normal" or "popular." Ask groups of students to look at their class, school or group honestly and list the things students are expected to wear, how they're expected to look in terms of hairstyle or makeup, and how they're expected to act. Have each group put their findings in chart form. Then have them discuss their charts and assess what would happen if Stargirl were to come into their midst.

Identifying Persuasive Language Winning a state oratorical contest is a huge achievement. As with all skills, it takes practice. Ask the students to give a persuasive, informative, or entertaining speech to the class. Afterwards, the class can offer constructive criticism.

Describing Actions or Events Stargirl took Leo to her "enchanted place" and asked him to quiet himself and do "absolutely nothing." Many people

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claim that this type of nonactivity is lacking in today's society. Doing absolutely nothing is called meditation in some traditions or centering prayer in others. Have students research one or more specific types of meditation. Then encourage the students to try meditation themselves and report on their experience.

Differentiating Fact and Opinion Homeschooling is a growing movement in the United States. Parents choose to homeschool their children for a variety of reasons, such as religious beliefs or dissatisfaction with the local school system. Myths abound about homeschooling. Ask the students to do some research on homeschooling, finding out the reasons parents choose this mode of educating their children and the requirements for homeschooling in the state, region or country in which they live. If possible, ask a few homeschooling parents and homeschooled children to come to the classroom to talk about homeschooling so that the students can get a first-hand perspective on the subject. Encourage questions.