

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Dirt Bike Runaway

by
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Book Information

Matt Christopher, Dirt Bike Runaway
Quiz Number: 5360
Little, Brown & Co, 1983
ISBN 0-316-14002-3; LCCN
149 Pages
Book Level: 5.3
Interest Level: MG

A shy, unhappy sixteen-year-old with a talent for working with motorcycles runs away from his foster home and gets involved with a variety of people, both bad and good.

Topics: Family Life, Orphans; Family Life, Running Away; Series, Matt Christopher; Series, Matt Christopher Sports Stories; Sports/Recreation, Racing

Main Characters

Bill Rocco a friend of Dex Pasini and Jess Kutter
D.C. MacKenzie Giff's sister, who is named after her grandmother, Dorothy Catherine
Dex Pasini a dirt bike racer who competes against Giff, Peter, and D.C.; he wins almost every race by cheating
Dr. and Mrs. Bentley the couple who adopted Peter from The Good Spirit Home
Giff MacKenzie Peter's best friend
Jess Kutter a friend of Dex Pasini
Mr. MacKenzie Giff and D.C.'s father
Mrs. MacKenzie Giff and D.C.'s mother
Peter Lewinski the main character; a sixteen-year-old orphan who has run away from his foster family
Tommy Joe Bentley the Bentleys' son, who torments Peter until Peter finally runs away

Vocabulary

berm a raised bank along the side of a road or track
furtively slyly; in a sneaky way
incredulous skeptical
mused pondered; thought about deeply

negotiate accomplish or arrange, often by bargaining
plaintively sadly; sorrowfully
reverie a daydream
scrutinizing inspecting; examining closely

Synopsis

Sixteen-year-old Peter Lewinski runs away from his foster home in Cross Point, Florida, and soon after reaching Cypress Corners, he meets Dex Pasini, Jess Kutter, and Bill Rocco. Jess tricks Peter into thinking that a bike belonging to Dex is really his and that he cannot get it started because he has lost the key. Peter finds a wire and uses it to start the bike just as Dex emerges from a store. Angered by seeing a stranger on his bike, Dex attacks Peter. After Peter is pummeled and bleeding, Jess intervenes, explaining that he had misled Dex as a joke.

Dex apologizes and offers to let Peter ride one of his bikes in a motocross race that afternoon. Peter accepts, and Dex also pays for Peter's entrance fee and dinner. Dex's real motive becomes apparent later when he implies that Peter is now indebted to him and should join him in stealing car parts. Peter refuses, and Dex beats him up again.

Giff MacKenzie, another teenage motocross racer, finds Peter and explains that he became suspicious when he saw Dex, Jess, and Peter go behind a building but only Dex and Jess emerge. When Peter tells Giff that he has run away from a foster home, Giff insists on bringing Peter home with him.

Giff's younger sister, D.C. had also been in the race. She is unfriendly toward Peter because of his association with Dex and does not approve of him staying at their house. Peter is disappointed that she had such a bad first impression of him.

As the days pass, the MacKenzies learn that Peter was orphaned at the age of two when his parents were killed in a car accident at a railroad crossing. After being subjected to years of harsh discipline in a children's home, Peter had been taken in by the

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Bentley family. Because of the parents' busy schedule, neither spent much time with him or their only child, eighteen-year-old Tommy Joe. Tommy Joe liked to harass him and ultimately threatened his life. So Peter ran away from their home in Cross Point. He had merely stopped in Cypress Corners on his way to Fort Myers. The MacKenzies contact the Bentleys and tell them that Peter does not want to return to them. The Bentleys are concerned about Peter but are willing to allow him to stay with the MacKenzies for another week. Peter begins hoping that the MacKenzies will adopt him. When D.C. learns about Peter's difficult past, she feels guilty for being so unfriendly to him, and she eventually apologizes.

As Peter's relationship with D.C. improves, he continues to race in various motocross races, but Dex wins almost every time, partly because he and his two friends perform illegal and dangerous maneuvers on the track to knock other riders off balance. In the last race of the story, Peter forfeits a chance to win the race when he stops to help when Dex crashes. D.C. wins the race but insists that Peter deserved to win. Peter says that beating Dex for once is all that matters to him.

When Peter and the MacKenzie family arrive home after the race, Mrs. MacKenzie announces that she and her husband want to adopt Peter. The Bentleys also realize that this is best for Peter and are willing to turn over custody. Peter is thrilled that he finally has the loving family that he has always wanted.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How do D.C.'s feelings towards Peter change over the course of the story?

At first D.C. does not like Peter because she believes he is a part of Dex's gang and because he looks dirty and unkempt. However, after she learns of his background and predicament and realizes that he is not at all like Dex or Dex's friends, she begins to like him and eventually accepts him as an adopted brother.

Literary Analysis

What did Peter learn at The Good Spirit Home that helped him deal with his problems in Cypress Corners?

Peter had learned how to endure difficult situations and to be independent and resourceful. Equally important, he learned from his attempt at stealing that crime does not pay. This important lesson keeps him from joining forces with Dex and his friends in their thefts.

Inferential Comprehension

What effect does working and racing together have on Giff, D.C., and Peter?

Peter comes from a very different background than Giff and D.C. But they do share a love for bikes and racing. This gives them common ground to develop a strong friendship. It also helps them to bridge their differences and understand each other better.

Constructing Meaning

Is Peter justified in wondering whether or not D.C. notices what is wrong with his legs? What is it about Peter that D.C. initially does not like?

Most students will probably admit to their own self-consciousness about a physical abnormality but will probably regard one leg being shorter than the other as rather minor. Expect some to mention other things about Peter that present much larger hurdles for him in winning D.C.'s approval (the condition of his hair and clothing, the black eye, and the fact that he had been keeping company with the wrong people).

Teachable Skills

Comparing and Contrasting American, Japanese, and German manufacturers of dirt bikes are mentioned in the story. Have the students work individually or in groups to search newspaper and/or magazine ads for various makes and models of dirt bikes. Ask them to evaluate various features and capabilities and explain in a short composition which model they prefer and why.

Understanding the Author's Craft On the chance that the author may have been somewhat autobiographical in this story, suggest to the class that they are going to pretend that this was indeed the case. Pretend further that the author is coming to their school and that to respect his time, everyone should write three questions in advance to ask him. Questions may address the possibility that there was a little bit of Peter in the author at that age, but questions may be about anything germane that a young audience would ask of a visiting author. Have students exchange papers and write the answers they think the author might give.

Understanding Sequence The first seven chapters cover only a single day in Peter's life. The total time for the story was likewise quite short. Have students use graph paper to record twelve to fifteen significant events on a timeline.

Extending Meaning Peter grows to respect D.C.'s ability to race dirt bikes: "He knew now that she was indeed a competitor, a factor he had scarcely considered before." Have the class brainstorm things that make a competitor. Ask them to bring in pictures of athletes for a bulletin board featuring the subject of competition. Tell them that they can hang their pictures next to any labeled attribute from the brainstormed list. Open the door for these contributions to come from politics, too. One springboard idea could be that competitors hate to lose.