

When the Cat's Away

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Synopsis

When Bianca's parents go away on holiday they think they have the supervision of their kids sorted out. Their neighbour Mrs Kelly will keep an eye on 18 year-old Jodi, 15 year-old Nathan and 14 year-old Bianca for a few days until Aunty Jean arrives. What they never could have imagined is that fate would conspire to leave their children alone for the entire month that they are away. Mrs Kelly is suddenly called to Auckland when her mother falls ill, and Aunty Jean can't drive because of a broken ankle. Jodi, Nathan and Bianca are left to their own devices and they plan to take advantage of their new found freedom. Pizzas for dinner and no one to tell them what to do, what could be better? Of course, the trio decide to have a party and everyone has a good time until things get out of hand and the house gets trashed. Suddenly the kids are in a world of trouble. It is crucial that they band together and figure out a way to raise the money to fix things before their parents arrive home. But how can this happen when none of them get along?

Text Type

When the Cat's Away is a fast-paced and humorous story about 3 siblings who band together in pursuit of a common goal. With particular appeal for girls there is enough action in this novel to keep even the most reluctant reader engaged. Set in New Zealand, the story is written in easy to understand colloquial language and deals with many issues pertinent to teenagers today including parties, friendships, relationships and family. Told in first person point of view, the narrator is 14 year-old Bianca. Bianca is not particularly close to her older sister or brother. She thinks that Jodi is self-centred and on a power trip and she has trouble communicating with Nathan, who only ever seems to grunt when she talks to him.

However, when things in their house get trashed the siblings need to pull together or they know that they will all be grounded for life. As each sibling begins to take responsibility for repairing the damage to their house, a strange thing happens, they begin to get along! United by working towards a shared goal the trio begin to get to know each other, and even to like each other. They become friends and develop a sense of loyalty to each other which didn't exist before. When their parents arrive home from their holiday they are astonished

by the transformation that has occurred - their children seem to have changed into hard working responsible people who stick up for each other.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 5-23), Chapters 3-12 (pp. 25-135) and Chapters 13-Epilogue (pp. 137-201).

During the shared sessions have students ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Wherever possible have them relate Bianca's exploits to their own experiences. Encourage students to read closely and infer information. Students should have a sound understanding of Bianca's character, including her thoughts, feelings and motivations. They should be able to explain how her character changes over the course of the story and what she learns from her experiences. Make sure students focus on the changing relationships between the siblings and the reasons why these changes occur. Lastly, students need to be able to identify main themes presented in the text, explain how they are developed by the author and how these ideas could help them in their own lives.

Introducing the Novel

Have students study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- "When the cat's away" is part of a well-known saying. What is the rest of it? What does this saying mean?
- Who are the main characters in the novel? How have they ended up home alone?
- How does their house get trashed?
- Why is it necessary for the siblings to pull together?

Teacher reads Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 5-23) aloud. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 5-23)

- Who is looking after Bianca and Nathan until Aunty Jean arrives? How does Bianca feel about this arrangement? What does she think of her sister? What is her brother Nathan like?
- Why do Bianca's parents think that Jodi has matured lately?

- How long are Bianca's parents away for? Who is supposed to be checking on them until Aunty Jean arrives?
- Who is Bianca's best friend? What is she really good at doing?
- Why does Bianca think that the power is starting to go to Jodi's head?

Discussion

- What have we learnt about Bianca and her family in the first two chapters?
- Describe Bianca's relationship with her brother and sister.
- Make a prediction about what will happen next in the story.

Students read Chapters 3-12 (pp. 25-135) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 3-12 (pp. 21-135)

- Why is Mrs Kelly so pleased when she checks up on Jodi, Nathan and Bianca? What is really going on?
- What news does Mrs Kelly give the kids? Why can't Aunty Jean come and look after them? Why is Bianca so surprised when she hears Jodi talking to Aunty Jean? What pact do the three of them make?
- Why does Bianca get such a bad night's sleep? Who is she surprised to see in the kitchen in the morning?
- What decision does Bianca come to as she walks to school with Bec?
- How does Jodi react when she arrives home and sees that Bianca has invited people over? What does she decide to do when Bianca refuses to send her friends home?
- How do the kids manage to get so many people over to their house in such a short space of time? What potential problems can arise from having people that you don't know in your house? Why does Jodi decide to break up the party? What happens when Bianca tells the crowd that the party is over?
- Who is the man in the blue shirt? How does he manage to clear out the party guests?
- Describe the state of Bianca's house after the party. What has been damaged?
- Why is there a long history of bad blood between Bianca's family and Mad Murphy? Why is Mad Murphy so angry? How much does he think the kids owe him? How long has he given them to put the money together?
- What is the grand total that the kids owe? How much do they have to earn?

- Where does Bianca end up getting a job? What does her job entail?
- Who is Patrick? How does Bianca manage to offend him?
- Why do Jodi, Nathan and Bianca decide to start cooking their own meals?
- How does Jodi manage to convince her parents that everything is fine? Is telling half-truths the same as lying? Why/why not?
- What do Bianca and her siblings reminisce about? Why is Bianca so surprised that they are sitting around smiling at each other?
- Why does Mr Harris think that he should ring Bianca's parents? How does she convince him not to? What assignment does she have to work really hard on?
- Why does Bianca find it so hard to speak to Patrick at work? What is her impression of him?
- Where is Nathan working?
- How does Jodi react when Bianca tells her that Mr Harris might call home?
- Who turns up on the doorstep on Friday night? What do they want?
- Who does Jodi invite over to help deal with the party goers?
- Who turns up on Friday night demanding money?
- What money-making idea does Jodi come up with while she is listening to Rowdy Rick's show? What competition does she think that Bianca should enter?
- Why does Bianca get frustrated when she tries to complete her Science homework? Who offers to help her? Why is this surprising?
- How does Bianca's opinion about Nathan change after he helps her with her assignment?
- Why does Mr Harris think that Bianca might have cheated on her assignment? How does Bianca prove that she didn't?
- Why does Jodi tell Bianca to invite Bec over? Why is Bianca surprised by Bec's appearance when she arrives? What changes does Bianca notice about Jodi when she and Bec are discussing the details for the stall?
- How old is Patrick? Why does this surprise Bianca?
- Why is Nathan so pleased to see Bianca when she arrives home from work?
- Why does Bianca think that something weird is going on with Nathan?
- Why does Jodi break up with Aaron? Why does she think that it is her fault? How does Bianca make her sister feel better? Why do Jodi and Bianca find it so funny that Nathan might have a girlfriend?

Discussion

- If your parents were away and you have absolute freedom, what sorts of things would you do?

- Have you ever had a party at your house that got out of control? What happened? Was there any damage? Did you get into trouble with your parents?
- Do you agree with Jodi when she says that they are all responsible for the damage to the house? Why/why not?
- How does Bianca's relationships with her brother and sister change as they work together to earn the money to fix up the house? What are the reasons for these changes?

Students read Chapters 13-Epilogue (pp. 137-201) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 13- Epilogue (pp. 137-201)

- Why does Bianca call her phone conversation with her parents a "lie-fest"?
- Why does Bianca offer to help Nathan with dinner? Why does Nathan have so much trouble thanking her?
- What great news does Bianca receive from the radio station? What other good luck does she have?
- Why does Bianca decide to follow Nathan to the movies? Who is his girlfriend? How does Bianca feel about this?
- What lie does Bianca tell Bec? Why do you think she does this? How does Nathan react when he finds out what she has done?
- Why didn't Bec want to tell Bianca about Nathan? How has Bianca's opinion about her brother changed in the last few weeks?
- What does Bec think the problem with the biscuits is? What idea does Bianca come up with to solve this problem?
- Why does Bianca feel so much pressure to win the competition?
- Why is Bianca so surprised when Rowdy Rick turns around?
- What is the first meal that Bianca has to eat? What strategy does Bianca adopt that helps her finish it?
- Why does Bec think that Rowdy Rick likes Bianca? How does she react when Bianca tells her that Rowdy Rick is actually Patrick?
- What are mountain oysters? What is the third dish that Bianca has to eat? Why is Bianca so certain that she will win when she sees what it is?
- Why does Bianca turn into a minor celebrity at school?
- What happens when Jodi, Nathan and Bianca go to buy the vase? How do they solve this problem?

- What does Bianca decide to spend the extra money on? Why does Jodi like this idea so much?
- How long do the slaves have to work for? Which slaves does Bianca purchase at the auction? What work does she get them to do?
- Who else turns up to help clean the house? Why is Bianca so embarrassed when Patrick arrives?
- What does Bianca suggest to Aaron that he cleans in the kitchen? What is her motivation for doing this?
- What offer does Patrick make to Bianca?
- How do Jodi, Nathan and Bianca react when they see their parents? What does Jodi say to her parents that renders them speechless? What else do the kids talk about that amazes their parents?
- Why isn't Bianca's mum upset when she finds out that Mrs Kelly is in Auckland?

Discussion

- What strengths and weaknesses are revealed about each sibling during their time at home alone together? How do these help bring them closer together?
- What lessons do you think Bianca has learned from her experience?
- Identify an important theme in the novel. Explain how this theme is developed by the author.

Activities

Review - Present an oral book report to the class about *When the Cat's Away*. Include information about the storyline, the characters and the themes. Remember to give your personal opinion about the story. Read an excerpt from the story as part of your presentation.

Poetic Writing - Write a poem based on events that occur in this story. Try and create imagery by incorporating figurative language features into your writing.

Static Image - Design an alternative book cover for the novel and write a new blurb. Combine verbal and visual features to communicate your ideas.

Paragraph - Write a paragraph that identifies the main themes raised in the novel. Explain how these themes are developed throughout the story and explain why they are important. Use quotes and examples from the story to back up your ideas.

Conflict - identify a major conflict in the story. Explain why it occurs and how it is resolved.

Movie Pitch - Write a one page "pitch" to a producer explaining why the story would make a great movie.

Monologue - Create a monologue for one character in an important part of the novel. What is he/she thinking and feeling in that moment? Why?

Drama - Choose an exciting event from the story and write a script for it. Include a list of characters and stage directions. Practise your play and present it to your class.

Soundtrack - Imagine that this novel is being made into a film. Choose 5 songs for the soundtrack. Explain why you chose the songs and where in the film they will go.

Notes written by Vicki Williams