

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Fear Place

by

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Book Information

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, The Fear Place
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Book Level: 5.4
Interest Level: MG

When he and his older brother Gordon are left camping alone in the Rocky Mountains, twelve-year-old Doug faces his fear of heights and his feelings about Gordon--with the help of a cougar.

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Animals, Cougars; Emotions, Fear; Family Life, Brothers; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Count on Me: Responsibility; Sports/Recreation, Camping

Main Characters

Charlie a cougar Doug observes in the mountains
Dad Doug and Gordon's father, who escaped from Cuba
Doug Grillo a twelve-year-old boy who overcomes his fear of heights to save his brother
Gordon Grillo Doug's thirteen-year-old brother, who is rescued by Doug
Mom Doug and Gordon's mother, who feels troubled over her relationship with her brother and her father
Ronnie Beck a young boy who sits next to Doug on the plane
Uncle Lloyd the brother of Doug and Gordon's mother

Vocabulary

alder a type of tree
brood offspring or family
conceivable imaginable or possible
grievance a complaint or injustice

Synopsis

Doug Grillo's parents are both geologists who spend

the summers working on a research project in the Rocky Mountains. During a previous excursion, Doug's older brother, Gordon, led the family on a hike up to a high ridge in the mountains, which Doug refers to as "the Fear Place." Doug is terrified by the narrow ridge that hangs over a deadly precipice, and Gordon uses this as ammunition to tease Doug mercilessly. The story opens with the Grillo family once again boarding a plane for the mountains, and the reader is made aware of the animosity created by a sibling rivalry between Doug and Gordon.

After the family arrives at their campsite, Doug's mother learns from the park ranger that her brother has died. Doug's mother's relationship with her brother was strained because she was envious of the attention he received from their father, and she warns Doug not to let his rivalry with Gordon get out of control. Doug's parents soon leave the campsite to attend the funeral in Boston, and Doug and Gordon are left to take care of themselves in the wilderness.

It is not long before Doug and Gordon begin to argue, this time over whose turn it is to dispose of the garbage. Doug loses the argument and then spills the garbage all over his older brother. After the ensuing fistfight, Gordon packs up some food and storms into the mountains alone.

Doug knows that Gordon often camps by himself and is not too worried about his brother's survival skills. Doug goes about his normal routine and works on observing the surrounding mammals for his merit badge. After a disappointing afternoon in which the only mammal he sees is a chipmunk, Doug heads back to camp with the eerie suspicion that he is being followed. He immediately suspects Gordon of spying on him, but is horrified when he realizes it is a cougar.

Doug's fear turns to wonder as the cougar peacefully follows him back to camp and then returns to lounge in the sun near him on several other occasions. Doug realizes that the cougar, which he has named Charlie, does not intend to harm him, but he becomes increasingly worried

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about Gordon, who should have returned to camp by now. Doug knows that Gordon only brought enough drinking water to last a couple days and concludes that something must have happened to him. Doug guesses that Gordon climbed up to his campsite on the Fear Place, so he decides to confront his fear and attempt to find his brother.

Doug climbs the narrow ridge, relying on Charlie to divert his fear from the intolerable height. When he finally locates Gordon's tent, he finds his brother lying on the ground with a broken leg. Doug realizes that Gordon is in danger of dying from dehydration and infection and decides to carry him down the ridge on his back. He finds, however, that going down is more frightening than going up, and his fear is compounded by the importance of the situation. He also senses the danger that Charlie will be attracted by Gordon's blood and view the boys as prey. Just when it seems they are not going to make it, they come across the park ranger who has been searching for the boys. Doug and Gordon reconcile their differences and learn that their feelings for each other run much deeper than they had previously realized.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Doug and Gordon Grillo are brothers who are close in age. How does Doug feel about his brother? Why do you think he feels this way?

In the beginning of the book, Doug says he does not like his brother very much. Gordon constantly baits Doug and tries to make him look stupid. The two brothers fight all the time and do not appear to be very close. It seems as if the two boys are in competition with each other throughout most of the novel. Doug's insecurity is magnified by his experience at the Fear Place, an incident in which he was too afraid to continue during an adventure with his family on the ridge.

Literary Analysis

How do you think the story might be different if it were written from Gordon's point of view?

If the story were written from Gordon's point of view, Doug would not be as likeable. Gordon would probably describe Doug as irritating and whiny. Also, Charlie would not make an appearance until the end of the novel. The cougar would probably not seem as kind as she did when described from Doug's perspective.

Inferential Comprehension

Why do you think Charlie seems to attach herself to Doug? What do you think might happen to Charlie if the story were to continue?

The answers to this question will vary. Charlie may "befriend" Doug because she has been fed by other campers, or if she has not encountered humans before, she may just be curious about Doug. Cougars also stalk their prey, which means Charlie may have malicious intentions. Charlie is never actually "tame," so when Doug leaves the mountains Charlie will continue to be a wild predator. She might continue to appear before startled campers, but it is doubtful that many people will be as brave or as friendly as Doug was.

Constructing Meaning

Do you know anyone who shares a relationship similar to Doug and Gordon's? Do you think that it is normal for siblings to be constantly fighting and competing with each other? Why or why not?

Most students will be able to identify with Doug and Gordon's relationship themselves or will recall a friend or relative who has a similar relationship with a sibling. Many students will think that Doug and Gordon are normal siblings, although some may believe that Doug and Gordon represent an extreme case of sibling rivalry.

Teachable Skills

Responding to Literature During his time alone,

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Doug encounters a cougar. Have your students research cougars and write a short response on what they would have done if they were in Doug's position.

Recognizing Setting The Grillo family decides to spend three weeks in the Rocky Mountains. Have your students research the Rocky Mountains and ask them to create their own maps of the area where the Grillo family camps. They should include Doug's Fear Place, the canyon, the meadow, and the camp area.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Gordon and Doug's father escaped from Cuba to live in the United States. Explain to your class the political struggles that people have faced in Cuba. Then ask them to write a response to this information.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Gordon and Doug are very eager to earn their Eagle Scout status and must earn many merit badges as part of the process. Have your students create their own badges for different classroom assignments and activities. Then, have the students work to achieve as many badges as they can.