

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Mick Harte Was Here

by
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Book Information

Barbara Park, Mick Harte Was Here
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Interest Level: MG

A young girl copes with the death of her brother in a bike accident.

Award: Misc./Other; Publishers Weekly Best Book; SLJ Best Book; State Award

Topics: Family Life, Brothers; Family Life, Death; Family Life, Sisters; Health & Wellness, Accidents/Prevention; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Transportation/Vehicles, Bicycles

Main Characters

Mick Harte the hero of the story; an imaginative, playful and good-natured boy who dies tragically as a result of refusing to wear a bike helmet, and whose life and personality are presented through the affectionate eyes of his sister

Mr. and Mrs. Harte Phoebe and Mick's parents who must each deal differently with the death of their son, and change as a result

Phoebe Harte the narrator of the story; a middle-school student who loses her seventh-grade brother to a bicycle accident and must come to terms with the grief resulting from her loss

Zoe Santos Phoebe's friend and confidante, who serves as a sounding-board and companion to Phoebe on her journey through grief

Vocabulary

camouflage a design on clothing meant to blend in with the background; used mostly in the military, but currently popular for youth street wear

cremation burning of a dead body

interment confinement or containment; used in the book in reference to burial of cremation ashes

perspective the ability to see things in their true relationship

Synopsis

At the beginning of the story, Phoebe Harte tells us about her brother's bike accident, hastening to add that "he's not here anymore." She recounts the day of the Mick's accident, beginning with a typical fight between the siblings, this time over a cereal-box tattoo. The special qualities of the boy, as described through the eyes of his sister, include a certain lovable mischievousness. Mick's depth of character can also be seen as Phoebe describes how the younger boy dealt with the death of his dog with compassion and dignity.

At first unable to talk even to her best friend, Zoe, about Mick, Phoebe latches on to Zoe's suggestion that she now think of her brother as being present "everywhere." As Phoebe's grieving process continues, she encounters both the utter devastation and denial of her mother and her own feelings of guilt, anger, and confusion about the tragedy. At an informal memorial service, speakers seem to capture Mick's essence in recounting stories of his exuberance and tongue-in-cheek humor. After the service, Phoebe returns to school and notices how her classmates are hopelessly uncertain about how to approach her. The principal galls Phoebe even further by calling Mick her "loss." The comment precipitates a dream in which Mick appears in a T-shirt flashing his own name. Phoebe wakes up laughing and suddenly feels sure Mick is not lost and will not be forgotten.

Later, for reasons unknown even to her, Phoebe accepts an invitation to speak to a school assembly about bike helmets and safety. The conclusion of the story occurs a month after the accident. Phoebe reports her parents are less concerned about unimportant things like pant creases and uniform hamburger patties. As the story draws to a close, Phoebe is presented with an opportunity to relive

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her and Mick's first "caper" together, when they wrote in the wet cement of the neighbor's driveway. This time, acting alone, Phoebe memorializes her brother in the cement of a new sidewalk with the words, "MICK HARTE WAS HERE."

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

At different points in the book, Phoebe experiences laughter in the face of the unspeakable tragedy of her brother's death. Find several such incidents in the book and describe Phoebe's attitude toward each experience.

Shortly after the accident, Phoebe finds herself laughing with Zoe over Mick's choice of Thomas Crapper as a Halloween costume. She says, "It sounds terrible, but it wasn't." Later, she laughs out loud in Mick's room and has the strange feeling he is laughing along with her. Finally, after the dream about Mick in his flashing T-shirt, she wakes up laughing, and declares to her mother that she is now sure Mick is not lost.

Literary Analysis

This story is not told in strict chronological sequence. How does the author use flashback throughout the book to tell the story of Mick's accident, detail his childhood and flesh out his personality?

The story opens in the present, one month after Mick's tragic accident. As Phoebe recalls the day of the accident, each event in turn calls to mind incidents from the family's past. For example, as Phoebe recounts the "tattoo" fight the morning of the accident, she tells how she and Mick once wrote in the wet cement. In another example, as Phoebe looks at Mick's dresser and shelves after his death, she recalls his own struggle with the death of their dog.

Inferential Comprehension

While Mick's mother is still so distressed that she can't bear to talk about her son, Phoebe begins to mention Mick's name at every opportunity. Why do you think she does this?

Phoebe has earlier been angered by her mother's response to Mick's death, declaring on p. 42, "This isn't only about you, Mother." She is probably trying to prod her mother to "snap out of it" and subconsciously pleading for badly needed attention for herself.

Constructing Meaning

By the end of the book, the reader has a good idea of what kind of person Mick Harte was. Given this understanding, do you think Mick would have approved of his own memorial service? Why or why not?

Yes. The service was an informal recounting of Mick's own brand of irreverence, enthusiasm and fun. As Phoebe comments to her mother on page 71, "...Mick would probably hate it if we tried to turn him into some perfect little angel..."

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Plot As Phoebe Harte works through the tragedy of her brother's death, she experiences many manifestations of trauma--disbelief, anger, grief, confusion, guilt and disconnection from family and friends. Finally, toward the end of the book, Phoebe's assembly speech on bike safety seems to pave the way for healing. In modern life, many people facing the tragic death of a loved one or their own debilitating illnesses have found the healing value of working for a good cause. Examples include famous people such as Christopher Reeve, Ryan White, James Brady and Betty Ford, as well as everyday citizens such as members of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Lead a class discussion on this topic, and ask students to name as many examples as they can to illustrate the point.

Understanding Characterization Much of this book covers Phoebe's challenge to deal with the

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unexpected death of her brother. The relationship between the two siblings was one of companionable admiration, coupled with the occasional exasperation typical between siblings. It may serve an instructional purpose to consider other fictional siblings and compare their relationship with the kind presented here. As a class discussion, ask students to name other books they have read in which the main characters are siblings. How is their relationship different from Mick and Phoebe's? What do the characters feel for each other - contempt, pride, resentment, love, hatred? Which story mentioned most closely approximates the students' own relationships with brothers or sisters?

Understanding the Author's Craft In *Mick Harte Was Here*, we learn everything we know about Mick's life from the remembrances of his sister. In real life, when a person dies, a "story" about his or her life is written and published in the newspaper as an obituary. Have students cut out and read two obituaries from the local newspaper. As a class, discuss and list the kind of information typically written about the person who has died. Then, using as much information from the book as they can, ask the students to write an obituary about Mick. Discuss how this relatively impersonal format contrasts with how his life is presented in the book.

Understanding the Author's Craft This story is told in the first person by Mick's sister, Phoebe. As an exercise in the value of the first-person point of view, discuss with the class how the story may have been different if told instead by a third-person narrator. What are the elements that might have changed or been diminished by a less personal approach? What is the author able to do with a first-person point-of-view that she cannot with a narrator? Under what circumstances would a narrator be preferable?