



The Thing You're Good At

Lesley Choyce

Reading level: 3.8

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Book Summary

Jake's friend Maria is the daughter of undocumented immigrants who have been living and working in the country for a long time. But the new government has implemented a crackdown. Maria's parents are detained and quickly sent out of the country. Maria, who was born here, decides to hide out in Jake's basement rather than risk becoming a ward of the state. But when she returns to her old apartment to retrieve her hidden birth certificate, Maria is abducted by young men on the lookout for teenage girls who have lost their parents to deportation. Jake is determined to rescue Maria before she's turned over to the authorities. Or worse.

Prereading Idea

Issues surrounding the deportation of undocumented immigrants are front and center as new policies are being implemented, laws on the books are being revisited and new laws are being heavily debated. Ask students to investigate the deportation of undocumented immigrants and write a letter to their elected government representative about their views on the topic. Students should make a request of their representative about his/her vote.

Connecting to the World—Writing and Research Ideas

- Ask students to write a reflective essay analyzing the reasons for and consequences of an action, event or decision in either Jake’s, Maria’s or Razor’s life. Students should assume the voice of the character and include lessons learned. Have students share their reflective essays in small groups.
- In chapter 2, Jake states that school “is all about what you look like, who your parents are, what you wear and who you hang out with.” Ask students to either defend or refute Jake’s opinion and to support their opinion with personal examples.
- When Jake hangs out with Oscar, Oscar always encourages Jake and allows him to see the world from a different perspective. Oscar says, “Every day is different. Always something new. You just have to watch for it.” Ask students to keep a “Something New” journal for two weeks, making a daily entry about the something new that he or she experiences every day. Students can share on a daily basis what they experience.

Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel***Setting***

The setting of this story is integral to the story line, and the author paints a vivid picture of the neighborhood. Ask students to write a **found poem** about the setting using words and phrases from the descriptions in the book. Have students practice and present their poems in a small group or to the class.

Theme

Generally speaking, the theme of a book revolves around the main character: what they learn and/or how they change as a result of their experiences. Based on the brief glimpse the reader has of Jake’s life, what would you say is the theme of *The Thing You’re Good At*? As a class, write a thematic statement for the novel. Have students investigate and bring at least one news article pertaining to human trafficking, immigration/deportation and/or poverty that shares the same theme as the novel. Divide students into small groups to discuss the theme and connections to the articles. Then display the theme and news articles in the classroom.

Characterization

Ask students to choose and analyze one of the major characters in the book, using five index cards. Write a one-paragraph description on each card expressing what they know about: (1) the character’s appearance, (2) their speech, (3) their actions, (4) their emotions and (5) what others think of them. Then ask students to read each card aloud in any order and have their classmates guess who the character is. Use rings or tape to connect one card to the next card and hang them vertically in the classroom.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. What impact does Jake’s father’s constant negative talk and condemnation have on his sons?
2. What is *self-actualization* and how does Jake achieve it?

3. How does the title reflect Mr. Lotz's philosophy about life and people? What is Jake's one thing "to be good at"?
4. Why does Jake go to Mr. Lotz to help him when he can't find Maria? What does Dalton do to help?
5. How does Mr. Lotz help Jake and Maria? Why do they trust him?
6. Why does Jake's family pull together for Maria? How does she change their family dynamic?
7. Cole, Oscar, Luke, Dalton and Jake's dad all prove to be caring and compassionate people. How would they normally be judged based on their looks and current living situations?

Writer's Craft

Simile

A simile is a tool writers employ, using the words *like* or *as*, to compare one concept to another generally unrelated concept but with one strong critical similarity between the two. Ask students to read the following sentences:

"Your brother getting busted was an eye-opener for me," Dalton said. "Like a big slap of icy cold water in the face." (chapter 8)

"Dalton, who had always seemed to me like a ship without a rudder." (chapter 10)

Ask students to choose a situation in the book and write their own simile. Have students illustrate their written examples, and display the students' work in the classroom.

Author Biography

Lesley Choyce is the award-winning author of dozens of books for young adults, including *Kryptonite* and *Identify* in the Orca Soundings series. His books have been shortlisted for the Stephen Leacock Medal, the White Pine Award, the Hackmatack Award and the Governor General's Literary Award. For more information, visit lesleychoyce.com.