

Literature Circle Guide to *School Story* by Andrew Clements

Book Summary

Twelve-year-old Natalie Nelson has been secretly writing a novel she titled *The Cheater*. When Natalie's best friend Zoe reads the novel, Zoe tries to convince her friend that the book is good enough to publish. Natalie is reluctant to try, and she certainly does not want to ask her mother Hannah Nelson, an overworked editor for Shipley Junior Books, for any special help. Zoe coaxes Natalie to submit her manuscript to Shipley under a pen name, with Zoe acting as her literary agent. With the help of Ms. Clayton, the girls' sixth grade English teacher, Zoe contacts Natalie's mother at Shipley Junior Books, using the name Zee Zee Reisman, and then follows up by sending Natalie's manuscript to Shipley. Hannah Nelson and her editor-in-chief Letha Springfield both love the novel *The Cheater* and immediately decide to publish this first novel from a new, unknown author. Natalie and Zoe are able to keep their secret until the very last moment, when Natalie reveals her true identity to her mother at an author's reception at Shipley.

Author Information

Andrew Clements was born in Camden, New Jersey, and grew up in New Jersey and Illinois. Through the encouragement of his parents and teachers, he grew to love reading at an early age. He majored in English at Northwestern University, and after college spent seven years teaching both grade school and high school. The years he spent teaching school provided the inspiration for many of the books he has written since. Then Clements went to work in children's publishing, where he was gradually given more and more writing responsibilities. His first book was a picture book; he has since written more than 40 books, including the award-winning novel *Frindle*. Clements now writes full-time. He and his wife Rebecca have four sons and live in Massachusetts.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. What gave Natalie the idea to write a "school story" in the first place?
Natalie's mother Hannah Nelson, who works in children's publishing, describes a meeting at Shipley Junior Books, in which the marketing department mentioned that Shipley needed to publish more adventure books, more series books, and more school stories – short novels set at school. When Natalie heard this, she began thinking that she was qualified to write a school story since she spent so much time at school (p. 6).
2. At first, Natalie and Zoe are going to get the story published by themselves. What events led up to Ms. Clayton being included in the plan?
When Zoe sends Natalie's manuscript to Shipley, she needs a way for Hannah Nelson to get in touch with her without betraying her or Natalie's true identities. She decides that she needs to rent an instant office for the Sherry Clutch Literary Agency, with a phone number, mailing address, and answering machine. For this, she needs the help of an adult, and she believes that Ms.

Clayton will be so impressed with Natalie's novel that she will agree to help. Though Ms. Clayton is hesitant at first, Zoe is quickly able to convince her to help.

3. Natalie and Zoe find out information about publishing. How do they each get their information? What do they each find out?
From her mother, Natalie learns about the slush pile at Shipley, where hundreds of manuscripts from unknown authors sit unread for many months. She also learns that most of the manuscripts sent to Shipley come from literary agents. When her manuscript is submitted, she learns about the revision process that manuscripts must go through. From her father and from reading the trade journal *Publishers Weekly*, Zoe learns how difficult it is to get a book published and how important a good agent is to the process.
4. In the book, it is clear that Natalie and her mother take care of each other. What evidence is there in the story to show how each one cares for the other?
Natalie and her mother are very close. They spend hours every day commuting together from New Jersey to Manhattan, and during that time they talk openly about their lives. When Natalie notices that her mom seems tired and overworked, she feels concerned and asks her about her job (pp. 5-6). For Natalie, it is very important that her mother, and not Letha Springfield, handle her novel, because she wants her mother to get the recognition for the project. Concerned for her daughter's safety as she travels alone in Manhattan, Hannah Nelson gives her daughter detailed instructions about how to navigate the city alone (pp. 18-9). When Natalie spends all her free time writing in secret, her mother is concerned that Natalie is working too hard on homework, and urges her daughter to rest and relax more (p. 91).
5. Natalie and Zoe go to the same school, but their lives are very different. Compare what you know about Zoe's life to what you know about Natalie's life.
Natalie lives with her single mother in Hoboken, New Jersey. She spends a couple of hours every day waiting for her mother to finish working, and then commuting home together. Natalie is close to her mother and misses her father, who died several years before. Zoe comes from a wealthy family and lives with both parents on the upper east side of Manhattan. She has two sisters, and to get time alone with her busy father, she likes to go with him to work at his law office on Saturdays.
6. Although Natalie's father has died before the story begins, he plays an important role in the book. Based on evidence in the book, how would you describe how Natalie feels about her father?
Natalie still respects and loves her father, and her story *The Cheater* is a tribute to him. As Zoe notices, "The book was like a good-bye poem from Natalie to her father" (p. 55). She thinks about him often, and when she writes, she uses his old desk chair and Macintosh computer so that she can continue feeling close to him

(p. 12). She often feels sad about losing her father, and seeing her good friend Zoe with her dad makes her remember how much she misses him (p. 54).

7. Natalie and Zoe run into some obstacles trying to get Natalie's book published. What are three problems they encounter and what solutions do they find?
One obstacle is Natalie's resistance to sending her book to a publisher, and through her persuasive persistence, Zoe is able to convince her friend to try. She then has to convince Natalie to use a pen name and to let the Sherry Clutch Literary Agency represent her, and again through persistence she is able to persuade Natalie. Then both girls must present their plan to their teacher Ms. Clayton and get her to help them, and though Ms. Clayton is reluctant at first, Zoe is able to talk her into helping. When Letha Springfield suddenly decides that she wants to edit *The Cheater*, Zoe, acting as Zee Zee Reisman, goes straight to the top to persuade Tom Morton, Letha's supervisor, to have Hannah, not Letha, edit the book.
8. What do you think the result would be if Natalie and Zoe had gone to their parents with their plan in the first place?
Students' answers will vary. For both girls, getting Natalie's novel published by themselves without their parents' help gave them a great sense of achievement. Given her situation with the difficult Letha Springfield, Natalie's mother may have had some trouble getting Natalie's book published at Shipley if the author's true identity had been revealed. It would have appeared that Hannah Nelson was seeking special treatment for her own daughter. If Zoe had asked her parents for help, she would certainly have received it, but then she would have missed out on the challenge of doing it all herself.
9. Zoe plans to be Natalie's literary agent. As a literary agent, she won't get as much recognition as Natalie for being the author of the book. What motive is there for Zoe to want to be the agent?
Zoe genuinely cares for her friend, and is truly impressed by the strength of Natalie's novel. Getting the novel published for her friend "was something she wanted to do for Natalie, something for Natalie and her mom" (p. 52). Also, Zoe loves power and control, and by being Natalie's agent, she is able to take charge of getting her friend's book published. The responsibility and challenge of this is exciting to Zoe, and once Zoe accepts a challenge, she is unwilling to back down or admit defeat.
10. What would have been different if Letha Springfield had been the editor of Natalie's book? Why was it important that Natalie's mother be the editor?
Natalie has seen that her mother is overworked and underappreciated by her boss, Letha Springfield. She wants her mother, and not Letha, to gain the honor and recognition of editing her book. If Letha, who is known to be domineering and difficult, had been Natalie's editor, she would have been far more likely to take over the entire process, and Natalie would not have had an enjoyable experience in seeing her book through to publication.

11. Zoe and Natalie have different opinions about what a lie is. Based on what you read, do you think Natalie and Zoe lied? Why?

Natalie feels strongly that a person should always tell the whole truth, without leaving any details out. Zoe, on the other hand, feels that a person does not have to tell the entire truth in order to be truthful; in other words, just because a person leaves out some of the truth does not mean that he or she is lying. Students will have various opinions on who lied in this novel, and the teacher may want to ask students to consider whether lying is ever justified.

12. In the contract, Zoe will receive 15% of whatever Natalie makes. That means, for every dollar Natalie makes, Zoe will get fifteen cents. Why does this seem fair or unfair?

Students' answers will vary. As Zoe points out, it is typical in publishing for an agent to get paid a percentage of whatever an author is paid (p. 195). Natalie feels that Zoe should make even more money, because she says that without Zoe, her story would still be sitting at her home. Students may also point out that Zoe's family is quite wealthy, so she doesn't need money for her college fund in the same way that Natalie does.

Note: The questions above are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7, 8; Analysis: 9; Synthesis: 10; Evaluation: 11, 12.

Activities

1. The book talks about a lot of different careers: law, publishing, advertising, teaching, and writing. Interview someone who is involved in one of these careers. Share your interview with your class.

With this activity, students have the opportunity to practice their interview skills and prepare a presentation to the class. Students might compare how the career is depicted in *The School Story* to what they learned from the person they interviewed.

2. Natalie and Zoe have asked you to create a magazine ad for *The Cheater*. Using words and images, create your ad using cutouts from magazines, information from the computer, or your own artwork! Remember, you are trying to sell this book to other kids. Your ad should include the title of the book and the author's name.

Students should be able to infer the plot of *The Cheater* from excerpts included in *The School Story* and from responses of characters who have read the novel. After drawing their own conclusions about Natalie's novel, students have a chance to show their knowledge using creative methods to design an advertisement.