

Literature Circle Guide to *How to Steal a Dog* by Barbara O'Connor

Book Summary

Georgina Hayes is desperate. Ever since her father left and they were evicted from their apartment, her family has been living in their car. With her mama juggling two jobs and trying to make enough money to find a place to live, Georgina is stuck looking after her younger brother, Toby. And she has her heart set on improving their situation. When Georgina spots a missing-dog poster with a reward of five hundred dollars, the solution to all her problems suddenly seems within reach. All she has to do is “borrow” the right dog and its owners are sure to offer a reward. What happens next is the last thing she expected.

Author Information

Barbara O'Connor lives in Duxbury, Massachusetts, a historic seaside village near Boston. She has a small but fantastic family: one husband, one son, two dogs, and one cat. She grew up in South Carolina, a beautiful state with mountains, beaches, and lots of interesting stuff in between. Barbara O'Connor has always loved to write. As a child, she wrote poems and stories and even a whole book. Now that she's grown, she still loves to write. And she loves children. So it seems only logical to write for children. She also enjoys writing biographies because she likes reading about people's lives and doing research. And she likes turning facts about a life into a story about a life.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Where are Georgina and her mother and brother living at the beginning of the story? Why are they living there?
In the beginning of the book, Georgina and her mother and brother are living in their car. They are living there because they were evicted from their apartment (pp. 3–5).
2. How does Georgina come up with the idea of stealing a dog? Why does she decide to go ahead with her plan, even though she knows it is wrong?
Georgina comes up with the idea of stealing a dog when she sees a sign for a missing dog that says “REWARD. \$500.” (p. 11). She thinks that she can steal a dog and then return it and collect the reward money. Georgina decides to go ahead with her plan because her family really needs the money and she is tired of living in a car.
3. Why does Georgina think that Carmella is going to be rich? What does she actually find out when she gets to know Carmella?
Georgina thinks Carmella is going to be rich because her house looks “like a mansion” (p. 23). Also, Carmella’s last name is Whitmore and she lives on Whitmore Road, so Georgina thinks Carmella must own the whole street (p. 25). When she gets to know Carmella, Georgina finds out that Carmella isn’t rich at all. Her house is falling apart on the inside, and she doesn’t have enough money to pay a reward (pp. 95–97).

4. What are the two mottos that Mookie shares with Georgina? Choose one of them and explain what it means, using examples from the story.

The two mottos that Mookie shares with Georgina in the book are: (1)

“Sometimes the trail you leave behind you is more important than the path ahead of you” (p. 132). (2) “Sometimes, the more you stir it, the more it stinks” (p. 134). The first motto means that sometimes it’s more important to make sure you’re acting right and being kind to people in the present than it is to worry about the future. The second motto means that sometimes when you’re in a mess, the harder you try to get yourself out, the worse it gets. Sometimes it’s better to just come clean and accept the consequences. Students’ examples will vary, but for the first motto, they might mention the time when Mookie secretly fixes Mama’s car (pp. 142–144). He does it just to help them out, without looking for some future reward. For the second motto, students might discuss how Georgina keeps trying to go ahead with her dog-stealing plan, even after she realizes that it would be simpler and more kind to just return Willy and confess.

5. Compare Georgina’s life with her friend Luanne’s. What are some of the differences in how the two girls live?

Answers might include some of the following differences: Georgina is living in a car while Luanne lives in a house with her own room and a soft pink carpet (pp. 11, 52). Luanne’s mother is very fastidious and protective (p. 19) while Georgina’s mother is too tired and overwrought to keep a close watch on her kids all the time. Luanne has other friends and doesn’t have problems at school while Georgina doesn’t seem to have any other friends and is not able to do her schoolwork successfully (pp. 26, 50). Luanne has clean new clothes and takes regular showers, and Georgina wears the same old clothes day after day and washes up in public bathrooms (p. 47). Luanne goes to ballet class and Girl Scouts after school while Georgina has to wait in the car or do errands (pp. 33, 51).

6. List two of the times Mama uses her “mean voice” with Georgina. Why do you think she does this? Do you think Mama is really a mean person?

Mama uses a mean voice and yells at Georgina and Toby a number of times in the book. Some examples are on pp. 39, 43, 49, and 58. Students’ judgments of Mama will vary. Some might say that she is a mean person because she yells at her kids, makes them live in a car, and forces them to go to school and to the Y when they don’t want to. Others will say that she is a good person who is trying her hardest to keep her family together and improve their situation. She doesn’t yell at Georgina and Toby just to be mean, but rather because she is frustrated and exhausted and sad. She is nice and caring more often than she is angry.

7. Why do you think Carmella continues to be nice despite what Georgina has done?

On pp. 163–165, Georgina confesses everything to Carmella, including how she stole Willy and the circumstances that made her decide to do it. Carmella is upset and feels betrayed, but at the end of the conversation, she invites Georgina

and Toby to come and walk Willy the next day. Students' interpretations of why Carmella does this will vary, but they should include the fact that Carmella says, "I guess bad times can make a person do bad things, huh?" Students might suggest that Carmella forgives Georgina because she knows that Georgina has been living in difficult circumstances and was desperate for money. They might also say that Carmella doesn't mind about anything else now that she knows Willy is safe, or that she forgives Georgina because she is an adult and Georgina is a child. Students might guess that Carmella herself has done things in the past that she is not proud of, or they might say that she is naturally a forgiving and generous person.

8. List all the potential problems that could arise from stealing a dog. How does Georgina address each of these problems in her list of rules for stealing a dog? Does she forget anything?

Some of the potential problems that could arise from stealing a dog include: (1) *Getting caught by the dog owner, your family, the police, etc.* Georgina addresses this with her first rule for finding a dog (p. 17), which says that the dog must not bark too much, and with step 2 of her plan (p. 28), which involves keeping an eye on the dog and the neighbors to make sure she won't get caught. (2) *The dog getting sick or hurt.* Georgina tries to ensure this doesn't happen to Willy by giving him water, food, and shelter, and taking him for walks. These items are covered in step 5 (p. 81). (3) *The dog running away.* Georgina deals with this by making sure that Willy is securely tied up with a string. This is rule 4 of step 5 (p. 81). (4) *The dog getting scared and biting you.* She makes sure this doesn't happen by choosing a dog that doesn't bite, which is rule 2 of step 1 (p. 17), and making sure to play with the dog so he doesn't get scared, which is rule 2 of step 5 (p. 81). Some of the other potential problems students might think of include: (1) The feeling of guilt that could arise from stealing someone's beloved pet. (2) The dog getting stolen by someone else. (3) The dog chewing through its rope and escaping.

9. Find three instances where Georgina gets frustrated with Toby. Why do you think she is so impatient with him? Do you think she really thinks he is dumb?

Georgina often gets frustrated with her little brother in the story. She calls him a "baby" (p. 3), a "dum-bo" (p. 73), and an "idiot" (p. 15). Other examples of Georgina getting impatient with Toby are on pp. 14, 33, 37, and 141. Students might say that Georgina does not actually think Toby is dumb because she says, "I have to admit, Toby had been pretty good at stealing a dog. He had thought of stuff like food and all. And best of all, he hadn't goofed up and told Mama what we had done" (p. 158). Also, she generally gets frustrated with him when he says something out loud that she is trying to avoid thinking about, or when he thinks of something that she has forgotten, as on pp. 77–78.

10. Reread the last four pages of the book. Do you think the story has a happy ending? Why or why not?

Students who think the book does not have a happy ending might say that

Georgina and her family still don't have their own house, and that her father has not come back. Those who think the book has a happy ending might say that now Georgina and her family live in a real house, even though it is shared, and that Georgina feels hopeful about the future. She says, "I pictured myself going to school in clean clothes and having my homework done...I pictured me and Luanne having a sleepover like we used to...I even pictured myself sitting on my very own bed wearing my new ballet shoes" (pp. 167–168). Students might mention that at the end of the book Georgina has her own bed, clean clothes, and a place to put her things. Students who believe the book has a happy ending might also discuss the lessons that Georgina has learned and how her experiences have made her a better person.

11. Imagine that the book is written from another character's perspective. How do you think the story would be different if Toby or Mama were the narrator?
Answers might include the following points: If Toby were the narrator, the story would be simpler because he is younger. It might include a lot more confusion as to what is going on and why they are stealing a dog. The tone of the story might be more innocent and sad rather than frustrated and angry. Toby might talk a lot more about how it is wrong to steal a dog and how they should just return Willy to Carmella right away. He might also talk about how he feels sorry for Mama because she is sad and works so hard rather than be upset with her because she doesn't have a house for them. If Mama were the narrator, the story might include a lot more speculation about what happened to her husband and anger with him for leaving. Mama might talk about her troubles at work and how it feels to have two jobs but still not make enough money to support her family. The story would have a different focus since Mama does not know anything about the dog-stealing adventure.

12. If you were in Georgina's situation, would you have stolen Willy? Why or why not? Have you ever done anything you knew was wrong because you thought you had a good reason for it?
Answers will vary, but they should indicate an understanding of the hardships Georgina and her family face, and of the moral dilemma involved in stealing when you really need the money. Answers about students' own personal experiences should show that they have learned something from the book. For example, they may have learned that people can end up doing things they know are wrong because they think the circumstances require it.

13. Do you think Georgina is a good person? Use examples from the story to support your argument.
Students who do not think Georgina is a good person might write about the fact that Georgina often snaps at her mother and brother, that she lies and steals, that she continues to keep Willy hidden even after she learns how sad Carmella is, and that she still tries to get Carmella to offer a reward even when she finds out that Carmella is poor. Those who think Georgina is a good person might discuss the circumstances that lead Georgina to act the way she does, and the

fact that Georgina is only trying to help her family. They might also point out that Georgina feels guilty about what she is doing, which indicates that she does have a conscience. Georgina feels bad when she is mean to Toby and Mama, and admits that Toby is a good kid. At the end of the book, Georgina comes clean with Carmella and apologizes. She is genuinely sorry for what she has done and gives the impression that she will make better choices and be nicer to people in the future.

14. On p. 49, Georgina says to Mama, “Maybe you could act like a *mother*.” Do you think Mama acts like a mother? Is she doing everything she can to take care of her kids?

Students who think Mama is a good mother might cite some of the following examples: She works extremely hard to make money and find a place to live, and she keeps them together as a family. She makes sure her children are well fed, tells them to do their homework, and tries to ensure that they are safe after school. Mama tries to stay positive (p. 39), checks in with how Georgina is doing emotionally (p. 49), gives her children affection (p. 53), and brings them treats like doughnuts (p. 79). Students who think Mama is not acting like a mother might say that she should have taken Toby and Georgina to live with someone else, like a friend or a relative, or taken them to a foster home while she earned enough money for a place to live. They might say that no matter how frustrated or tired or sad she gets, she shouldn’t ever yell at her kids.

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom’s Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1–3; Comprehension: 4–5; Application: 6–7; Analysis: 8–10; Synthesis: 11–12; Evaluation: 13–14.

Activities

1. Imagine that you are Georgina and it is a year after the events in the story took place. Your father has just come back to Darby and wants to see you. Would you forgive him? What would you say to him? Write a skit in which your father comes over and you tell him your feelings and ask him any questions you have. Include a paragraph at the beginning that describes the scene—where you and Mama and Toby are living now.

Skits should include an opening paragraph that describes the scene, whether it is the house with Louise and Drew or some other place. There should be a list of the characters who will be involved and a short description of each. The skit itself should express all of Georgina’s feelings, which may include anger, sadness, love, indifference, or fear. Georgina’s father might explain where he has been and why he left, and he might apologize to his daughter, or he might try to avoid the subject.

2. Draw a map of Darby, North Carolina. Include all the places where Georgina and her family spend the night—the old abandoned house, Carmella and Willy’s house, and any other locations you can remember from the story.

The map should include the kids’ school, Whitmore Road, the abandoned house, the Texaco station, the apartment where Georgina used to live, Luanne’s house, the various places Mama works, the Quiki Mart, and the parking lot where the car breaks down. Students can also include any other places where they imagine Mama might have parked the car at night.

3. Write a passage from Luanne’s perspective that takes place the day you find out Georgina is living in a car. Describe your day at school, your thoughts about Georgina’s appearance and behavior, and how you feel when you discover your friend’s secret.

The tone of this passage will vary. Some students might think Luanne has a very compassionate view of her best friend’s situation. Others might imagine that Luanne agrees with her mother and thinks Georgina has “cooties” (p. 19). Luanne might feel sad that her friendship with Georgina is waning, she might feel relief, or she might feel indifferent because she is now close friends with Liza Thomas.

Other Books by This Author

Beethoven in Paradise

Fame and Glory in Freedom, Georgia

Greetings from Nowhere

Me and Rupert Goody

Moonpie and Ivy

Taking Care of Moses