

Literature Circle Guide to *The Liberation of Gabriel King* by K.L. Going

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Book Summary

It is the summer of 1976 in rural Georgia. Ten-year-old Gabriel King is scared of many things: spiders, alligators, corpses, his best friend Frita's older brother Terrance, and especially fifth grade. To help liberate Gabe from his fears, Frita makes a plan to help him; together they are going to list their fears and conquer them one by one. Gabe goes along with the plan to please his friend, even though it means facing spiders *and* Terrance, as well as swinging from the rope swing into the catfish pond. To inspire Gabe, Frita faces her own fears, including speaking to the local leader of the Ku Klux Klan at the town Bicentennial celebration. As a result of their adventures together, Gabe and Frita gain the courage to face their fears and develop a new appreciation for their friendship.

Author Information

K.L. Going was born in Rhinebeck, New York, and attended Eastern College in Pennsylvania. After college, she worked as an adult literacy tutor, a ticket agent for an airline, a front desk clerk at a hotel, and a bookstore manager, until she began writing full-time. Her first novel, *Fat Kid Rules the World*, was named a Michael L. Printz Honor Book and a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association. K.L. Going currently lives and writes in Glen Spey, New York.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Why doesn't Gabe make it to his own Moving-Up Day ceremony?
Fifth grade students Frankie Carmen and Duke Evans tie Gabe's sleeves together in a knot behind his back and leave him alone and humiliated on the playground.
2. What is Gabe's number one fear?
Gabe fears going to fifth grade, because that means more time spent with the mean, soon to be sixth grade students like Duke Evans and Frankie Carmen. He is afraid of the fifth grade teachers and afraid of being the shortest student in his class. (p. 3)
3. Describe the nightmare that Gabe had the night after he caught Jimmy, his new pet spider.
In Gabe's nightmare, he dreams of human spiders looking down on him and Frita. He and Frita are lost, wandering through the swamp looking for Gabe's parents. They try to run, but they can't see the way, and they find themselves caught in cobwebs. When Gabe looks up, he finds a spider in the shape of the bully Duke Evans staring down at him, so he tries again to run, but he loses Frita. (pp. 58-9)
4. Why do you think Gabe is so afraid of Frita's big brother Terrance?
Terrance often acts angry and grumpy, towards his family as well as Gabe. His "Black Power" T-shirts and his negative attitude intimidate Gabe. Gabe doesn't yet understand the way the Wilson family, and especially Terrance, have been affected by the racism in

their community, and he feels that Terrance's attitude is directed toward him.

5. At the Bicentennial celebration, why does Gabe suspect that Mr. Evans said something cruel to Frita?
When Mr. Evans whispers to Frita, Gabe notices Frita's eyes are "big as full moons." She scrambles away from Mr. Evans as fast as she can, and the rest of the night she is strangely quiet, wanting to stay near to Gabe's father.
6. After a successful experience with the rope swing at the catfish pond, Gabe reflects: "There's nothing like success to boost your confidence." (p. 94) Write about a time in your life when this statement was true.
Students' answers will vary, but most will connect with Gabe's experience in feeling a great sense of accomplishment in successfully facing a fear.
7. In chapter 19, Gabe learns about an episode from the Wilson family's past. How does this information help explain Frita's fears and Terrance's anger?
When the Wilson family was living in Alabama, and Mr. and Mrs. Wilson were working with Martin Luther King, they had a visit from the Ku Klux Klan one night. Some costumed KKK members lit a cross in the Wilsons' front yard and demanded that Mr. and Mrs. Wilson come out to talk to them. During this ordeal, Terrance and Frita hid in a clothes hamper for hours. The memory of this experience helps explain Terrance's rage against the white community and Frita's fears of Mr. Evans, who has ties with the local KKK.
8. In the course of the story, how does Terrance change in his attitude towards Gabe, and what do you think caused this change?
Terrance's attitude towards Gabe changes slowly. Because Frita announces to Terrance that Gabe is afraid of him, Terrance becomes more conscious of his treatment of Gabe. When Frita cries (real or feigned) tears about the way Terrance treats her friend, Terrance's heart softens, and he begins to treat Gabe more like a little brother. He treats Gabe like he treats Frita, teasing him playfully and swinging him by the ankles. Another factor that might have helped Terrance accept Gabe is that Gabe demonstrates his awareness of discrimination against African Americans in Jimmy Carter's hometown of Plains, Georgia. (p. 103)
9. What most surprises Gabe when he sees Frita's fear list for the first time? Why is this an important discovery for him?
Frita's fear list appears on page 141. Gabe is not surprised to see that Frita's fear of the Ku Klux Klan tops her list, but he is surprised by two other fears that Frita had listed: her fear of Terrance leaving home and her fear of not having Gabe with her in

fifth grade. Gabe realizes at this moment that just as he depends on Frita for strength, Frita depends on him, too. He thinks to himself, "Maybe Frita really did need me." (p. 142)

10. The night before the big rally, Gabe realizes the key to having courage in a frightening situation. In your own words, explain what Gabe learns about courage. **Most students will recognize the way that Gabe's relationships with the people around him, especially his best friend Frita, give him courage. Gabe's father says to him, "Ain't nothing so scary when you've got people you love," (p. 145) and Gabe realizes that even though he won't ever completely conquer his fears, his love for his family and Frita are a source of courage and strength to him.**
11. At the Bicentennial celebration, Frita refuses to talk after her run-in with Mr. Evans. Imagine the thoughts in her head as she stands silently watching the fireworks: what do you think she is thinking and feeling? **Based on what we know of Frita's family history, we imagine that she is feeling afraid, for herself and for her family. Mr. Evans has warned her that she might face a visit from the Klan, and this brings back sad, anxious memories for Frita.**
12. Mr. Wilson explains *oppression* to Gabe: "Oppression is when you're put down. ...It's when you don't have the freedom to be who you want to be because someone else doesn't believe you should have that freedom." (p. 102). Which characters in this book face oppression, and what kind of oppression do they experience? **Students' answers will vary. Gabe faces oppression in the form of his own fears and self-doubts that often incapacitate him. As an African-American, Frita faces oppression from Ku Klux Klan members who seek to intimidate her and her family. Students might differentiate between oppression from others and oppression from one's self.**
13. In chapter eight, Frita tells Gabe that he should name his new pet spider: "Once you name him, you'll feel like he's yours and then you won't be scared of him anymore." (p. 46) Explain in your own words what Frita is trying to accomplish with this advice. **Frita suggests that by naming the spider, Gabe will feel more attached to his spider. With a name, his spider will be more familiar and less threatening to him**
14. In the quest to conquer his fears, Gabe takes several risks that seem to him to be quite dangerous. Make a list of all Gabe's adventures from the summer and rank them in order—from most dangerous to least dangerous. In your opinion, are any of Gabe's fears appropriate? **Gabe's complete list of fears is included after the final chapter in the novel. Students might consider which items on Gabe's list might cause physical harm versus embarrassment or humiliation. Several of the items on Gabe's list are potentially dangerous, like roller-**

skating on the highway and tornados, but most of his fears involve his feeling ashamed or embarrassed.

15. How is the summer of 1976 a turning point in the lives of both Gabe and Frita? When they are older, what do you think each will most remember about this exciting summer?

Students' answers will vary. Most students will notice how both Gabe and Frita faced their deepest fears and learned to appreciate their friendship more fully. Through learning about the Wilson's family history, Gabe learns about the history of racism in his community, and begins to understand Frita and Terrance better.

Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-7; Analysis: 8-10; Synthesis: 11-13; Evaluation: 14-15.

Activities

1. What do you remember about your childhood fears? Think back to when you were a young child, and create a list of your Top Ten Fears at that time. Write an essay in which you describe your memories of your childhood fears and how these fears affected you. If you can, explain how you were able to overcome your fears.

With this activity, students will reflect on their own past fears and how they were able to overcome their fears. They will compose a list of fears like Gabe's and then write a narrative essay in which they describe memories associated with these fears.

2. During the summer of 1976, Gabe experiences success and failure, thrill and disappointments. Review the novel by listing the major events of Gabe's summer, and create a line graph plotting the high and low points for Gabe. For each of the events on your line graph, draw a symbol or picture to represent the event and write a one-sentence description of what the event meant to Gabe.

This activity helps students review the novel and create a visual depiction of the novel's events in the form of a line graph. Comparing graphs could also be an excellent discussion-starter.

3. *The Liberation of Gabriel King* addresses some historical events from the 1970s: the Watergate scandal, the election of Jimmy Carter, and the Bicentennial celebration. Find an adult who remembers one of these events well, and interview him or her to learn more about the topic. Write what you learn in a report, and be prepared to share what you've learned with your classmates.

Through these interviews, students will gain background information about the historical context of the novel. In addition to interviews, students could be required to do additional research using books and on-line sources.