

Literature Circle Guide to *Notes from a Liar and Her Dog* by Gennifer Choldenko

Book Summary

Ant MacPherson often feels like a misfit in her own family. She's the middle child, one of three sisters and often overlooked. She doesn't feel understood or appreciated by her mother, and her father is usually out of town on business. Her family has moved thirteen times, and Ant is hoping that the most recent move to northern California is truly the last, as her father promised. She also worries about her beloved pet dog Pistachio, who is getting older and is often ill. Ant often finds herself lying to her parents, her sisters, and her favorite teacher she calls Just Carol, and more and more often her lies land her in deep trouble. Through volunteering at the local zoo, participating in a math competition at school, and gaining the trust of Just Carol, Ant begins to understand the value of telling the truth. When Ant's father announces that he's accepted a new job in Connecticut, Ant, her sisters, and her mother bind together to try to convince Mr. MacPherson that they want to stay in California, and as a result Ant begins to feel a new connection to her family.

Author Information

Gennifer Choldenko was born in Santa Monica, California, in 1957, the youngest child in a family of four children. Choldenko began her writing career with a job as a copywriter in a small ad agency. She began taking classes in illustration, and this eventually led to a full-time study of illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design. After becoming very successful in advertising, she began to pursue her real love—children's books, and her first novel *Notes from a Liar and Her Dog* was chosen as a *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year and won several other awards. Choldenko is married with two children, and she lives in the San Francisco Bay area.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. When Ant is called into the office at the beginning of the story, what has she done wrong? Name three things that you learn about Ant and her family in this scene.

Ant is in trouble because she has been announcing that she is adopted, that her real parents are going to come to take her away from the parents she lives with now. In this scene, we learn that Just Carol, Ant's teacher, is concerned about Ant's behavior and is worried that Ant

is having problems at home. We learn that Ant has often been in trouble in the principal's office. Ant is irritated to see her mother at school, and she is rude to her mother in front of Mr. Borgdorf, the principal, and Just Carol.

2. Ant overhears her parents talking about her father's job. What is Ant afraid might happen? How does she feel about the conversation she hears?

She is afraid that her father will once again change jobs and the family will have to move. She hears her father talking about how much he hates his job, and how he has headhunters calling to offer him something better. She feels anxious and sad about the possibility of her family moving once again, especially since her father had promised her that the move to California would be their last.

3. Retell what happens the first time that Ant takes Tashi to the zoo. Describe the events in the time order in which they happened. When Just Carol picks her up, Ant has Tashi hidden in her coat pocket, because she wants to make sure Tashi gets his midday dose of heart medicine. After meeting the zoo employee Mary-Judy and receiving instructions, Ant and Harrison get to watch Mary-Judy feed the lions in their cages until one of the male lions urinates on both of the children. Then Ant and Harrison get to feed the giraffe Kigali, and afterwards Ant and Just Carol go to clean the lions' cages. In order to give Tashi his medicine, Ant tells Just Carol that she has to go to the bathroom in order to get a moment alone with Tashi. But she doesn't have enough time, and when Just Carol returns too early, Ant leaves Tashi alone for a moment, planning to return to get him immediately. Left alone, Tashi suddenly ends up in the lion's cage, and to rescue her pet, Ant reaches in to the lion's cage to pick up Tashi.

4. Ant says she has trouble lying to Harrison's father because he believes anything she says. Why is it so easy for Ant to lie to everyone else?

Ant finds herself in a cycle of lying. Because she lies so often, no one really believes what she says or takes her very seriously. And because no one believes her, she feels free to continue lying. For example, Ant says of her mom: "She never believes me, so it doesn't matter what I tell her" (p. 21).

5. Compare the way that Ant's mother and father treat her with the way she thinks her "real" parents would treat her. Why doesn't she want to believe that Mr. and Mrs. MacPherson are her "real" parents?

Ant is unhappy at home, and doesn't really feel a part of her family. Her "real" parents would appreciate her much more. To her "real" parents, she is special and unique, not just the middle daughter in a family of three girls. Her "real" parents are never mean or insensitive to her; instead, they are always accepting, sympathetic, and kind. She doesn't want to believe that Mr. and Mrs. MacPherson are her "real" parents, because she doesn't feel accepted by them.

6. What advice would you give Ant and her sisters about their father changing jobs and making the family move? Think of two things they could do to make the situation better.

Students' answers will vary. Ant, Elizabeth, and Kate could show their parents how much they have benefited from living in the same place already for two years. They could write their father letters to describe all the benefits of living in California over Connecticut, and they could try to enlist their mother to help them convince their father to find a job in California.

7. Did you expect Ant to win the Math-athon? Why or why not? Does her participation surprise you? Why?

Ant surprised everyone, including herself, by winning the Math-athon. She knew that she was a capable math student, but she had no idea of her ability to win over

all the other sixth grade students in the math competition. Ant doesn't feel like competing, especially after her father doesn't stay to watch, and she is about to leave when she sees Just Carol. Since she doesn't want to disappoint her teacher, she stays to finish the Math-athon, and ends up receiving the first-place trophy.

8. Think about the title of the book. Why is Ant's dog so important to the story? What does Tashi mean to Ant?

Ant loves her dog more than any person in her life, partly because Tashi loves her so much. Tashi never holds a grudge, and he accepts Ant unconditionally, unlike her own family members. Because Ant feels that she can't face the world without her pet, she takes Tashi everywhere she can, and the dog ends up getting Tashi in trouble several times. Because of Tashi, Ant lies at the veterinarian's office and at the zoo with Just Carol, and after her lies are exposed, she is forced to face the consequences of lying.

9. Analyze what has gone wrong between Ant and her mother. Explain their relationship first from Ant's point of view, then from her mother's point of view.

Ant feels like her mother wants to boss and control her. She feels that her mother doesn't accept her as she is but is instead always expressing disapproval in her daughter. Ant also feels that her mother prefers her sisters to her. Mrs. MacPherson feels like she can't trust her daughter because of Ant's history of lying. She feels that Ant deliberately tries to annoy her and make her look foolish. Most of all, she feels that she doesn't understand her daughter at all, and that Ant doesn't want to help her.

10. What did you learn about Ant's feelings when she takes Tashi to the zoo for the second time? How does Ant feel about the dog? About her mother and Just Carol? About herself?

Ant thinks that her mother is considering having Tashi put to sleep, and she is so panicked at the thought that

she takes Tashi to the zoo, even after Tashi's disastrous last trip to the zoo. Ant can't imagine life without her dog, and she is willing to risk every other relationship in her life for her dog. She doesn't trust her mother, and instead of asking her mother about her plans for Tashi, she assumes the worst and takes the situation into her own hands by hiding Tashi in her jacket once again. Yet she cares enough about Just Carol's trust to confess to her teacher what she has done, showing that she has learned something about the importance of telling the truth.

11. How do Elizabeth, Ant, Just Carol, and Mrs. MacPherson work together to keep Mr. MacPherson from moving the family to Connecticut?

Just Carol's conversations with Mrs. MacPherson have shown Ant's mom just how much Ant needs to know that her family is stable and loving, and Mrs. MacPherson has begun to see the positive influence of Just Carol on Ant. Elizabeth and Ant make a plan to convince their parents to stay in California: Ant will show her mother that her behavior is improving due to her influences in their current situation, and Elizabeth will talk to her father about the long winters in Connecticut that will stop him from playing golf year-round. Then Mrs. MacPherson, who had previously gone along with all of her husband's decisions to move, finally intervenes, asking her husband not to move the family away from Sarah's Road.

12. By the end of the story, important things have changed for Ant. Do you think she will change and stop being a liar? Give reasons to support your answer.

Through the influence of Just Carol, Ant has learned the value of telling the truth so that others will trust her. She also begins to feel more valued by her mother who has told Ant that she is sorry for not accepting her and for giving preferential treatment to her sisters. In her final conversation with her mother, Ant is vulnerable with her mother for the first time, showing her mother how much she wants to be accepted and loved.

13. Who do you think is the "hero" of this story? Explain why you think this character did something brave and admirable.
Students will have various responses to this question. Many students will describe how Ant begins to be brave, vulnerable, and honest through the events here. Other students might mention Just Carol, who unselfishly and bravely tries to help Ant in a variety of ways, even risking her own position as a zoo volunteer.

Note: The following questions are keyed to *Bloom's Taxonomy*:
Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-7; Analysis: 8-9;
Synthesis: 10-11; Evaluation: 12-13.

Activities

1. "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" is a famous fable that teaches a lesson about lying. A shepherd boy cries out that a wolf is after his sheep when it isn't true; when a wolf really does come and the boy cries for help, nobody believes him. Write your own version of the story with updated characters and illustrate it. Or create your own original fable that teaches a lesson about lying and add an illustration.
In the first chapter, Ant's principal mentions this fable to her as a warning about the consequences of lying, and this becomes an important theme in this book. As students write their own fables, they will invent alternate ways to portray the importance of honesty.
2. Create a poster or brochure advertising for volunteers to work in the zoo. Feature the duties a volunteer would have to perform, qualifications and qualities required for the job, and what a volunteer would gain by doing the job.
Through reading about Ant's experiences working at the zoo, students will have insight into the responsibilities of a zoo volunteer. Students should be ready to present their posters to their classmates.