

Literature Circle Guide to
BLIZZARD'S WAKE by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Book Summary

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor weaves a taut, gripping story about grief, determination, and healing as the lives of the Sterling family and Zeke Dexter bind together. Set against the actual events of the March 1941 blizzard, separate narrative strands introduce Kate Sterling, a teenager still mourning the death of her mother, and Zeke Dexter, the drunk driver who killed Ann Sterling and who has just been released from prison.

Author Information

Newbery Medal winner Phyllis Reynolds Naylor has published more than 100 books. She says she's not happy unless she spends time writing every day. She lives in Bethesda, Maryland, with her husband Rex, a speech pathologist. She has two grown sons, Jeff and Michael, and three grandchildren. When she's not writing she likes to hike, swim, play the piano, and attend the theater.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Why is Zeke Dexter getting out of jail? How long has he been there? Where is he going?

Zeke Dexter is released early from his five-year sentence for negligent homicide. He spends three years, five months, and six days in the North Dakota State Penitentiary and leaves early because of good behavior. He plans to go back to his family home in Grand Forks where his brother lives, but he doesn't know the house has burned down.

2. What is the connection between Zeke and Kate? How does Kate feel about Zeke?

Zeke killed Kate's mother Ann when he got behind the wheel of his car drunk. He missed a stop sign and rammed into the passenger side of "the car of two women coming home from choir practice." (p. 24) Kate hates Zeke and finds herself fantasizing about making him suffer like her mother suffered.

3. What is "the bridge"? Why is it important to Kate?

The bridge is a special project for the county fair that Kate's mother started before she died. She liked to make very detailed models out of broom straws and toothpicks. In the past she made a castle, a Ferris wheel, a Victorian house, a ship, and a birdcage. (p. 36) The bridge was her most difficult project and she had written out the design. It is important to Kate because her mother had cared about these projects and worked very hard on them. The unfinished bridge represents a connection Kate still has with her mother. When Zeke helps her improve upon the design so she can finish the project, it becomes a bridge between Kate and Zeke that allows Kate to see Zeke as more than just the horrible accident he caused.

4. Why can't Zeke reach his brother by phone? What doesn't he know? What problems will this make for him as he heads home?

Zeke doesn't know that his family's house has recently burned down. He assumes he'll be able to live with his brother at the house, at least until he gets a job and saves up some money. Zeke's brother wasn't aware that Zeke was getting out of prison early. Zeke is headed to the house by foot when the blizzard hits. Even if he was able to make it through the storm, there would be no house when he got there.

5. How has Kate been affected by her mother's death? How has it changed her life?

The death of Kate's mother has profoundly affected Kate. She has found that ever since her mother died "there were certain things Kate found she had to avoid to keep the panic away." (p. 22) The things she has to avoid include spending time around the mothers of her friends and having her friends over to her house. She finds holidays and birthdays to be "excruciating." (p. 23) On the school bus or while at home, she is overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and sadness for arguing with her mother the night she was killed, and anger and a desire for revenge because her mother was taken from her. Additionally, more of the housework falls on Kate's shoulders now. (p. 43)

6. List all the ways day-to-day life was different in 1941 from the way life is today. List all the ways it is the same.

Many details from the story show that the book is set in an earlier time. Zeke buys an omelette, home fries, and coffee for a total of 15 cents. (p. 54) At Kate's school, sometimes there's a "Trouser Week for girls," but usually "the girls arrived at school with legs as red as lobsters between the hem of their skirts and their ankle socks." (p.22) Kate's house doesn't have electric lines and her father cranks a generator once or twice a week to build enough electricity for the radios and a few light bulbs. (p.75) At the same time, students should be able to draw connections between life in 1941 as depicted in the book and life today. Kate and Jesse like to listen to music and hang out with their friends. Kate loves her kitten and Jesse wants to learn how to drive. The students at Kate's school are worried about war and the state of the world.

7. Imagine you were Jesse or Kate during the blizzard. How would you react to the appearance of Zeke Dexter? What would you do? Why?

Jesse is startled when he realizes the man in the car is Zeke. He doesn't understand why Zeke isn't still in prison and thinks maybe he escaped. Kate is horrified to find Zeke in the car. She doesn't want to rescue this man and she certainly doesn't want him in her home. Over time, Jesse comes to see likable qualities in Zeke. They talk about cars and Jesse realizes that, though he did something horrible, Zeke is a person and is more than the horrible thing he did. It takes Kate longer to see Zeke as more than the accident that claimed her mother. Eventually Zeke helps her fix the bridge project her mother started and Kate begins to see Zeke as human.

8. On page 150 "Kate faced the bitter realization that her heart had been frozen solid, and

spring would come to all but her.” What does this sentence mean? What keeps Kate’s heart so cold and what keeps it from warming?

Kate is stuck. She is trapped in a cycle of tremendous guilt over her last moments with her mother and for hating Zeke for taking her away. She realizes her frozen heart won't allow her to move on. Because she has not forgiven herself, she cannot forgive Zeke, and thus she is trapped while spring, warmth, and life move ahead for everyone else around her.

9. War, from President Roosevelt’s address to the nation to Kate’s history teacher’s lectures, is always in the background of this story. Symbolically speaking, what do the war preparations have to do with the story?

Kate is symbolically at war with herself. She blames herself for arguing with her mother on the last night of her life. She is guilt-ridden to know her last words to her mother were, "I hate you." At the same time, she is at war with Zeke. He is to blame for her mother's death and she wishes he would suffer like her mother did. Toward the end of the book, Kate realizes that only by forgiving herself and by forgiving Zeke will she truly be at peace.

10. Explain the title of the book. What does “wake” mean? What alternative meanings could the title have? What other titles could this book have had?

The word "wake" has multiple meanings. As a noun it can mean, "The trail left by something passing through" as in, *the blizzard left destruction in its wake*. It can also mean, "A watch kept over the body of a dead person before the funeral." Thus, the title may apply to both the aftermath of the blizzard and of Ann Sterling's death.

11. If Zeke had not ended up at the Sterling’s house, how do you think Kate’s life would have been different?

Kate is forced to face the man whose actions have haunted her for four long years when he spends time recovering at her house. Although this experience is hard for Kate, it also allows her to face her emotions and move forward. She is compelled to finally tell her father about the argument she had with her mother the night she died. Her father is able to help her see that her mother knew Kate loved her, even if Kate had been angry with her. Ultimately Kate realizes she must forgive both herself and Zeke. Without Zeke's presence in her house, she might not have found a way to move forward, or she possibly would have come to these realizations from a different set of circumstances.

12. At the end of the book, Kate writes Zeke a letter. What do you imagine he thinks of it? What do you think he would have said if he wrote a letter back to her?

When Kate receives a letter from a boy at school, Zeke tells her he has never received a letter himself. Students may point out Zeke would be surprised to receive a letter from Kate, and because she had been so angry at him, he might initially be concerned about what she had to say. Students may have differing opinions about how Zeke would react after reading Kate's letter. He might be very touched. He might feel sad about what he had done. If he wrote back to Kate, he might tell her how sorry he is about killing her mother. He might promise her, as he had promised

Jesse, that he would never drink and drive again.

13. Was Zeke sufficiently punished for his crime? Why or why not?

The length of a prison sentence often depends on more than just what crime was committed. Factors such as a prior record, the interpretations of the jury, and other circumstances often come into play. Zeke was sentenced to five years and served three and a half. He does remember drinking, but he doesn't remember the accident. He describes his life in prison as "going to work in a prison twine plant by day and staring at his bunk, his chair, his sink and toilet, in the evenings." (p. 41)

14. Do you think Dr. Sterling should have behaved differently in any way? Explain.

Dr. Sterling doesn't think twice when he pulls Zeke, half-frozen and suffering from frostbite, into the car. He is alarmed when he realizes who Zeke is, but he continues to help him. Once they all make it back to the house, Dr. Sterling makes the decision to tend to Zeke himself, rather than request the plow come dig them out so he can be transported to the hospital. When Zeke cuts himself badly with the ax, Dr. Sterling again decides that he should recuperate at the house. Later in the book, Kate says she knows why her father kept Zeke in the house for so long: "For her sake as much as Zeke's." (p. 208) He wanted to give Kate the opportunity to find forgiveness in her heart. While Dr. Sterling is a good doctor and gives Zeke as much care as he can, his leg injury is "a little more than [he] bargained for." (p. 177) It's possible that Zeke would have been better off if he had been transported to a hospital or students may feel that he received the best care possible at the Sterling home.

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. Get together in a small group and talk about forgiveness. Is there anyone you can't forgive? Why? What was the hardest thing you've ever had to forgive someone for? What was the worst thing you've been forgiven for? Would you have forgiven Zeke Dexter if you were Kate?

Kate doesn't think it's possible to forgive Zeke for what he did, but eventually she realizes that blaming herself for the argument with her mother is what's keeping her from being able to forgive him.

2. Research drunk driving laws in your state and make posters for your classroom and school about the dangers of drinking and driving.

In the story, Zeke remembers drinking, but he doesn't remember the accident. Jesse asks him to promise never to drink again and Zeke says he can't do that, but he can promise he'll never drink and drive again. Students can research drunk driving statistics at the library or on the Internet.

3. *Blizzard's Wake* is based on a real event, the Red River Valley Blizzard of 1941. Find some old newspapers from your community and find an event from long ago to use as the basis for a story you write. Combine historical happenings with fictional creations.

Students can use library and Internet resources to research local events. Historical fiction combines some true events with imagined details. The blizzard works well as a historical fiction framework because it provides the author with a dramatic event that affects all of her characters. Zeke and the Sterling family are put into unusual circumstances to which they must respond. Ask for volunteers to share their completed stories with the rest of the class.

Other Books by This Author

How I Came to Be a Writer, Aladdin, 2001

Jade Green: A Ghost Story, Atheneum, 2000

Reluctantly Alice, Aladdin, 2000

Sang Spell, Aladdin, 2000

Shiloh, Aladdin, 2000

Walker's Crossing, Aladdin, 2001