

Literature Circle Guide to HEARTBEAT
by Sharon Creech

Book Summary

Twelve-year-old Annie loves her life, but suddenly it seems that everything is changing. Her mother is pregnant, and Annie will no longer be an only child. Her grandfather who lives with her family has begun to lose his memory. Her best friend Max is moody and seems frustrated with everything, including Annie. Also, the track coach is pressuring Annie to try out for the track team, but Annie can not imagine giving up running just for the love of it in order to compete on a team. Through her experiences, Annie begins to accept the changes of time and life, including birth and old age, success and failure. She decides to continue running just for herself, following her grandfather's advice, while her friend Max joins the track team for the achievement of winning. She finds that she can simultaneously rejoice in the life of her new baby brother Joey while she grieves the loss of her grandfather's memory and strength.

Author Information

Sharon Creech was born in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, and grew up in a large, active family. She discovered in college that she loved story-telling, and afterwards found a career teaching high school English and literature in England and Switzerland, spending eighteen years in Europe. For Creech, teaching and traveling both provided the perfect training ground for writing her novels. Her first two novels (published in England) were written for adults, but all of her subsequent work has been written for children. After *Walk Two Moons* won the Newberry Medal in 1995, Sharon Creech stopped teaching and devoted herself to writing full time. She now lives in Pennington, New Jersey, with her husband who is a school headmaster, and she has two grown children.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Describe the way that Max and Annie like to run.

Max and Annie run barefoot on the ground in all seasons, even winter. They run without talking, through the woods and around the pasture.

2. What is the outcome of Max's first race with the track team?

Max is wearing his new shoes, and at one point he trips and falls. Though he manages to overtake several other runners in spite of his fall, he does not win the race (p. 139).

3. What secret about running does Grandpa tell first to Max and then to baby Joey?

Grandpa tells Max: "Run for the pleasure of running."

4. The girls' track team coach frequently asks Annie if she is interested in trying out for the track team. How does Annie respond to the coach's question, and what is she really thinking?

Annie says, “I’m sorry, I just don’t want to.” She secretly feels annoyed that the coach is badgering her to try out for the team. She has observed the track team practices and noticed that everyone runs the same, no one smiles, and competition gets in the way of enjoying running. For Annie, competing in track “would spoil such a good thing as running”(p. 70).

5. Describe the dreams Annie has about her mother’s unborn baby on pages 20 and 119. What do her dreams show about Annie’s feelings toward the new baby?

Annie dreams that the baby is really a baby rabbit, a mouse, or a horse (p. 20). Another time, she dreamed that she lost the baby behind the radiator where it melted (p. 119). Annie’s dreams show that she has some worries about what the baby will be like and whether or not she is responsible enough to be a big sister.

6. Describe Annie’s relationship with her grandpa. What does Annie have in common with her grandpa? What role does he play in her life?

Annie’s grandpa is her friend and confidant, always ready to listen when Annie is ready to talk. He is slowly losing his memory, and his forgetfulness has a way of helping Annie appreciate the little things in life that she might not otherwise notice. Annie and her grandpa share a love of running and a dislike of competition. For both, competing in races takes the joy out of running.

7. Annie asks Max, “Why are we here on this earth? . . .Am I supposed to do something *important*? It doesn’t seem enough to merely take up space on this planet. . .” (p. 28) How would you answer Annie’s questions?

Students’ answers to this personal question will vary. Annie’s question is prompted by her friend Max, who has known since he was just seven years old that he wanted to be a famous athlete when he grew up. Annie feels frustrated because she feels that she should do something important, but doesn’t know yet what it will be.

8. On p. 115, why does Annie slug Max? Afterwards, she feels like apologizing, but doesn’t provide a full explanation of why she did it. Can you explain why Annie hit her friend?

Annie doesn’t seem to understand why she hit her friend, but she seems to feel annoyed, frustrated, and angry in the events leading up to hitting Max. After school, she had witnessed the boys’ track coach trying to convince Max to take a used pair of running shoes, and she felt sadness and frustration for her friend, who is unable to afford his own shoes but too proud to accept the used ones from the coach. Also, the girls’ track coach had been pressuring her to join the team, and Annie feels annoyed because she is unable to explain why she really does not want to compete. Perhaps Max’s comment “That’s a little better pace, Annie” after Annie had won the race felt condescending to her, too.

9. In the chapter called “Sleeping,” Annie glimpses Grandpa holding baby Joey, and she feels both “infinitely happy” and “infinitely infinitely infinitely sad” (p. 162). Explain why she feels the way she does in that moment.

In that moment, Annie feels deep joy at the birth of her new baby brother and also deep sadness at the knowledge that her grandfather's life is in its final stages. She has experienced many of the great changes of life and has come to acknowledge the temporal nature of life.

10. As you look back through the novel, what references can you find to *heartbeat*? What might the title *Heartbeat* signify?

Throughout the novel, Annie and Max run barefoot, and their feet make the sound of a heartbeat “thump thump thump” when they run. Also, a most important moment for Annie and her parents is the first time they hear the heartbeat of their unborn baby (pp. 66-67). After her brother is born, Annie comes to check that both he and her grandpa are still breathing while they sleep, and she hears their hearts beat “thump-THUMP, thump-THUMP” (p. 162). Through living with her elderly grandfather and a new baby brother, Annie gains awareness of all phases of life and learns to appreciate the ongoing rhythm of life.

11. At the very end of the book, Annie's final drawing of her apple is a “small shiny brown seed” (p. 180). Why do you think she chose to draw her apple this way, and what does this seed symbolize?

Annie's final drawing shows what is left of the apple core after all the other parts have been eaten or thrown away. While the apple is now gone, the remaining seed shows the potential for new life. In this story, Annie experiences life with an aging grandpa, and she begins to realize how she takes after her grandpa in spite of the difference in their ages. Also, she witnesses the growth and arrival of a new life, her baby brother, which she describes as a “wondrous miracle” (p. 155). For Annie, the apple seed symbolizes the ongoing nature of life, the rhythm that includes both life and death at the same time.

12. Throughout the story, we get details about Max's life. Putting the pieces together, what is Max's story?

Max is serious and intense, driven to succeed especially when it comes to running track. He's grown up with Annie, but Max's life changed dramatically when his grandpa died and his father deserted the family (p. 12). Now Max lives with his mother in an apartment, and they struggle financially to the point where Max's mother can not afford to buy her son running shoes for track. Max seems jealous of Annie's life with both parents and her grandpa, and he feels like he wants to escape his situation, to grow up and move away as quickly as possible. He feels that track might just be the way he gets to escape his past: “These feet are my ticket out of here” (p. 18).

13. With the birth of her new brother Joey and the fading of her grandpa's memory, how do you think Annie's life will change in the near future?

Annie will most likely need to take new responsibilities, like caring for her new brother and helping her grandpa get through his daily routine. As the big sister and no longer the only child, she will have to get used to sharing her parents with a

sibling. Also, with her extra responsibilities, Annie may have less time for her own pursuits like running.

14. After her confrontation with Max, Annie says, “I do not like to be wrong which is probably a serious character flaw” (p. 115). Do you think this is true? Explain.
Students’ personal responses will vary. We do observe that Annie is firm in her convictions throughout the story, yet she is teachable to her parents and grandfather. After her fight with Max, she tries to admit she was wrong by giving her lawn-mowing money to Max (p. 116).

15. In the chapter called “The Coach,” Annie explains her reasons for not wanting to participate in competitive sports (pp. 70-71). Do you agree with her criticism of competitive sports? What might be some of the benefits of competitive sports?
Students’ answers will vary. Competitive sports provide students with opportunities to be work hard and be successful in a non-academic way. Students who participate in competitive sports learn about the value of practice, self-discipline, and team work. Through sports, students develop new friendships with teammates and coaches, and learn about working hard to meet their goals.

Activities

1. With another student, choose one of the chapters in *Heartbeat* and create a reader’s theater to present to your class. Assign lines, and practice your dramatic reading aloud. Be ready to explain why you chose to present the chapter you did.
This activity gives students the chance to create a dramatic interpretation of one of their favorite scenes in the novel. Teachers might wish to provide highlighter pens so students can mark the lines they will be reading, as well as extra class time to practice the readings.

2. For a class assignment, Annie writes poems about things she fears and things she loves (pp. 32–34). Compile your own lists of things you fear and things you love, and write them in a free-verse style poem like Annie’s.
You may wish to let students know in advance if they will be sharing their poems with their classmates, as many students may write very personal lists. Students should be encouraged to consider what their lists show about themselves.

3. Annie runs for the pure pleasure of running. Do you have a sport, interest, or hobby that you enjoy simply for its own sake? What makes it appealing to you? Using descriptive language, write an essay about your special interest, explaining why you enjoy it. Or write a free-verse style poem as Annie does to express your love for your hobby.
With this assignment, students have the opportunity to practice writing in a poetic style like Annie’s, using vivid language to show their love for their own special interest.