

Literature Circle Guide to  
CHOCOLATE FEVER by Robert Kimmel Smith

**Summary**

Henry Green loved chocolate so much that he ate it at every meal--in the regular ways, like chocolate cookies, chocolate cake, and chocolate milk, and in unusual ways, like chocolate syrup on mashed potatoes and chocolate sprinkles on buttered noodles. His parents loved and indulged him; even his older sister and brother were good to him. One morning he broke out in large, brown, chocolate-smelling spots. The school nurse took him to the hospital where he was diagnosed with "Chocolate Fever." Henry felt afraid, and he ran away. He was picked up by a kind truck driver who was hijacked just as he convinced Henry to call home. What else can go wrong for Henry? Can Chocolate Fever be cured? Will Henry learn to control his chocolate obsession?

**Author Information**

Robert Kimmel Smith was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1930 and as a young man, hoped to become a doctor. After college, he served in the army and later married, having two children. In addition to the many children's books, adult books, plays and television scripts he has written, he has worked as copywriter at an ad agency, and was a partner and creative director at another.

**Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

1. List all the sweets Henry eats on the Friday morning he gets chocolate fever.

**Chocolate Cake**

**Cocoa-crispy cereal with chocolate syrup in the milk**

**A glass of chocolate milk**

**Chocolate cookies**

**(pp. 15-16)**

2. Why does Henry tell the gang of boys in the schoolyard that he has Chocolate Fever? Why does he want them to be scared of catching it?

**Henry thinks if he can convince the gang that Chocolate Fever is contagious, they'll keep away and stop harassing him. (p. 52)**

3. Describe how the dogs' jumping and licking Henry allow Mac to foil and capture the hijackers

**The dogs, on the trail of Henry's chocolate scent, come rushing into the cabin, "yelping and jumping and barking enough to fill the cabin with confusion." Mac uses the commotion as an opportunity to take Lefty's pistol away from him, then takes Louie's gun after it falls. The dogs keep storming into the cabin, but Mac is able to keep the hijackers captive until the police arrive. (p. 77-78)**

4. Why do you think Henry feels so comforted by Nurse Molly Farthing?

**With everyone else around him acting hysterically, Nurse Farthing is “cool as a cantaloupe.” She holds Henry’s hand, which makes Henry feel better. It also helps him calm him to see that there’s one adult who isn’t overreacting. Nurse Farthing’s calmness seems to rub off on Henry. (p. 35)**

5. Examine the reasons Henry runs away from Dr. Fargo’s office. What do you think he was afraid of?

**All the commotion surrounding Henry and his new disease reaches a fever pitch after Dr. Fargo examines him. “There was more excitement than Henry had ever seen,” Smith writes, “....Henry was tired....He wanted to be left alone.” Instead of comforting Henry, as Nurse Farthing did, Dr. Fargo seems so excited by having discovered “a new disease” and “making medical history” that he forgets momentarily about his patient. (p. 41)**

6. Have you ever been afraid of a doctor’s, nurse’s or dentist’s office? If so, describe why you were frightened and what you did to get over your fear. If not, explain how it is you’ve been so brave!

**Ask students to discuss what might make a doctor’s office scary or intimidating: the presence of other sick children, having to sit in the waiting room for a long time, those lonely toys scattered around the waiting room that no one seems to play with. Very few doctor’s offices are places that are comforting, and since you might already be sick or not feeling well, you might be especially uncomfortable in such an environment. And then, of course, some doctors and nurses can appear cold or uncaring, like Dr. Fargo.**

**But sometimes the people at a doctor’s office are quite kind and go to great effort to make you feel better. Maybe they talk to you about school, what kind of sports you play and activities you like, what kind of books you read or video games you play. Usually, it helps to have a parent there with you. It’s hard to get over the fear of a doctor’s office, but it helps to have a kind and caring doctor, and if you’re sick, it helps to figure that you won’t be sick forever, and that by going to the doctor’s office you are probably well on the way to recovery.**

7. Even though Henry has ugly brown spots all over his face, Mac treats him well. Why? What is it that Mac has experienced in his life that helps him understand what it’s like to be “unique” (p. 61)?

**Mac, an African American, is used to being treated differently because of the color of his skin. He can sympathize with what Henry is going through. Since Henry only developed chocolate fever that morning, he’s still in shock and rightfully worried about his appearance. But Mac has been black all his life, and is used to looking different from others, from standing out because of the color of his skin. Mac has developed ways to be positive about what makes him different—about being unique and—having a positive attitude is something that can help Henry get through his difficult time. (pp. 61-62)**

8. Just as Henry and Mac are about to pull over and call Henry's parents, Mac's truck gets hijacked. Modify that scene in the book and describe what might have happened if they had actually called on the phone. How might Henry's parents have reacted?

**Henry's parents would surely have been relieved to hear from Henry. They might at first have been confused – “Who is this Mac,” they might wonder, “and what is he doing with my son?” but eventually they would have listened to what Henry and Mac had to say. They might have asked Henry to stay put so they could pick him up. Or they might have worked out some kind of arrangement with Mac to bring Henry home.**

9. Try and predict what might happen to the hijackers once they're in the hands of the police. Most likely, they will go to prison, but what will happen to them before that? What is the process a criminal goes through before he or she can be put in jail.

**Even though the hijackers were caught red-handed holding Mac and Henry hostage, in an American court of law, every criminal is considered innocent until proven guilty. That means they will have to appear in court and be defendants in a courtroom trial. They will have the opportunity to hire a lawyer to argue their case for them, and if they cannot afford a lawyer one will be appointed to them for free. During the trial, either a judge or a jury of regular citizens will decide whether they are guilty or not guilty, and, if the decision is guilty, what their punishment will be.**

10. Explain what Mac means when he tells Henry “A good child respects his parents...A good child don't cause his parents heartache or grief.” What is your definition of “respect,” and why, in your experience, is it important not to cause your parents “heartache or grief” (p. 64)?

**Teachers might talk about the fact that one of the responsibilities of a child is to make sure his or her parents don't have to worry too much about their well being. Parents worry so much already about their children, and children need to be aware when they are doing something, like running away, it causes their parents even more stress than they normally experience. Students will have all sorts of definitions of “respect,” and what it means to them and how it's defined in their families.**

**Teachers might talk about how respect means more than just calling your parents “sir” or “ma'am” but learning to value all the effort they go to (in their jobs, in the way they take responsibility for their children) and making them feel like they are appreciated for that effort. (p. 64)**

11. Compare the different ways all the adults in the book react to Henry's Chocolate Fever. Have you ever been sick and had an adult react hysterically? Explain why such behavior might have only made you more upset or afraid?

**Mrs. Kimmelfarber reacts emotionally, turning hysterical; her reaction seems like an overreaction. Nurse Farthing, of course, is quite calm and comforting to Henry. Dr. Fargo turns selfish: instead of comforting his patient he is more interested in the potential fame and glory that might come to him for discovering this strange new disease. Mac is kind and understanding that Henry is going through a difficult time,**

and is especially sensitive to the fact that Henry feels he looks “ugly.” Mac seems to have gained wisdom from lots of life experience and perhaps his own pain. Alfred “Sugar” Cane, without being preachy or heavy-handed, gives Henry the sound advice that “we can’t have everything we want every time we want it,” including chocolate.

**Teachers might want to talk about how some adults overreact or become unnecessarily angry and raised their voices, and that these behaviors can be frightening. Encourage students to talk, too, about people from their own lives who have reacted in comforting or positive ways to their problems, people in their own life similar to Nurse Farthing or Mac.**

12. Perhaps you think of Mac as the hero of the book and the hijackers as the villains. Nevertheless, try to think of some of the characters that *don't* fall easily into one category or the other, such as Dr. Fargo or Mrs. Kimmelfarber. These characters obviously care about Henry but perhaps have trouble showing it. Describe what you think their motivations are for the way they treat Henry and how you feel about these characters. Be more descriptive than simply saying whether you like these characters or not.

**Mrs. Kimmelfarber is obviously worried about her student, and having so many students to be in charge of, she is probably worried about Henry’s disease spreading to others. Mrs. Kimmelfarber has never seen Chocolate Fever before and has nothing else to compare it to, and she is obviously unsettled by this.**

**Dr. Fargo is too caught up in his own “discovery” to stop and realize he has a patient who needs his comfort and care. Teachers should encourage students to discuss how Dr. Fargo is not a bad person, but seems to have his priorities mixed up; he’s more interested in himself than his patient.**

13. *Chocolate Fever* is a work of fiction, and there’s no such thing as chocolate fever. But describe the consequences of eating too many sweets? And how does a person *really* get freckles?

**Eating too much chocolate — or, for that matter, eating too much of any candy — can give people bad stomach aches or even a headaches. Too much sugar (combined with not brushing teeth well enough) can result in cavities, which everyone knows can make going to the dentist a painful experience.**

**Freckles, of course, are not caused by eating too much chocolate or eating too much of anything. Freckles are actually called melanin — small brown spots — and usually appear on people with fair or light skin. They also tend to appear on the skin when one spends a lot of time in the sun. Many young kids develop freckles on their cheeks, which is the body’s natural way of protecting the face from the dangerous UV rays of the sun.**

14. What do you think Robert Kimmel Smith wants us to learn from his imaginative story about Henry? What kind of lesson or message did you get from the book? Describe how you might apply this lesson to your own life, to your interactions with other kids your age, to other adults?

**Students might focus on the book's lessons dealing with how we should treat others who are different from us; how we should comfort those in pain or in need rather than shunning them; how sometimes the things we love (like eating chocolate) can be done to excess; and though *Chocolate Fever* is a fictitious disease, there can be dangerous consequences to eating too many sweets. Teachers should talk about these consequences. Encourage students to share experiences where they have encountered "unique" individuals in their own life, and perhaps how the lessons learned from *Chocolate Fever* might stay with them the next time they have to interact with someone different from them.**

### **Activities**

1. Have you ever had too much of a good thing, a food that you once loved but because you ate it too much it now gives you the willies just to look at it? If so, write a little story about how that happened. If not, write an imaginative tale what might happen if *you* ate too much of your favorite food.

**Encourage students to be creative here, but not gross. Discourage them from copying *Chocolate Fever* by asking them to place their stories in their own hometowns, with their own families and friends and teachers, like Robert Kimmel Smith seems to do in *Chocolate Fever*. When they're finished, encourage them to read them aloud in front of the class, and, for fun, keep track of all the different foods that they write about.**

2. Take a poll of people's favorite and least favorite foods — your friends, your parents, your teacher. Make a chart where you keep track of the different things people like to eat. After you've compiled all kinds of different food items, look for patterns and draw conclusions — what are the foods people seem to like the most; what do those foods have in common; are they salty, sweet? Are there any items you have never heard of? Pay attention to how many people's favorite foods are junk foods!

**Students should do this assignment over a few days, taking their work home and asking friends and families. Ask them to make a formal chart: to make a mark in the chart every time someone lists favorites like pizza or hot dogs, but also to add a new food (like Korean kimchi) to the chart when someone mentions it. Find out which kinds of foods were the most popular and maybe have a party, later in the year, where you eat those foods. Also, find out what some of the strangest foods were, and do a lesson where you tell the students a little bit about the culture from which they came. Discussing the diverse cultures from which great food comes will tie in nicely with the theme in *Chocolate Fever* about treating those different from us well and with respect.**

3. Now choose one of those items and promise yourself to try it. Ask your parents if they'll buy this food from the supermarket, cook it for dinner, or take you out to try it at a restaurant. Be creative. Suggest to your school cafeteria that they try and make it, or maybe they already do!

