

A Curriculum Guide to

***The Second Life of Abigail Walker***

by Frances O’Roark Dowell

**About the Book**

At school, Abigail is an outsider. Chubby and prone to bursts of outspokenness, she cannot manage to fit in even with the crowd of “middle girls,” who are neither very popular nor outcasts. She finds peace drawing and dreaming among the overgrown weeds and wildflowers in an abandoned lot across from her home. Then “middle crowd” leader Kristen begins to plot against her, and Abigail realizes that perhaps the only solution is *not* to try to fit in but to be her truest self and perhaps even to help others do the same.

**Discussion Questions**

The discussion questions below correlate to the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.3.1, 3,5) (RL.4.1, 2, 3, 6) (RL.5.2, 3, 5, 6) (RL.6.2, 3, 5, 6) (RL.7.2, 3, 6) (SL.3-7.1a-d).

1. The novel begins with the sentence, “The fox had been stepping into stories since the beginning of time.” How does this sentence, and the entire first chapter, foreshadow elements of both the story’s plot and themes?
2. What embarrassing incident has Abby feeling worried as the novel begins? List at least three different concerns with which Abby is struggling in Chapter Two.
3. Who is Kristen? Do you think every school has girls like Kristen in it? Do you think Abby makes a good choice by moving to Anoop’s table? What advice would you give to Abby about dealing with Kristen in the early chapters in the novel?
4. How does Abby meet the fox? What does the fox do to Abby when she tries to approach it? How does this incident begin to interweave the mythical story of the fox with the real-life troubles of Abby in the present day? What does the fox represent to you as a reader?
5. In Chapter Eight, Abby runs from the abandoned lot because she is afraid she will be found by Kristen and Georgia. Where does she run? What new animal becomes part of her journey? What happens when Anders leads her away from the creek?
6. Explain Abby’s complex feelings about Saturday night pizza supper as described in Chapter Eleven. How does this chapter summarize Abby’s relationships with her mom, dad, brothers—and with food? Why do you think Abby keeps eating pizza at the end of the chapter?
7. With what project does Abby begin to help Matt and the Benton family? What does she learn about Lewis and Clark, about research, and about Matt’s psychological situation? Have you ever

met a war veteran? If so, have they ever discussed their war experiences with you, and how did this make you feel?

8. Who is Marlys Barry? In Chapter Thirteen, Abby remembers choosing between sitting with Marlys and sitting with Kristen after Claudia moved away. What does she now realize were bad reasons for making the choice that she did at the time? Have you ever hung out with someone simply because you felt flattered by their attention—perhaps even if you didn't feel quite safe or relaxed around them? Would you do it again? Why or why not?

9. How does the research project for Matt help Abby connect more with people at school? What does Abby begin to realize about Matt—and about herself—during their discussion by the beehives?

10. How do Kristen and Georgia catch up to Abby in Chapter Sixteen? Why do you think Abby allows her mother to send the three girls up to her bedroom? Why doesn't Abby speak up for herself in this chapter?

11. What “eating problems” trouble the fox in Chapter Eighteen? Compare the fox's relationship to her food with Abby's own struggles. In what way are the problems similar?

12. When Kristen and Georgia smear yogurt in Abby's locker, she considers it “medium girl stuff.” What does she mean by this? Why do you think Kristen and Georgia are so focused on Abby?

13. What is the significance of the creek in terms of Anders's relationship with his father, and Matt's own sense of safety? How is the trip from Abby's neighborhood, through the woods to the Benton farm, important to Anders, Abby, and, later, to Anoop?

14. What is important about Abby's experience of looking over the photographs in her father's office? Have you ever felt that a parent or other adult relative was disappointed in something that you did, or unhappy with the way you looked? Did you act upon this feeling? Why or why not?

15. Do you think Abby's experience in her father's office affects her decision to ride Ruckus? Are there things about Abby that make her especially able to understand Matt? If so, describe them.

16. Describe the argument Abby has with her mother about Kristen's sleepover. Do you think Abby's mother has a point? Do you think the loss of her own sister makes Abby's mom particularly blind to the reality of Abby's social situation? What would you have done had you been in Abby's shoes?

17. How might you compare Abby's mother's loss of her sister to Matt's traumatic experience in Iraq? Do you think both of these characters are struggling to come to terms with the truth of their present-day situations because of their tragic pasts? How are their actions similar? List at least two examples.

18. What happens to Abby at the sleepover? How does this change the dynamic for Abby at home? At school? In what other ways has Abby changed, emotionally and physically?

19. At the close of the novel, the fox thinks, “Who needs wings?” How might you define “wings” in this context? What is the fox really wondering?

20. What do you think will happen to Abby at the end of the story? What do you hope for Anders and Matt? For Anoop? For Abby’s family? For Kristen and Georgia?

### **Activities & Research**

The discussion questions and activities below correlate to the following Common Core State Standards: (RI.3-5.4, 5, 9) (RI.6.1, 4, 7) (RI.7.1, 4) (W.3-7.2a-b, 3a-b, 7, 8) (W.3-5.1) (W.6-7.2) (W.7.3a-e) (RL.3-7.4, 5, 6) (RL.5.5) (SL.3-7.1a-d).

1. Go to the library or online to learn more about foxes in mythology and literature. Create an illustrated poster or booklet that includes lists of classic stories featuring foxes, a list of adjectives associated with foxes, and facts about this animal and the continents on which it can be found.

2. One reason Abby struggles is because her best friend, Claudia, has moved away. Have you ever had a good friend move away? Write a short essay describing this experience or about how you might feel if a good friend did move.

3. What does Abby do in the abandoned yard across the street from her home? Why does she often go to this place? Do you have a similar retreat in your own life? Write a poem, letter, or song lyrics describing the place, why you go there, and what the place means to you.

4. Chapter Four begins “Poets throughout the ages could not keep their pens off her sleek red fur, her thin, elegant nose.” Write a two- to three-paragraph essay describing the way this metaphor about the fox relates to Kristen’s obsession with Abby.

5. Weight is an issue that affects Abby’s relationships with her parents and classmates. In the character of Abby’s mom or dad, Kristen, Georgia, Anoop or Anders, write a short essay in which you describe Abby, your thoughts about her weight, and why her weight makes you behave toward her in the way that you do.

6. One of Abby’s difficulties is that she is sometimes honest about her thoughts and feelings in a way that does not help her social standing at school. Go to the library or online to research famous quotes about honesty and historical figures known for honesty. On a large sheet of art paper, combine your quotes and facts with those found by friends or classmates to create an “Honesty Mural.” If desired, add drawings, stickers, magazine clippings, or other materials. Mount your mural in a school hallway.

7. In Chapter Seventeen, Abby considers explaining her need for research help, and imagines Marlys saying, “You’re helping some man you hardly even know write a poem? About the

Lewis and Clark expedition? So he'll want to keep living?" Imagine the author included Abby's explanation in the novel and that Marlys actually asked these questions. In the voice of Abby, write her one- to two-paragraph dialogue-style reply.

8. Despite its value, Abby's honesty sometimes lands her in unpleasant situations. Other times, she tells fibs (such as being on a diet) to try to escape such difficulties. Divide your friends or classmates into two groups to debate for and against the statement, "Honesty is the best policy."

9. Go to the library or online to learn more about the nonfiction book *Undaunted Courage*. If possible, look through the book yourself. Then, in the character of Matt, try to explain why you feel the need to write about the animals encountered by Lewis and Clark on their expedition. Or, in the character of Anders or Mrs. Benton, explain why you think Matt chose this project and how you think it might help him.

10. A fox, a dog, and a horse all play important roles in connecting and healing the humans in this story. In the character of one of these animals, write a two- to three-page, first-person essay beginning, "If Abby had asked me for advice about [problem of your choice], I would have told her . . ."

11. On a large sheet of unlined paper, create a story map for *The Second Life of Abigail Walker*. In boxes, note the key plot lines of the story; in circles, write down themes you identify as important; make icons for characters; and use arrows or other graphic elements to show how the author interweaves the plots and themes.

12. Go to the library or online to learn more about PTSD, the mental illness from which Matt suffers. (Hint: Start by visiting the Veteran's Affairs site at <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/>.) Then create a poster to help raise awareness about veterans suffering from PTSD.

13. The novel is written from two points of view: Abby's and the fox's. Divide a sheet of paper into two columns, labeled ABBY and FOX. Fill each column with notes on how the different narrators perceive Abby's neighborhood, the abandoned lot, and the woods.

14. Through her inclusion of the fox and other wild animals, author Frances O'Roark Dowell incorporates elements of "magic realism" into this contemporary novel. Go to the library or online to learn more about this literary genre. Create a reading list of other middle-grade and young adult novels that feature magic realism, such as Louis Sachar's *Holes* or Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus*. Is *The Second Life of Abigail Walker* a title which invokes magic realism? Write a short essay answering this question and explaining whether elements of magic realism make the story *more* or *less* relatable for you as a reader. Use quotes from the book to support your arguments.

15. Like Lewis and Clark, many characters in the novel show great courage, albeit in more subtle ways than exploring uncharted parts of North America. Write an essay describing how a character of your choice shows "undaunted courage" in the novel.

16. Imagine you are the artist assigned to create the cover for a new edition of *The Second Life of Abigail Walker*. Use colored pencil, paints, or other graphic arts materials to make the cover. Consider the images and colors you will use, and the style and size of the title and the author's name. Share your cover with friends or classmates.

*Guide written in 2013 by Stasia Ward Kehoe. Stasia holds a BA in English from Georgetown University and an MA in Performance Studies from New York University/Tisch School of the Arts. She has taught dance and writing classes to elementary through high school students on both the east and west coasts. Her novels are published by Viking/Penguin. She lives in western Washington.*

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