

A Curriculum Guide to

Checked

by Cynthia Kadohata

About the Book

Three things matter most to Conor: his dad, his dog, and hockey. Conor and his dad, once a pro player, spend long hours at the rink and on the road for tournaments, aiming for Conor to go pro someday. When Conor's not skating, he hangs out with his beloved dog, Sinbad. But then Sinbad gets cancer, and treatment costs thousands of dollars. Conor must confront a choice between his extra hockey lessons and helping Sinbad live a few more years at most. The trouble is, it's only when Conor's out on the ice that he can leave his troubles behind and get in the zone—with the best team he's ever been on!

Discussion Questions

The discussion questions below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.5-8.1, 2, 3, 4) (RL.5-6.5)

1. Discuss the book's title. What are different meanings for the word *checked*? Why do you think the author chose it? How does it reflect important elements of the novel?
2. What kind of a person is Conor? What are some things he's concerned with, and what gives him happiness? Discuss how he changes in the course of the book, and what brings about those changes.
3. What is Conor's father like? How does he treat Conor? What is their everyday life like together? What do they have in common that's important to both of them?
4. Talk about why Conor's father cries, and whether you think that will change in the future. Judging from Mr. MacRae's life, why is being a police officer difficult? When it comes to his father, why does Conor say, "I gotta take care of him"?
5. Describe Sinbad, his personality, and his role in Conor's life. Why do you think they are so close? How does Sinbad's illness affect Conor? Near the end of the book, Conor says he wants to be "right here, in the moment, the way Sinbad always is." What does he mean by that?
6. Talk about the importance of hockey in Conor's life. Why does it matter so much to him? What are some of the benefits of playing hockey? What are some of the drawbacks? Do you think it's a good choice for him to pursue hockey so intensely?
7. Describe the house and the neighborhood where Conor lives. On the last page, Conor says that the hills of Canyon Country are "where I'll always belong." Why does this location matter so much to him?

8. Point to some of the ways in which Conor helps Mr. Reynolds. What do these interactions show about Conor's character and his upbringing? Does Mr. Reynolds help Conor at all?
9. More than once, Conor describes his Aunt Mo as "great and embarrassing, but mostly great." What's her relationship like with Conor and his father? What does Conor like about her? How does she embarrass him?
10. Conor says of Coach Dusan, "He's literally the only person I know who I never see standing around looking at his phone." What does that tell you about the coach? Why does Conor want to be on Coach Dusan's team? How does he treat his players?
11. Why do you think the author closed the book with the chapter about Thanksgiving and Conor meeting his grandparents? Why did he decide at first not to see them? Why did he change his mind? Describe their meeting and his reaction to his grandparents.
12. Conor makes observations about the different kinds of parents who attend their kids' hockey practices and games. Find examples from the novel and talk about them. What are some of the characteristics parents display that are good for the athletes? What actions present problems for the child and the coach?
13. Describe Jae-won and his family. Discuss Conor's friendship with him and his relationship with Jae-won's family. What activities and feelings do the boys share? How are they different?
14. Describe Lucas's personality. In what ways is his family life different from Conor's? Why does Conor feel grateful for Lucas, and what does he learn from him?
15. This is a novel about hard choices. Identify some of the hard choices that Conor, his father, and others make in the book, and what Conor has to say about those choices. How does dealing with hard choices change some of the characters and their lives?
16. Conor's father says, "Having a life you're passionate about is the only thing that's worth a can of beans in this world." What does he mean? What prompts him to say it? Who in the book has such a passion, and how has it affected his or her life?
17. Conor thinks about the importance of moving on from mistakes or disappointments, saying, "It's just like a tree getting burned down. Then you regenerate." What does he mean by that? What problems is he facing? What are different ways he and Sinbad regenerate in the novel?

Extension Activities

What Makes a Good Coach

What makes a good coach? What characteristics are drawbacks? Have students write an essay about this topic, drawing on the novel and their own experiences. If they haven't had a coach, students should talk to others who have or glean information from sports stories in the media.

The essay should also touch on the similarities and differences between a good coach and a good schoolteacher.

The Price of Success

When he's on the airplane, Conor reflects that NHL players often leave their homes and families to travel. Have each student choose a highly successful professional athlete in any sport, and research the level of work and commitment—even sacrifice—that his or her success has required. In their research, students should find the extent to which the sport dominated athletes' lives as children and teens, and the cost as a pro athlete in terms of time and other sacrifices.

“Having a Life You're Passionate About”

Conor's dad emphasizes the importance of having a passion. Have students interview someone who has a passion in life in any area: sports, arts, animals, nature, reading, collecting, and so on. Small groups of students should first brainstorm a list of interview questions. The interview should be recorded, after which the student should summarize it and report back to the small group. Discuss the results as a class, and determine whether students agree with Conor's dad on the importance of having a passion.

Amazing Dogs

Conor feels like Sinbad understands him and has strong intuition. Have students work in pairs to research one special aspect of dogs' abilities. For example, they could focus on dogs that detect illnesses or on a type of working dog such as service dogs or military and police dogs. Using print and digital resources, the students should put together a multimedia presentation to share with the class.

Dear Son

Conor's father is not a big talker, but he feels things deeply. Have students write a letter from Mr. MacRae to Conor at the end of the book, after the hockey tournament. It should express Mr. MacRae's thoughts and feelings about Conor, Sinbad, his job situation, and any other topic of importance. Make this a writing journal exercise that students can keep private.

Concussions and Contusions

Sports injuries among young athletes, such as Conor's concussion, have received a lot of attention in recent years. Have small groups of students choose different popular youth sports to research, focusing on statistics about injuries and rules to prevent injuries. They should report their findings to the class, and engage in a class discussion about youth sport injuries and whether more should be done to prevent them.

Guide written by Kathleen Odean, a former school librarian and Chair of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee. She gives professional development workshops on books for young people and is the author of Great Books for Girls and Great Books about Things Kids Love.

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