



The Big Dip

Melanie Jackson

Reading level: 3.9

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Book Summary

Joe and his friend Skip are enjoying the thrill of the Big Dip, a famous rollercoaster, until they learn the old man in front of them has been shot. The old man mutters with his dying breath something about getting a Margaret Rose to the police. Joe leaves the crime scene to get on with his life. But someone is desperate for the Margaret Rose and thinks Joe has it. When his sister is kidnapped, Joe is in a race against time to solve the puzzle.

Author Biography

Born in Aberdeen, Scotland, **Melanie Jackson** grew up in Toronto's Bennington Heights neighborhood; if you've read Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, you're already familiar with Bennington. Melanie is curious and rather pest-like, she claims, so she decided that the only natural career to go into was newspaper reporting. She started out at the *Toronto Star*, then moved on to freelance for such magazines as *Chatelaine* and *Vancouver*. And, always, she kept scribbling mystery stories.

Melanie isn't sure why she likes mysteries so much, except that maybe it's part of being curious about life and its possibilities. She's convinced that people who like mysteries are optimists, because they expect problems to be resolved. A creative writing mentor for the Vancouver School Board, Melanie lives in East Vancouver—close to the Pacific National Exhibition grounds with its famous rollercoaster—with her husband, daughter and cowardly cat.

Connecting to the Text

Building Suspense

Melanie Jackson builds suspense using cliff-hangers at the end of each chapter of *The Big Dip*. For example, in the last paragraph of chapter one Joe says, “[It was] not a heart attack... This guy was shot.” As we read this, we ask ourselves, “Who shot the old man, and why?” To find out, we must keep reading.

1. Have students working in small groups complete the exercise below. Once all the groups are finished, invite each to present their findings and share their “most suspenseful last paragraph” with the class. Which was the most suspenseful chapter? Did things turn out the way you thought they would? How did the author’s use of suspense enhance your experience reading the novel?
 - Draw a chart listing each of the thirteen chapters using the model below. Take turns reading the last paragraph of each chapter aloud.
 - For each chapter, discuss the following questions:
 - ♦ How does the last paragraph build suspense? What do you want to find out? What do you think will happen next?
 - Record the group’s comments on your chart. When you have finished, choose the chapter that you think had the most suspenseful ending paragraph.

Option: Have students choose one of the suspenseful sentences or paragraphs as the basis for a short skit or radio play.

Chapter	How does the last paragraph build suspense?	What do you want to find out? What do you think might happen next?
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		
11		
12		
13		

Chapter Summaries

After reading each chapter in *The Big Dip*, encourage students to prepare a short summary of the events in the chapter. Once all chapter summaries are complete, choose one of these options:

- Write a letter to a character in the novel, asking them a question related to the story. Indicate why you chose the question you did. For example, I'm curious to know why you didn't call the police sooner...Why don't you ask Amy out? You never know; she might say yes...Was Skip always a good friend?
- Prepare an artistic interpretation (a drawing, collage, photograph) and a caption explaining how it is relevant to the plot or character development.
- Write a paragraph with predictions for the future for Joe and Skip. Imagine Joe and Skip as adults, years from now. What careers do you think they'll have? What path will their lives take?
- Write an outline for a 14th chapter for *The Big Dip*, detailing what you think happened afterward.

Synecdoche

Synecdoche is a figure of speech where a part of something is used to represent the whole. For example, a ship's captain may say, "All hands on deck," and the "hands" would represent the ship's crew. In *The Big Dip*, Joe refers to one character as Baseball Cap (Police Detective Mike Gagel) and another as Trench Coat (Babs Beesley). Ask students if they can identify examples of synecdoche in other novels, popular culture or in common expressions. Ideas to get them started could be: "wheels" to describe a car; "doors" to describe houses (as in, "The Singh family lives three doors down"); or "head" or "eyes" to describe a person and their capacity to focus (as in, "Get your head in the game" or "Keep your eyes on the ball").

Inner Dialogue

Melanie Jackson uses italics to indicate what Joe is thinking. This gives the reader a sense of his thoughts, feelings and fears. A good example of this is in chapter two, when Joe's mind wanders during the math test. Challenge students to write a short story in which they include use of italics to describe the main character's thoughts and feelings.

Vocabulary Enrichment

The following words are used in *The Big Dip*. Invite students to complete one or more of the exercises below.

advantage	disarm	injured	seared
ambulance	emergency	irritated	security
anxiously	greenhouse	kidnapped	silhouette
attendant	grotesque	momentum	siren
blathered	hallucination	operator	statement
coincidence	handcuff	panicked	surprise
concentrate	impression	plagiarized	tragedy
contagious	impulse	police	uniform
counterfeit	informant	ransom	valuable

1. In one or two sentences, explain how five of the vocabulary words relate to the plot or character development in *The Big Dip*.
2. Choose five words from the vocabulary list. Use each in a sentence, or define them in your own words.
3. Write a short story, newspaper article or descriptive paragraph using five vocabulary words. Do the vocabulary words suggest a theme or genre? For example, crime, mystery, spy thriller.

Compare and Contrast

As a group, identify a few situations or scenes from *The Big Dip* where the author has introduced parallel or contrasting elements. Then encourage students to find their own examples and keep a list as they read through the novel. Then share the examples in a group discussion. You may wish to use this exercise to introduce the literary convention of irony.

Discussion topics to consider:

- Why does the author present these parallel and contrasting elements? What can they tell us about the characters and their journeys? How do these enrich our reading experience?
- Discuss the use of “fast” and “slow” in the novel. For example, Joe is a fast runner but considers himself slow in other areas, such as school or girls.
- In terms of girls, are Skip and Joe what they appear to be? For example, Skip is more confident than Joe when it comes to girls.
- Compare images of confinement and open space in the novel such as Joe’s feelings while taking the math test in the confinement of the hot summer classroom to his feelings when he’s running.

Connecting to the Characters

Ideas for Projects

The following can be used for individual or small group projects:

1. Throughout the novel, Joe compares himself to Skip, “Mr. Too-Perfect.” Skip initially appears to be perfect, but in the end Joe is the hero and Skip the villain.
 - Write a letter to a friend in which you describe Joe or Skip. Describe his personality. What’s he like? Is he someone you could be friends with? Why, or why not?
 - Have you, like Joe, ever been jealous of a friend? Write a paragraph relating your experience to Joe’s.
 - Sometimes we make it difficult for ourselves when we compare ourselves to someone who we think is perfect. Write a letter to Joe, offering him advice on handling this situation.
2. Create a character profile for both Skip and Joe, then compare the two. Begin by brainstorming adjectives that describe each, such as *jealous*, *athletic*, *charismatic*, *cheery*, *fast*, *sly*, *encouraging*, etc. Then write a paragraph that describes each character, incorporating at least four of the adjectives. After that, write another paragraph in which you compare Skip to Joe. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? What can they learn from each other?
3. Joe said, “For me, running was everything.” As a track star, running is a big part of his life and his identity. The ways that this skill influences him are referred to multiple times in the novel. As a reading comprehension and writing exercise, complete the following:
 - Find examples of the theme of running in the novel (for example, runner’s breaths, finish line, in a race, etc.).
 - How has being a runner affected Joe? Explain, using examples from the novel. How does Joe feel about being recognized as “Mojo?”

Option: Have your interests affected your life and your personality, like Joe’s has affected him? If so, explain how.

Plot and Character Development

As students read through the novel, encourage them to highlight key sentences or quotations that seem important or which resonate for them.

- Ask students to choose one sentence or quotation and write a paragraph describing why it is meaningful.
- Read some of the student responses to the group and discuss the sentences the class chose. Encourage students ask questions such as, “Why did you choose that quote?”, “What part of the novel was that from?”, or “Who said that, when, and why?”
- Ideas could include:
 - (ch. 1) *The old man whispered, “A plant...the Margaret Rose...Get it to the police...”*
 - (ch. 2) *He’d taken the biggest dip of all—the one that you never come up from.*
 - (ch. 3) *He was right, of course. Like always. Mr. Too-Perfect.*
 - (ch. 4) *It’ll be dark then...Dark as my soul...*
 - (ch. 6) *She sure had dark eyes—like lake water at midnight. When she smiled, lights appeared in them.*
 - (ch. 10) *I should have known I couldn’t trust her. I couldn’t trust anyone. I was on my own.*
 - (ch. 13) *I knew I’d be upset at Skip for a long time, maybe my whole life. I’d liked him. I’d trusted him. And he’d betrayed me.*

Connecting to Curriculum

Social Studies/Geography

The setting of Vancouver, British Columbia, is featured prominently in *The Big Dip*. Many locations in and close to Vancouver are mentioned throughout the novel, including:

Pacific National Exhibition (PNE)	Broadway Street
Sunrise Park	Granville Street
Nanaimo Street	Britannia Library and Community Center
Hastings Street	English Bay
VanDusen Botanical Garden	Okanagan Lake
Whistler	Victoria

- Using a map of British Columbia and Vancouver, identify these locations. Show Joe's journey around Vancouver in *The Big Dip*. Where did he begin? Where did he end?
- Choose one of the Vancouver locations. Write a report on its history, indicating how it got its name, and how it has contributed to the city of Vancouver. Is this a place you'd like to visit?

Option: Create a travel flyer for Vancouver with at least three of these locations as possible destinations. What would make these locations attractive to potential tourists?

Research Topics

1. The rollercoaster at the PNE is over 50 years old and is the only remaining wooden rollercoaster in Canada.
2. Princess Margaret Rose of Britain (1930-2002) was the younger sister of Queen Elizabeth II. Find four interesting facts about her life.
3. Joe learns that people study and collect roses. The Margaret rose, as described in *The Big Dip*, is considered very rare and is worth thousands of dollars. Choose something people collect, such as comics, stamps, coins, action figures, Barbies or sports cards, and find five interesting things about it.
4. The VanDusen Gardens in Vancouver, British Columbia, are a setting in the novel. When was it built, and by whom? Describe three interesting areas in this famous garden.

Art

The Pacific National Exhibition (PNE) in Vancouver, British Columbia, is an agricultural fair which also has an amusement park and midway (Playland). The exhibition runs for seventeen days every August. Since 1910, the PNE has been a showcase for BC industry and agriculture. Imagine a county or farm fair in 1910. How would it be different from a fair of today? Create a collage that compares community fairs of then and now.

History

A world-famous running race was held in Joe's hometown of Vancouver. Roger Bannister, an Englishman, competed against Australian John Landy at the 1954 British Empire Commonwealth Games. The race was called "The Miracle Mile" because both had run (at separate events) a mile in less than four minutes, a significant record at that time.

- Divide the class into small groups, assigning each one question below. Then have each group share their findings in short presentations.
 - ♦ Create a timeline for the life of Roger Bannister, indicating where he was born, schooled, and key milestones in his running and vocational careers.
 - ♦ What records did Roger Bannister break as a runner? Compare those records to Olympic runners of today. Would Roger Bannister be able to compete on the world stage today?
 - ♦ He received knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II—when, and why? Describe the services he received recognition for, and describe the knighthood ceremony.
 - ♦ Roger Bannister was interviewed by the BBC on the 50th anniversary of his famous 1954 run. How did he respond when asked if the four-minute-mile record was the highest achievement of his life? Compare his comments to an athlete you admire.

Web Resources

news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/breakfast/3687199.stm

The BBC interview with Roger Bannister is available here.

www.bcsportshalloffame.com/docs/galleries/1950.html

Footage of the famous Vancouver race is available here.