



Explore

Christy Goerzen

Interest level: ages ten to fourteen

Reading level: 3.5

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Book Summary

When Mike Longridge gets himself in trouble yet again, he is given a choice: juvenile detention or an outdoor program called Explore. He opts for Explore, but soon finds himself wondering how he is going to survive ten months with the hippies and keeners in the program. He's never felt so out of place and is certain he will never get the hang of the outdoor activities. Will Mike go back to his old trouble-making ways or will he finally find a place to belong?

Author Biography

Christy Goerzen has been telling stories since the age of two. Her poetry and fiction have been published in various periodicals. *Explore* is her first novel. Christy lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, with her husband and two cats.

Connecting to the Text**Theme and Point of View**

One of the themes in *Explore* is first impressions. Ask students to identify examples of characters' first impressions of others in a group discussion. How do first impressions shape their perceptions of others? Do the first impressions match how these characters feel later? Can our first impressions sometimes be unfair to others?

Examples from *Explore* could include:

- (p. 3) Mike said Lisa was “cute, with long black hair and perfect skin...the kind of girl who would never give me the time of day.”
- (p. 4) At the Orientation Day, Mike said all the kids at the Explore program were “outdoorsy keeners” who “love hiking and classifying plant species and whatever else Granolas like to do.”
- (p. 6) Mike says Officer Lando is a “clueless grown-up with a coffee mug on her desk that said, ‘Fill your day with sunshine.’”
- (p. 8) Lisa said to Mike, “You don’t talk much, do ya? That’s cool. You’re the strong silent type.”

Connecting to the Characters

The following topics can be used for group discussion, individual novel study or writing projects.

1. Mike and his dad move around a lot, especially when “the stack of unpaid bills start to pile up” (p. 10) and Mike has been in trouble with the police. Rather than go to a juvenile detention program, Mike is given the opportunity to attend Explore, a wilderness program. Mike says, “once again, my fate was decided by a clueless grown-up” (p. 6).
To what degree is Mike’s fate decided by grown-ups? How is Mike’s fate determined by his own choices? Compare his choices at the start of the novel, on the mountain and at the end of the novel. At the end of the novel, do you think Mike will make different choices in his life—in the friends he hangs out with or in the activities in which he participates? How do you know?
2. Mike hates games. They make him nervous. He says, “I always worried I’d get the rules wrong and then get laughed at” (p. 19). Do you think Mike fears other things besides games? Do these fears limit his ability to experience new things? What advice could you give Mike to help him face his fears?
3. At the beginning of the novel, Mike dreads the Explore program, but by the end of chapter three he says, “I couldn’t remember the last time I laughed like that” (p. 25). What changed for him? Describe how you think Mike feels.
4. Lisa says, “I like to be a free agent. But I also like to help out my own species” (p. 22). At first Mike thought Lisa wouldn’t want anything to do with him, but

perhaps Lisa and Mike have more in common than Mike thinks. Can you think of two examples that demonstrate this?

Plot Study

Ask students to consider the following scenes from *Explore* and brainstorm how the story could have unfolded differently, using the questions below for prompts.

- (p. 14) Mike and his friends broke into the house around the corner from the 7-Eleven. After breaking the flower pot, Mike stayed to clean it up, even though a car was in the driveway.
What if Mike had not stayed to clean up the mess?
What if Mike had “ratted the other guys out”?
- (p. 31–32) When Mike came home from the first day at Explore, his dad described Mike’s new jacket as a “cult uniform” and the Explore program as “Hippieville.” He also said, “I give it a week. Then you give up. That’s how it’s always been with you, Mikey.”
What if Mike became discouraged and quit the Explore program?
What if Mike stood up to his dad and defended the Explore program?
- (p. 51–52) Mike overheard Lisa describe Mike as an “injured bird” that she only liked as a friend. Her friends said that Lisa was “totally out of his league.”
What if Mike had never overheard that conversation?
- (p. 75) Mike dreaded skiing after the “telemarking disaster.” He faked a headache so he could stay in on the second day. Eventually, he ventured out on his skis.
What if Mike hadn’t gone on his skis?
What might have happened to Kayla?

Reflections on the Protagonist’s Journey

The following topics can be used for individual novel study or writing projects.

1. After he tried rock climbing, Mike said, “[T]his was only the beginning. We still had kayaking, backcountry skiing and outdoor survival. There were so many more things to learn, so many more things I would suck at” (p. 42). Write a letter to Mike to encourage him to change his attitude. What advice can you give him so he’ll be more enthusiastic about trying new things? Consider a time when you had a similar attitude to Mike’s. Could you have used the advice you gave Mike?
2. Mike’s dad doesn’t support Mike trying new things. He says, “I give it a week. Then you give up. That’s how it’s always been with you, Mikey” (p. 31-32). In contrast, Lisa says, “You can do it, Mike. I know you can” (p. 41). Imagine you are Mike writing a diary entry the evening after he tried rock climbing. Describe how he feels about the experience, and about what his dad and Lisa said.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Art Projects Using Images from the Novel

1. Encourage students to create an art project which captures the images from a scene in *Explore*. Scene suggestions are listed below. Invite students to share their art projects with the group. Why did they choose the scene they did? Was it easy or difficult to transfer the image from the novel to their art project? Why, or why not?
 - (p. 14) *School photos of little kids framed the kitchen sink. A sign that said Fran's Kitchen hung above the stove. I think we were in someone's grandma's house... [There was] a pot of yellow flowers. It smashed onto the clean white floor.*
 - (p. 20) *I could hear more crashing through the bushes as the wolves and bears and cougars made their way toward us. I never thought I'd be so scared of a bunch of hippies.*
 - (p. 28) *All of these additions, like the carved benches, the trails, the fire pits...were made by other Explore classes. You'll leave a lasting impression too.*
 - (p. 44) *I got a flash of wide cedar siding and an old gray drainpipe. Right foot on the pipe bolt, left hand on the siding ridge.*
 - (p. 52) *She didn't like me at all. I was just her latest charity case—an injured bird.*
 - (p. 74) *The moon was like a huge spotlight on the snowy trees...It was the stillest, clearest night I had ever seen. The stars were amazing. It was like I could see the entire Milky Way.*

Science

1. One of the games at the Explore program is called Predator and Prey. Maggie says, "Some of you are predator animals, like eagles, wolves and bears. Some of you are prey animals, like chipmunks and deer" (p. 18). For her game, Maggie is using the predators and prey within a mountain forest habitat. Ask students to choose a predator species from a habitat close to where they live. Then ask student to answer the following:
 - What are the prey species for your predator? Describe a technique your predator uses to hunt or capture its prey.
 - Describe the ecosystem your predator inhabits.
 - If your predator was eliminated from its ecosystem, what would happen to the prey population?

Option: Can you find a predator—in a habitat close to where you live—that is smaller in size to its prey?

Language Arts—Writing and Creative Work

1. Use one of the following quotations from *Explore* to write a paragraph or creative reflection, such as a journal entry or a song, about how this quotation might have special meaning to Mike.
 - (p. 9) *Watch out for those hippie types...All that 'love and rainbows' crap.*
 - (p. 27) *It felt weird to put the jacket on, but also good somehow.*

- (p. 32) *Then you give up. That's how it's always been with you, Mikey.*
- (p. 42) *There was something about how she said it. She really thought I could do it. Could I?*
- (p. 52) *A boy like him. Out of his league.*
- (p. 71) *What Maggie really meant is that I was officially the biggest loser in the history of skiing.*
- (p. 83) *Rick raised his mug. "To Mike." Everyone else raised their chipped cabin mugs.*
- (p. 86) *My dad said, like he had a hundred times before, "Time for a fresh start, Mikey."*
- (p. 98) *You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em. Know when to walk away, know when to run.*

2. Officer Lando encouraged Mike to join the Explore program, and she expected “perfect attendance, participation in all group activities and a good attitude” or “it’s off to the Derbin day program” (p. 4–5). When Cam went to Derbin, he had to spend his days “[picking] up garbage at playgrounds and stuff like that” (p. 5). Imagine an alternate story for Mike, one where attends the Derbin day program. Write a dialogue between “Derbin” Mike and “Explore” Mike. How do they describe their choices and their daily experiences?

Connecting to the Students—Ideas for Discussion and Exploration

As a group, discuss the following topics, drawing parallels to the experiences of the characters in *Explore*, where possible. **Option:** Ask students to write paragraphs, answering the questions below.

1. When Mike first encounters the kids at Explore, he classifies them as Granolas and “outdoorsy keeners.” Mike makes assumptions using visual clues: Gore-Tex, wooly tuques, pottery bowls and rosy cheeks. In your school or social life, do you classify people into groups? What are your visual or auditory clues? (*Prompt:* clothing, jewelry, taste in music, hobbies, jargon.) What are the groups in your school called? By classifying the people around us, are we limiting the way we understand each other? Is this a negative or a positive thing—or can it sometimes be both? When you meet someone for the first time, what influences your first impression? Do your first impressions match your later feelings about the person? Why, or why not?
2. Officer Lando thinks Mike is a “good kid who falls in with the wrong peer groups” (p. 5). Because Mike and his dad move a lot, Mike’s method for finding new friends is to ride his BMX “to the corner store and [see] who [is] there” (p. 5). Is there a correlation between Mike’s method for meeting friends and his tendency to get into trouble? After attending Explore, do you think Mike will hang around at the 7-Eleven anymore? Think of three ideas a new kid in your class could use to meet new friends. (*Prompt:* join a school club or team, sign up to help at a school event.) What could the new kid do if s/he moved to your town outside of the school year?

3. Mike said he didn't "get a rush" from "participating in illegal activities" like stealing comics; he "just didn't have anything else to do" (p. 13). He also said that breaking into the house around the corner from the 7-Eleven had been Cam's idea. Is having nothing to do ever an excuse for stealing? If stealing is someone else's idea, does that mean you're not responsible—even if you participate? Do you think it's easier for kids who are bored to get into trouble, rather than kids with lots of activities and hobbies?

More Activities and Discussion Topics

1. At Explore, the students participate in team-building exercises that promote communication and problem-solving skills. Divide students into small groups and ask each group to invent a 5-minute game that is safe, fun and appropriate to your class' culture and physical space. Then, have each group lead the class in their team-building game. Ask students to debrief the experience. Did everyone contribute? Did some people emerge as leaders? Did the exercises help students get to know each other better?
2. Lisa knows how to use maps and a compass. She said, "It takes time to learn" (p. 23). Ask students to choose one of the following items to research, sharing two interesting facts for each:
 - Earth's magnetic field
 - Professions that use a compass
 - History of the compass (ancient Chinese compass to the modern GPS)
3. Four types of skiing are talked about in *Explore*: heli-skiing, telemark skiing, downhill skiing and cross-country skiing. Ask students to choose one of the following topics to report on:
 - History of skiing
 - Different kinds of equipment
 - Safety and first aid while skiing
4. At the Explore Orientation Day, Mike sees *DISCOVER YOUR POTENTIAL* written on the whiteboard. In *Explore*, Mike tests his limits and learns a lot about himself. There are many opportunities for youth to participate in adventure programs. Some examples could be Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA/YWCA, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts/Guides.

Invite students to research the programs available in their communities. What is available? How does one become involved? When do the programs start? Are there programs available to students who have financial need? Encourage students to share program brochures, websites or contact information with the large group. Post information in the classroom or distribute it to students.