



## Learning to Fly

Paul Yee

Interest level: grade 7 and up

Reading level: 3.4

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AR Quiz # 126435

### Book Summary

After Jason's father leaves his mother for a younger woman, Jason's mother buys a deli and moves Jason and his little brother to a small town. Unfortunately, as the only Chinese family in town, prejudice against them runs strong. Jason hates both school and helping his mother in the deli, where his classmates see him and taunt him. All he wants to do is return to China, until he meets Chief, a First Nations kid who is also harassed for his race. Chief and his buddies are potheads, and it doesn't take long for Jason to join in their activities. But Jason's luck runs out when he is busted for buying pot from a known dealer, and his friendship with Chief is put to the test.

### Prereading Idea

Working in small groups, ask students to investigate North American Indian reservations and the people who live there. Explore the history of the interactions between the First Nations and the settlers, and discover why they are no longer called Indians. Why were reservations created and how has living on them affected the traditional communities and their culture? What are the living conditions on the reservations, and how do the communities earn their living? What First Nations communities live in your area and where are the local reservations? Find out if there are any public events, art exhibitions or cultural displays hosted by these communities that the class can attend. Have students write their findings on index cards and as a class use the index cards as a springboard to discussion and creation of a concept bulletin board. Post the cards along with pictures of reservations in your area.

### **Connecting to the World—Writing and Research Ideas**

Jason's mother complains that in North America, "...lawyers have more power than the police. Robbers have more rights than their victims," (page 14). Create a power continuum bulletin board for lawyers/police and criminals/victims. Ask students to investigate and gather news stories and statistics to either prove or disprove this statement. Students should include stories that deal with victims' rights groups, police and legal associations and organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union who fight for the rights of the accused. Discuss the findings and chart them along the power continuum.

The night Jason gets busted begins a new chapter in his life. Ask students to assume Jason's voice and keep a journal of his experiences with his family, friends and the law, including the emotional highs and lows that come with the territory. All entries should be based on details from the novel and events that would likely occur based on the circumstances. Have several students share journal entries each day.

### **Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel**

#### **Characterization**

Chief and China are the only two non-white students in Milson High School. With a partner, ask students to draw a Venn diagram, charting the individual characteristics of each of the boys on either side of the diagram and listing their similarities in the overlapping space. Then on another Venn diagram, chart the issues each boy faces with his family, the community, friends and school, placing their similarities in the overlapping area. Have students create a character collage to capture the essence of the character using ideas from both charts. Have students include quotes from the text that support their ideas as well as pictures from a variety of sources. Post collages around the classroom.

#### **Setting**

In groups of three, ask students to discuss the characteristics of Milson, the small town where *Learning to Fly* occurs. Ask students to make a T chart, and on the left side list the characteristics of Milson that are required to make the story work in a small town. On the right side, have students make a list the characteristics that would be necessary for the story to occur in a big city. As a class discuss which aspects of the story would have to change for the story to work in a big city. Ask students to work with a partner to create a storyboard for the story that might occur in a big city.

**Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions**

1. When Jason works in the deli, he constantly repeats himself. He says, "...people do not hear me. They see a Chinese face, and right away they think my English will be poor and broken," (page 3). Is Jason being sensitive, or is there truth in what he thinks? Why or why not?
2. On page 7, Jason considers the essentials of friendship: being cool, wearing the right clothes, making people laugh and looking like everyone else. How do his ideas change by the end of the story? What happens that causes him to rethink his position on friendship?
3. Jason's mother loses the trust of her son by bringing him to live in North America. Jason feels that she has lied to him since his life is not what she promised it would be. What other factors play a role in how Jason's life is unfolding?
4. Why do Chief and his buddies choose to befriend Jason? Knowing what he does about Chief and his buddies, why does Jason agree to be friends with them?
5. When Jason's mother learns of the rent increase and the new deli moving into the mall, she begins to discuss cuts in the family budget. What is Jason's reaction? How could he have been more supportive?
6. Why is Chief so sure that none of his friends will actually get busted? Why does Jason have to take such a hard charge with a steep penalty?
7. After Jason is busted, what does his mother do for him that shows how much she loves him? What does his father's reaction to Jason's arrest say about his father's character?
8. When Chief and Jason are on the water tower, what are their initial plans? What do they finally decide to do? Does Jason go to China?

### **Writer's Craft**

#### **Verb Usage**

The power in every sentence, verbs convey action, so using strong, specific verbs makes writing more enjoyable to read. Paul Yee models this in his writing. Ask students to read the sentences with the following verbs:

Heave	page 21	Strides	page 39
Jangles	page 22	Saunter	page 57
Chortles	page 33	Clench	page 83
Marvel	page 37	Grope	page 83

Challenge students to draw and then to write a description of a scene, activity or person using no adjectives, but only powerful verbs. Have students select their favorites and display all descriptions and accompanying illustrations.

#### **Author Biography**

**Paul Yee** writes about Chinese people because he is familiar with their language, history and culture; they are the people he knows best. To create his characters, he enjoys researching his characters and the situations in which they find themselves, while also drawing upon his family and people he knows in the community. Paul can speak and write some Cantonese and Mandarin and earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of British Columbia.