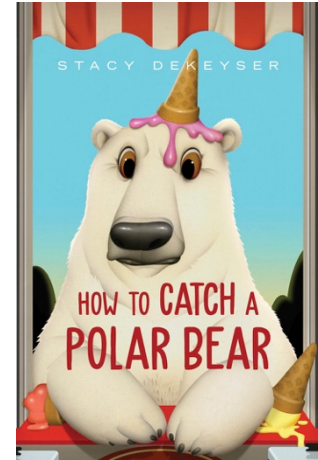


HOW TO CATCH A POLAR BEAR

by Stacy DeKeyser

Reading Group Guide



About the Book

It's the summer of 1948, and excitement is in the air for best friends Nick, Ace, and Penny. They believe it is going to be the best summer ever, that is, until a polar bear escapes from the city zoo and is heard in the alley behind Nick's house! They are determined to find out what led to the escape. But they have other plans for the summer too. Nick is working at his uncle Spiro's frozen custard shop, and Ace and Penny are working on their paper route. At the same time, the team has to work together to try to help Uncle Spiro beat his shady competitor, Happy Harold, as they both sell their frozen custard at the city zoo. Throughout the summer, mysteries arise, and Nick and his friends are determined to solve them. Who will become the most successful businessperson? How is Frosty the polar bear able to escape the zoo? And will anyone actually figure out how to catch a polar bear?

Discussion Questions

1. Take note of the book's title. What prediction can you make based on the title and illustration on the front cover?
2. Ace and Penny are Nick's best friends. However, even best friends have differences. At the beginning of the story, Nick finds out something that has him thinking it will be the "worst summer ever." What was it? Were you ever upset and didn't know why until someone got you talking about it?
3. Setting describes the time and place of a story. What is the setting of this story, and how are the events affected by it? How would the story change if the time period or location were different?
4. Describe Ma. What kind of person is she? What is her general outlook and her work ethic? What do you think is her finest quality? Explain.
5. Ray, the radio announcer, reports that a full-grown polar bear has been reported missing from the city zoo. (Chapter 2) What do we know about this incident? What remains a mystery? How might this event connect to the monkey escaping from the zoo in 1929?
6. Uncle Spiro and Happy Harold are competitors in the frozen custard industry. Compare Sparky's custard shop to Happy Harold's. Which do you think would be more successful? Which would you like to visit more or even work at?

7. One of Nick's favorite things to do is to grab a bag of marshmallows and head to the zoo. He notices the behaviors of the rhino and, of course, Frosty the polar bear. As he thinks about the animals, he realizes, "What you see on the surface is not always the whole story"(Chapter 12). How might this comment foreshadow events to come?

8. Nick enjoys his time observing the animals at the zoo, but he's not sure the animals feel the same way. Nick thinks, "I'm pretty sure that no one asked any of these animals if they wanted to live in a zoo. Nope, zoos are not for animals. Zoos are for people." (Chapter twelve) Nick also narrates, "There you are, watching all these animals, and they're on the other side of the fence watching you. It makes you wonder: Who's really on display anyway?" (Chapter 31) What does he mean by these comments? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

9. Penny takes over Ace's paper route, which is unusual for a girl in 1948. How do Ma and Pop feel about Penny being a newspaper carrier? Explain why. How does the setting of the story influence their opinion of a girl doing a "boy's job"?

10. In books, authors introduce secondary characters that can be sidekicks, advisors, or challengers. What type of character do you think Happy Harold is? How would Happy Harold describe himself? How would Uncle Spiro describe him? How would Nick describe him? Which description do you most agree with?

11. As the mystery of Frosty's escape from the zoo unfolds, Penny announces, "'He didn't *escape* after all. Somebody *let* him out.'" (Chapter fourteen) Why does she think this? What evidence do you read that proves her right or wrong?

12. When Ace quits his paper route and hands it over to Penny, she is concerned that the supervisor will not approve of a girl taking over the route. Penny says, "Some people care." (Chapter 18) What does this mean? How does the supervisor react to the news? How does Nick feel about how girls are treated? What do you think about these characters' reactions?

13. When Sophie quits, Ma takes over Sparky's cart and is great at selling custard. What does she do to get respect from the customers and to encourage them to buy her product? What do you think are important qualities for someone to have to be successful when selling a product?

14. When Happy Harold creates strawberry custard, Uncle Spiro isn't angry. He says, "It's just business. You gotta stay a step ahead of the competition." (Chapter 23) Later on, Nick comes up with the idea of charging a one-cent deposit on the custard cups. How do you think the extra charge will affect Spiro's business? What do you think makes a successful business?

15. Mysteries have suspects, and suspects have motives. There seems to be some suspicious behavior at the zoo. It is still a mystery how Frosty's back door was left open to help him escape. Make a list of who or what could be the culprits, and what their motives would be.

16. Mr. Stankey, the head zookeeper, gets very angry at Ace when he gets caught feeding Maxene strawberry custard. Is he justified? What are three reasons why it is important not to feed the animals at the zoo?

17. Happy bullies Nick and says how unhappy he is that Uncle Spiro steals his idea of a

third custard flavor. Nick wants to fight back, but his parents have taught him to be respectful to grown-ups. He wonders, "So what are you supposed to do when the bully is a grown-up?" (Chapter 38) What do you think Nick should do?

18. Sometimes characters say or do the opposite of what you would expect. This often leads to a complicated relationship among characters. Describe Pete. How does he interact with Nick and Ace? What causes their relationship to change? Explain what Nick means when he says, "So, the bully was tired of being bullied." (Chapter 44)

19. The Fourth of July celebration at the zoo is supposed to be the best day of the summer. But Nick, Ace, and Penny end up fuming at one another. What happened? How did it turn out? Was there ever a time when you and your friends were upset with each other? Explain what happened.

20. The turning point of the story is when Frosty escapes again, and this time corners Penny! How does Penny handle it? How does Ma react to this incident? How do Ace and Nick get Frosty back to his home, and what do they notice when they get there?

21. Pop is unaware that Ma is working the custard cart at the zoo for Uncle Spiro. How does he react when he finds out? What makes Pop react this way? What does Pop do to express his feelings in the end? Would a person react the same way today after finding out their partner had a job? Explain.

22. Every story ends with a resolution. What is the resolution in *How to Catch a Polar Bear*? Is the mystery solved? What details led to you solving the mystery?

Extension Activities

1. The setting is the summer of 1948. Throughout the story, characters refer to people, objects, or occupations that may not be familiar today. Research what life was like in 1948, or look up some of the following references to learn more about the time period:

- a. John Wayne movies
- b. radio announcers
- c. Abbott and Costello radio shows
- d. a washline
- e. a milkman
- f. satchel of newspapers
- g. streetcar

2. Much of the novel takes place at the city zoo where the polar bear is the star of the show. Study polar bears to find out interesting facts, such as their habitat, diet, body parts, and predators. What is the most unusual or fascinating fact you found? Then watch a video or documentary about polar bears. Jot down notes on your observations and compare them to your research.

3. The idea of whether animals should be kept in zoos has been debated for a long time. Should animals be kept in zoos for the safety and preservation of their species? Is it better for them to be in their natural habitat? After researching both sides, write a persuasive/opinion writing piece where you make a claim stating your opinion and include details to support your claim. Share your argument with the class.

4. When Sparky's comes out with Frosty Freeze custard, it is an instant hit. Uncle Spiro explains the idea of supply and demand to Nick and shows him how it leads to great business. Create your own business model for a shop of your own. What would you sell, and what would you do to make your business unique?

5. Ma and Pop are immigrants from Greece. What does that mean? They have a loving home and a loving family. Describe how they became successful in America and how their ideals from the old country affected their ideals in America. Then research Greece and learn more about the language, including common phrases; the flag; the country's geography; and its history.

6. Frozen custard is a popular treat in the United States, particularly in the Midwest. Research custard and other frozen treats, like ice cream, Italian ices, and gelato, to find out how they are made and what makes them different from one another. Which ingredients are in some and not in others? Are there some that are more popular in your area?

Angela Benevento is a Literacy Specialist and former elementary school teacher who lives with her family in New York.

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