

Teacher's Guide – *The Perfect Distance*

The Perfect Distance addresses important issues such as decision-making and self-confidence and challenges teen readers to think about prejudice, friendship, and ethics. The following is a teacher's guide to be used alongside the book. Warning: it contains many plot spoilers.

Further Reading Material for Additional Research

1. *Coyotes: A Journey Through the Secret World of America's Illegal Aliens*, Ted Conover, Vintage, 1987.
2. *Farmworker's Daughter: Growing up Mexican in America*, Rose Castillo Guilbault, Heyday Books, 2005.
3. *Mexicans in America*, Alison Behnke, Lerner Publications, 2004.

Pre-Reading Activity

1. What do you think the title "*The Perfect Distance*" might mean?
2. Ask students to think of their favorite sport (or competitive activity). Then ask them to identify the highest honor or achievement they could earn in this sport. Next, give them a scenario where they either fail to achieve this honor (for example, an injury) or are successful in achieving it (perhaps a hard-won game). How would either winning or losing effect their life? Would their opinion of themselves or their relationship with the sport change?
3. Ask students to free-write about an experience where they once held someone in their life in very high regard but their opinion of the person changed. How and why did it change? Give them examples of a teacher, a coach, a friend.

Thematic Connections – Questions for Group Discussion

Competition

1. Why does Francie want to win the Maclay so badly? What does she feel the win will do for her, both emotionally and practically speaking?
2. Consider the main teenage characters in the book: Francie, Colby, Tara and Katie. How does each character feel about competing? Do their attitudes differ?
3. On page 83 Francie says: "As much as the trainers pretended to be friendly, they were just as competitive as us." The parents also seem to be competitive. Is it surprising that the adults are as competitive than the kids? Why or why not?

Friendship

1. On page 3 Francie says about Katie: "If we hadn't met at the barn I'm sure we never would have been friends." Why are they friends? What do they have in common? Do friendships only work between people of similar backgrounds?
2. Why does Francie agree to give Doug her test? What specific things convince her and why?
3. Will Francie and Becca continue to be friends? Why or why not?

Identity

1. What are Francie's "two worlds?" Identify her two (or more) worlds and then on the board place the major and minor characters in the book in these different subgroups.
2. Why does Francie keep pretending to be Tara when she meets Colby for the first time?
3. Why does Francie not want Colby to know she is a groom at the beginning of the book?

Social Status

1. Identify key moments where Francie feels uncomfortable about her family background.
2. How do the parents and riders treat the grooms at West Hills? Cite specific examples.
3. What happens at the tack store and how does it make Francie feel?

Chapter Questions

Based on Bloom's Taxonomy

Ch. 1-3

1. What is your first impression of Rob?
2. What are "the rules" at West Hills? Name two rules.
3. What does it mean to "find a distance?"

4. What does Francie know about her mother?
5. How does Francie feel about going to college?
6. What does Francie's father give her and why is it significant? What does it mean to Francie?

Ch. 4-5

1. What does Francie collect? Why does she collect them?
2. Why does Francie get to ride Tobey? What does this say about her in comparison to the other riders at West Hills?
3. What is colic?
4. Why doesn't Katie help Francie feed the horses?

Ch. 6-8

1. How does singing along in the car with Becca, Doug and the twins make Francie feel?
2. Why does Francie give Doug the test?
3. What is a "test" in an equitation final?
4. What is Francie's state of mind as she enters the ring at the Regionals?
5. How does Francie's father react to her ride and why?
6. What is a self-fulfilling prophecy?
7. How does Katie's father react to her ride and to her not making the Garden? What does he tell Rob?
8. What place does Francie finish in the final results? Why is she disappointed?

Ch. 9-11

1. Why does Francie feel out of place at the restaurant?
2. Why does Francie's father not want her to be friends with Colby?
3. Why does Susie think Francie should go to college?
4. Why does Stretch mean so much to Camillo?
5. Why does Francie not drink alcohol?
6. Why does Francie wish she was "Francie Martin" instead of Francie Martinez?
7. Where does Colby ask Francie to meet him? Does she go?

Ch. 12-14

1. What happens at the tack shop? How does Katie react and what kind of friend does this make her?
2. What does Francie hope for from Rob after her round in the gymnastics?
3. Why does Francie repeat the line?
4. Will Francie and Katie be friends again? What does Susie say about why Katie might have a hard time being friends with Francie?
5. Will Stretch ever come back? How do the various people in the barn react to his injury?
6. Why does Francie cool things off between her and Colby?
7. Will Francie give Doug the next test? Will she and Becca remain friends if she doesn't?

Ch. 15-17

1. What happens to Camillo at the Medal Finals and how does Colby help?
2. What mistake does Tara make in the test at the Medal Finals?
3. What does Francie find in the barn outside Stretch's stall?
4. What is Camillo's reaction to Stretch's death?
5. What does Tara say to Francie in their lesson? Why does it upset her so much?
6. What actually happened to Stretch?
7. Why does Francie's father not turn Rob in?
8. Why does Francie not want to ride at the Garden? Will she?

Ch. 18-epilogue

1. Why does Francie's father insist on going to the restaurant in the Garden?
2. What does Rob ask Francie to do before the final ride-off against Tara? Does she do it? Why, or why not?
3. In the epilogue, what do we learn about where each of the characters is now: Francie, Katie, Colby, Tara, Rob, and Susie?

4. What does Katie tell Francie and how does Francie feel about it?
5. What is it like for Francie to watch Tobey with his new rider?

Vocabulary

Have students look up any words they do not understand. Here is a list of more difficult words:

optimist/pessimist (p. 32)
prophecy (p.38)
devious (p. 55)
bane (p. 86)
eked (p.94)
apathy (p.105)
vicariously (p.130)
nostalgic (p.147)
futile (p. 171)
surreal (p.240)

Comprehension Guide/Quiz Questions

Based on Bloom's Taxonomy

Knowledge

1. What is Francie's family situation? Why does she often feel out of place at West Hills and at school?
2. What kind of person is Rob Renaud? What specific decisions does he make or actions does he take that define him?

Comprehension

1. Outline the specific events that lead up to Francie feeling more confident in herself as a rider.
2. From dialogue, action and Francie's descriptions describe how Rob sees Francie, Katie, Tara, Gwenn and Colby, respectively.

Application

1. Find three local resources for Camillo to learn more about how to get a Green Card. Include phone numbers, addresses, and the services they offer.
2. Find at least three places in the novel where characters make what they consider "mistakes." What did they learn from these mistakes?

Analysis

1. Compare and contrast Francie, Katie, Colby and Tara's outlooks on competing and winning.
2. Compare and contrast the parents in the book.

Synthesis

1. What would you have done in Francie's situation if you found out Rob killed Stretch? Did she have a choice?
2. Could or should Juan have acted differently when he found out Rob killed Stretch?

Evaluation

1. Will Francie fulfill her dreams and become a professional rider, like she always dreamed of? Why or why not? What else could you see her doing after college?
2. Where will the other characters be in ten years?

Multiple Intelligence Projects

Multiple Intelligence theory is based on the work of Howard Gardner at Harvard. The thrust of his research shows that people have a variety of intelligences, not just the two that schools typically focus on (math/language) and that many students can reach higher degrees of success when they are allowed to use the one at which they excel.

Verbal/Linguistic

If, when Katie was upset with Francie and not speaking to her she instead wrote Francie a letter, what would she write? Write this letter, pretending to be Katie. Then write a response from Francie where she shares her feelings.

Logical/Mathematical

Write a brief timeline of the four shows that Francie attends, noting what happens at each event. Highlight the major plot points.

Body/Kinesthetic

Separate into groups of four to five people. Have each person choose a different character from the book to portray. Acting as that character, create and act out a short monologue that seeks to enlighten the audience as to what motivates and drives the chosen character. Here are some questions to consider:

1. What does the character want most from life?
2. What is he/she most proud of?
3. What does he/she fear the most?

Afterward, explain your characterizations to the group and field questions about aspects of the monologue.

Musical/Rhythmical

On page 66 Francie hears a song and explains: "It was a song I usually hated, but Doug, Becca and the twins started singing along, and all of a sudden I got the urge to sing too." Francie soon finds herself liking the song. What song have you changed your mind about because of an experience you had when the song was playing? Write a short journal entry describing the song, the moment it changed for you, and why it changed.

Questions for Discussion or Short Writing Assignments

1. Rob Renaud is hard on many of the riders, and hardest on Francie. Find specific scenes where he is tough. Why do the riders put up with it? Does it make them better riders or could the same result be achieved using different means?
2. What kind of riders are Francie, Katie, Tara, Gwenn and Colby? Consider talent, motivation, and drive.
3. What does it mean to be a groom at West Hills? How are the grooms treated by the riders, the parents, Rob? Cite specific examples from the text.
4. The title "*The Perfect Distance*" literally refers to finding the right distance to take off from at a jump. What could it mean figuratively for Francie in the book?
5. Why does Francie's father want her to go to college?
6. Why do you think Francie lacks confidence in herself? How and why does her confidence grow through the course of the book?
7. On page 216, when talking about why Rob had Stretch killed, Francie's father explains that "There are big financial stakes in this sport." Since there are such high financial stakes, what can be done to protect the horses from harm? Can you come up with other sports or businesses where animal rights come into play? Should animals be used for sports?
8. Why does Francie's father feel he cannot turn Rob in? Do you understand his position?
9. Why does Francie's father not want her to know much about his former life in Mexico and the family they have there?
10. Have you ever looked up to someone, only to have something happen and your respect for that person change? What did you learn from the experience?

Longer Writing Assignments or Essays

1. If Francie wrote Rob a letter at the end of the book, what would she write?
2. Write a scene where Francie meets her mother. How and where would they meet? How would Francie feel about meeting her?
3. Describe a situation where circumstances prevented you from speaking out against something you felt was wrong. What would have happened if you had spoken out? Do you regret your decision?

4. On page 44, Colby tells Francie he is not sure how he feels about immigration laws: "If people can't get work where they're from and want to work hard why not let them in, but then again, what about all the people here that need work?" Write an essay exploring on immigration. How should our country decide whom to let in? Should people who arrive through illegal channels be sent home?

5. Describe a situation where you or someone you know cheated. Why did they cheat? Would they do it again?