

The Great Chocolate Cake Bake-Off

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Synopsis

Nicholas Scott lives with his father and little brother Zac. His mother has passed away and as his father is always busy making unusual sculptures in the garage, Nicholas is often in charge of cooking, cleaning and organising the household. Nicholas has never thought that he's very good at anything – until he discovers that he can bake the most amazing cakes. At the insistence of his new annoying neighbour Ruby, Nicholas enters the Great Chocolate Bake-off competition. To his surprise he makes it into the National finals, along with Oliver Billington, a boy from his school who always wins everything.

Nicholas has little faith in his own ability to win the competition. His doubts are compounded when Ffyona, Oliver's sister, begins to make snide remarks about him at school and accuses him of cheating. But with the support of Ruby, who appoints herself as his manager, his father and Zac, Nicholas begins to wonder if maybe this time he is in with a chance. That is until his secret ingredient mysteriously goes missing during the final competition. Nicholas can't possibly make his a winning cake without his magic ingredient...or can he?

Text Type

The Great Chocolate Cake Bake-off is a light-hearted story about the importance of having belief in yourself and giving yourself the opportunity to succeed. The novel is humorous and highly readable with broad appeal for readers of both genders.

The main character Nicolas is realistic and likeable. Many readers will be able to relate to his belief that he is an "all-round non-entity and completely average". Nicholas is teased at school because his father makes sculptures from recycled materials and his family has little money. One of his biggest enemies is Ffyona, Oliver Billington's little sister, who seems to get great pleasure from tormenting him. Nicholas' character develops and changes as the story progresses. Much of this change occurs after he meets Ruby, a confident and intelligent young girl who believes in Nicholas' abilities. Nicholas gradually begins to see that with the support of Ruby and his family, he just might be able to win the competition – even without his secret ingredient.

The novel deals with many issues including bullying, the importance of self-belief and confidence, and the role that family and friends often play in an individual's success. An interesting sub-plot in the novel examines the characters of Oliver and Ffyona and what it is like for them having parents who expect great things from them. Oliver is under so much pressure from his parents to succeed that he resorts to stealing Nicholas' secret ingredient at the competition final. They see anything other than first place as being failure. Similarly Ffyona is constantly compared to his older brother and often found to

be failing. Nicholas eventually realises that while the Billingtons may appear to have it all, he wouldn't swap places with them for anything.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 5-17), Chapters 2-9 (pp. 18-93), Chapters 10-18 (pp. 94-173) and Chapters 19-30 (pp. 174-276).

During the shared sessions encourage students to discuss their ideas and ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and issues presented in the story. Have them make inferences and predict what is going to happen next in the story. Wherever possible, have students relate Nicholas' adventures to their own experiences and broader knowledge. Students should analyse the main character and look at his actions, how he relates to others and how his confidence increases as the story progresses. They should be able to identify important themes and ideas raised in the story.

Introducing the Novel

Have students study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- Who is the main character in the novel? What do we know about his personality from reading the blurb?
- What other characters are mentioned in the blurb? Why do you think Ruby is "incredibly annoying"?
- Do you know anyone like Oliver Billington "who always wins everything"? How do you feel about this person? How does this person make you feel about yourself?
- What do you think Nicholas' Special Secret Ingredient might be?
- What are you good at? What do you think is the secret to succeeding at something? What advice would you offer Nicholas if you were his friend?

Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 5-17) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 5-17)

- Who is the narrator of the story? What is the effect of the first person point of view?
- Who are the Billingtons? How is their family different from Nicholas'?
- What do we learn about the main character and his family in this chapter?
- What is your initial impression of Ruby?
- Why does Nicholas find Ruby so annoying?

Discussion

- Nicholas' father is a sculptor who sometimes struggles to sell his work. Often their family is short of money. In what ways can not being very well-off affect a child's life? Why do you think some children tease others who don't have much money?
- In this chapter we learn that Nicholas' mother has died. In what ways has Nicholas taken over her role in the household? How do you think his mother's death might have affected Nicholas?
- Describe Ruby. Why do you think that Nicholas gets the feeling that now she is living next door everything will change?

Students read Chapters 2-9 (pp. 18-93) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 2-9 (pp. 18-93)

- What information has Zac found out about the new neighbours?
- Which art piece does Adam sell? What does he tell the boys they can buy with the money? What does Nicholas tell his father that they need?
- Why doesn't Nicholas want his dad and Bella to get on too well?
- Who is Boyce Maxwell?
- Why does Ruby need to come over to the Scott's house after school?
- Why do Nicholas and Rajiv call their teacher "winsome losesome"?
- Who is Oliver Billington? Why is he considered the "school star" Why is Nicholas so jealous of him?
- What is Ffyona like? Why doesn't Nicholas like her?
- Who are Ffyona's friends? Why do they make a bee-line for Ruby when she starts school? Describe their first encounter with her.
- What does Ruby want Nicholas to make for their first dinner? Why does Nicholas worry that the meal is going to be ruined? How does his father solve the problem?
- What does Nicholas reveal to Ruby about how Zac got his name?
- Why is Nicholas so suspicious when his father has a shower and gets changed for dinner?
- Why do you think Ruby is encouraging Nicholas to cook meals that she doesn't even like?
- What two competitions does Oliver receive certificates for at the assembly? What are his parents going to give him as a reward?
- Why is Amy walking around with a dazed look on her face?
- Why does Ruby stick up for Oliver when Nicholas, Rajiv and Amy are talking about him? Do you agree with her point of view? Why/why not?
- How does Nicholas feel about his dad's job? Why doesn't he voice his real feelings to Rajiv?
- Why has Miss Winsome been feeling sick lately?
- Why doesn't Nicholas believe that he is good at anything?

Discussion

- Describe Nicholas' father. Do you believe that he is a good father? Why/why not? Is it fair that Nicholas has so much responsibility around the house? Explain your answer. In what ways does Adam support and encourage Nicholas? Find examples from the story to back up your ideas.
- Do you believe that boys can cook? Why/why not?
- Do you think that Adam should have checked with Nicholas before he volunteered to look after Ruby after school? Why/why not? Have your parents ever volunteered you to do something that you didn't want to do? If so, what was it? How did having to do it make you feel?
- How might being good at conducting experiments help Nicholas with his baking?
- Why is Nicholas so worried that his dad and Bella might like each other? Why does Nicholas believe that the three of them "don't need anyone else"?
- Describe Ruby. What do we know about her so far? Why do you think she is reluctant to share information about herself with others? What characteristics does she possess that you admire?

Students read Chapters 10-18 (pp. 94-173) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 10-18 (pp. 94-173)

- Why doesn't Nicholas enjoy cooking dinner? What does he begin to make instead?
- What does Nicholas like about making muffins? What doesn't he like about them?
- Why does Nicholas decide to make a chocolate cake? Where does Ruby suggest that he look for the recipe?
- Why do you think Nicholas is so worried about being seen out with Ruby? Why don't Nicholas and Ruby see Ffiona and Oliver get out of the car and walk past them? Why does Oliver look embarrassed? Why does Ruby snap at Nicholas after Ffiona and Oliver walk off?
- Why does Nicholas wish that Oliver didn't overhear him and Ruby talking?
- Why does Nicholas begin to doubt his ability to make a cake? What suggestion does Ruby make to try and allay his fears?
- Why is Nicholas shocked when he sees the inside of Ruby's house? Why is Nicholas so sure that his cake will work out? Why doesn't he get to taste it?
- How does Nicholas' dad react when he sees the cake? What does Adam tell Nicholas about his mother while they eat the cake?
- Who encourages Nicholas to enter The Great Chocolate Bake-Off? What information does Ruby give Nicholas about the competition?

- What responsibilities does Ruby assume as Nicholas' manager, photographer and publicity agent?
- Why does Nicholas think that his ability to bake might be a gift that he received from his mother?
- Why does Nicholas hate shopping for shoes so much?
- What does Nicholas decide to call his cake?
- What does Nicholas believe are the advantages and disadvantages of having Ruby as his manager?
- What do Ffyona and her friends hassle Amy about? How does Ruby embarrass Ffyona in return?
- How does Nicholas react when he finds out that he has made it into the regional final of the competition? How does Ruby react? Why do you think their reactions are so different? What does being in the finals entail?
- Who does Nicholas see together when he rushes to school to try and catch Ruby? Why is he so surprised by this?
- Who else makes it into the finals?
- Why does Nicholas think that Ruby has a "total lack of confidence" in him? Do you agree with him? Why/why not?
- Why do you think Ffyona starts the rumour that Nicholas stole Oliver's recipe? What advice does his father give him when he tells him about what the girls have been saying? Why does Adam think that it might be hard for Ffyona being Oliver's sister?
- What does Ruby do to help prepare Nicholas for the finals?
- How is the competition being judged?
- How does Nicholas feel while he is waiting for his interview?

Discussion

- In what ways does Nicholas' cooking and baking improve over time? Why is it so important to practise doing something if you want to be good at it?
- In what ways is Ruby a good friend to Nicholas? Do you think that he would be such a good baker if it weren't for her? Justify your answer.
- Why do you think Nicholas doesn't want anyone to know that he has entered the competition? Why do you think he has so little faith in himself? What advice could you offer him that might help improve his confidence?
- Describe Ffyona and her friends. Why do you think they are so nasty to the other kids at school? What is the best way to deal with bullies like them?
- Nicholas' father suggests to him that it might be difficult for Ffyona to have a brother who is so good at everything. What would it be like to be constantly compared to a sibling who is a "star"? Is it fair that Oliver's parents put such pressure on him to succeed? How might this pressure affect him?
- Make a prediction about what is going to happen in the story next.

Students read Chapters 19-30 (pp. 174-236) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 19-30 (pp. 174-236)

- Who are the three judges? What does Nicholas say that suggests to one of them that the cake isn't entirely his own work? How does he clear up the situation?
- Which two contestants move on to the National Finals?
- Why does Nicholas complain that Oliver is not only "brilliant at everything, he's nice with it too"?
- Why do you think Nicholas still doubts himself and his ability to make a cake even after he makes it to the National Finals?
- Why is Nicholas so worried when he realises that Daisy is at the library?
- Do you agree with Ruby when she says "to be successful, it doesn't matter whether or not you can actually do something. It just matters if other people *think* you can do it"? Explain your answer.
- How does Ruby shut Ffiona up when she tells everyone that the chefs at Treat Yourself have been helping Oliver practise? Why doesn't Rajiv think that what Ffiona is saying is true?
- What happens when Nicholas and his family go back to the store to buy some more of his secret ingredient?
- What makes Nicholas wonder if his dad ever gets lonely? How does Nicholas feel about Bella? How has his attitude about his father finding someone changed since the start of the book? What puts him off his dad dating Bella the most?
- How does Nicholas feel leading up to the finals?
- What does Nicholas overhear Ffiona and her mother talking about when Miss Winsome runs out of the classroom? Why does he almost feel sorry for her?
- What does Nicholas do for the class concert? Why is it nice to do some things just for fun, and not worry about winning and losing?
- Why does Adam get so distracted when he goes over to Bella's for dinner? Why does Nicholas get a lump in his throat when they go to leave?
- What does Nicholas' plastic box contain?
- What does Mrs Billington comment on in the foyer of the hotel? Why does Nicholas feel so proud of his father?
- Why does Zac think that Ffiona is nice? Do you think he told Ffiona about Nicholas' secret ingredient? Why does Nicholas feel so uneasy after his conversation with Ruby?
- Why does Ruby feel sorry for Oliver?
- Who looks after Nicholas' ingredients when he goes to the toilet? Who else gives their ingredients to her?
- What does Nicholas' father say to him just before he goes into the kitchen?
- How does Nicholas feel when he realises that his secret ingredient is missing? What do you think happened to it?

- Why is Ruby so sure that she will be able to find more of the secret ingredient?
- Why does the competition begin without Nicholas? What does he do while everyone else starts baking their cakes? What adaptations does Nicholas make to his routine to allow him to bake the cake in less time?
- What time does Ruby arrive back with the secret ingredient? What does Nicholas think about just before he goes to add the secret ingredient? What does Nicholas find inside the empty bottle?
- Why does Ruby trick Nicholas? Why does Nicholas decide to go ahead and finish his cake without the secret ingredient? What does Nicholas do to help his cakes cool more quickly? What does Oliver say to the organiser to try and get her to stop the competition?
- How does Nicholas feel when he looks at his finished cake? Why is Ruby so proud of him?
- What does Nicholas make Ruby say before he goes up the front to hear the winners being announced?
- How does Nicholas feel when he is announced the winner? How do Oliver's parents react to his second placing?
- Why is Nicholas so surprised when he finds out that Ruby likes Oliver?
- What is Nicholas' secret ingredient? Why do you think he didn't really need it after all?

Discussion

- What do the Billingtons offer to buy Oliver if he wins? Why does Ruby think that "maybe he doesn't want anyone to offer to buy him one either"? Compare the Billington's attitude towards the competition to that of Nicholas' father. Is winning everything?
- What part do Ruby and Nicholas' family play in his success?
- How does the author of the story create tension during the final competition?
- What is the climax of the story?
- What is the main theme of the story?
- What lesson do you think that Nicholas' experience has taught him?

Activities

Plot – Create a flow diagram that shows all of the main events in the novel in the order that they occur.

Static Image – Design a poster advertising The Great Chocolate Cake Bake-Off. Remember to combine verbal and visual features to convey your message.

Review – Write a book review for *The Great Chocolate Bake-Off*. Include a brief plot summary of what happens in the story. Don't give too much away though or people won't want to read it! Describe the characters in the novel and give your opinion about whether or not they are credible. Describe your favourite part of the novel and explain why you like it. Identify the main theme or message in the story and explain why others will enjoy reading it.

Newspaper Article – Imagine that you are a reporter for Nicholas' school's newspaper. Write a newspaper article about Nicholas' success at the Great Chocolate Bake-Off. Remember to include quotes from Nicholas and his manager Ruby.

Diary Entry – Imagine that you are Oliver Billington. Write a diary entry for the night after you came second in The Great Chocolate Cake Bake-Off. Explain how your parents made you feel about the fact that you didn't win and include your thoughts and feelings about what happened during the day.

Theme – Design a collage that depicts the main theme of the novel. Use different words and images from the story to convey your chosen theme.

Character – Come up with 5 questions and answers for a main character in the novel.

Character – Write a paragraph about Nicholas. Describe what he is like at the start of the story and how he develops and changes as the story progresses. Explain the reasons why these changes occur and what lessons you think Nicholas has learned by the end of the story.

Character – Write a character description of Ruby. Include name, age and appearance. Describe what she is like as a person, her characteristics and positive and negative attributes.

Writing – Write an alternative ending for the story.