

A Curriculum Guide to

The Boundless

by Kenneth Oppel

About the Book

Will Everett longs for excitement but he's shy and awkward, an artist rather than a hero, nothing like his strong father who works on the first transcontinental Canadian railroad. Yet to his surprise, Will is thrust into adventure when he's caught in a deadly avalanche and later witnesses a murder. During a trip on the Boundless, a magnificent 900-car train, Will tests his courage against gun-wielding villains, the wilderness, and a Sasquatch, a bigfoot monster. Will joins forces with Maren, a strong-willed tightrope walker who captures his heart, and together they risk their lives to save the Boundless from disaster.

Prereading Questions

What does it mean to be courageous? What are examples of physical courage? What are examples of courage that aren't physical? Is courage important? Why or why not?

Setting

1. It's unusual to have a book where the main setting is a train. Describe some of the features of the train, which has more than 900 cars. The book describes the Boundless as being "like a rolling city." In what ways is that true? In what ways is it different from a city?
2. How do the train and its inhabitants mirror society at the time? What are the different social and economic classes? How does Will interact with each group? Where does Zirkus Dante fit into the social structure?
3. At times in the story, it seems like the train is a sign of progress. In what ways is that true? Who benefits from it? Yet the train is also described as cutting "a scar" across the landscape. What are the negative aspects of the coming of the train?
4. At times, Will is not on the train but in other settings. Describe some of these and how they feature in the plot. What role does nature and specifically the wilderness play in the story?

Characters

1. Describe Will's relationship with his father in the first chapter and then in the rest of the book, which starts three years later. How does their relationship change throughout the book? What causes the changes? Why does Will's father change his mind about paying for art school?

2. Will and Maren have very different backgrounds. Describe ways in which their lives have been different. Why do they become friends? How does their relationship grow as the book progresses?
3. Describe Cornelius Van Horne. He's described both as a "visionary" and a "slave driver." In what ways is he a visionary? What are other admirable aspects of his character? In what ways do his actions show a darker side of his character? How does the Boundless, especially the funeral car, reflect his character?
4. Brogan could be called the villain of the story. What does he do that is wrong? He complains that he and the other workers were not fairly treated by Van Horne. Do his complaints have merit?
5. Mr. Dorian is a complex character. In what ways does he treat the people under him well? In what ways does he use people? How does he help Will and how does he use him? Do some research to learn about the plot of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a novel for adults by Oscar Wilde. What relationship does its plot have to the plot of *The Boundless*?
6. Why is Maren so loyal to Mr. Dorian? What has he done for her? What does she do for him? Do you agree with her decision to help him look for the painting? Why or why not?

Plot

1. Mr. Van Horne says to Will early in the book, "It's always good to have a story of your own." What does he mean by that? How does it foreshadow the rest of the book? In what ways does Will create his own story?
2. Will wants to know Maren better, so he takes actions to see her, help her, and impress her. What are some of these actions? What effect do they have on his fate and on the plot?
3. Several mythological creatures from Canadian folklore affect the plot. Name the creatures and describe them based on the details in the book. What role do they play in moving the story forward? How does Will interact with them? Compare that to how Brogan interacts with them.

Themes

1. Fairness is a major theme in *The Boundless*. Find examples of unfairness and bias that Will encounters on the train. Describe his reactions to the unfairness.
2. Another theme is independence. Will wants to become independent but doubts his ability to do so. How does his level of independence contrast with Maren's? What happens in the story to make him more independent?
3. Courage is also at the heart of this novel. Give details about the ways that different characters, including Will and Maren, show courage. What motivates their actions?

Point of View and Structure

1. *The Boundless* has a third person point of view (POV) that's "limited omniscient," meaning the narrator sticks closely to the perspective of one or a handful of characters, seeing into their thoughts and emotions. Find examples of this in the story. The narrator mainly focuses on Will but occasionally describes scenes about Brogan. Why do you think the author chose this POV instead of having Will tell his own story? Why does the story sometimes shift to Brogan?
2. The author also chose to use the present tense, even though the book takes place in the past. Find examples of the present tense and consider what they would sound like in the past tense. Discuss why the author may have made this decision.
3. The first chapter takes place three years earlier than the rest of the book. Discuss why the author chose to structure the book this way.
4. The first chapter, starting with the first line, uses foreshadowing to hint at, and prepare the reader for, what will happen later in the book. Find examples in the first chapter of foreshadowing of events and relationships that develop later on in the story. Why does the author use foreshadowing?

Use of Language

1. Discuss why the author titled the book *The Boundless*. Why would that be the name of a train? Besides being the name of the train, what could "boundless" refer to in the story?
2. The author uses carefully chosen strong verbs throughout this adventure. Have students make note of such verbs as they read. For unfamiliar verbs, have students first try to understand them from context and then look them up. Discuss why the author chose a particular verb and consider possible synonyms.

Here are some examples:

- Filching
- Thrashes
- Mangled
- Clambers
- Pelts
- To bolt
- Wafts
- Undulates
- Barrages
- Thwart
- Pummels

3. The author frequently uses figurative language, painting vivid word pictures. Have students write down examples of such language and consider how they add another dimension to the text. What areas, such as nature, do the similes and metaphors come from?

Here are some examples:

- Metaphor: “Pain spiderwebs across his side.”
- Onomatopoeia/alliteration: “With a yelp he looks down and sees it slither past his leg and disappear into the darkness of the hole. A hot whiff of animal rises up to him.”
- Metaphor: “tent-shaped woman.”
- Simile: “he is moving faster, stamping time with his heels like a flamenco dancer, the cards forming fans.”
- Simile: “Exotic fish dart away like colored bolts of lightning.”

Activities

Board the Boundless! Brochure

Have each student create a trifold brochure that advertises the Boundless, describing its route and its attractions to potential customers. The brochure should combine headings, paragraphs of text, and some kind of illustrations. Students can start with the information in the book and then supplement it with research. The Canadian Pacific Railway has a website with extensive information including photographs and posters that could serve as models for the illustrations: <http://www.cpr.ca/en/about-cp/our-past-present-and-future/Pages/default.aspx>.

Word processing programs usually have brochure templates as does NCTE’s ReadWriteThink website (http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/Printing_Press/).

Act It Out!

In this activity, students will find scenes in the book to convert into dramatizations to be acted out by small groups. The activity depends on close attention to the text, a requirement of Common Core. As students are reading the book, have them take note of scenes that they might like to act out. Good choices would be short scenes that have a limited number of speakers and a fair amount of dialogue; the scenes can also include action that’s feasible to reenact in a classroom. After reading the book, have students discuss the possible scenes that would work well and make choices. Have them break into small groups and convert a scene into a dramatization, using the dialogue from the book plus one or more narrators to set the scene and speak the parts that aren’t dialogue. Have students present the dramatizations to the rest of the class, with or without costumes and scenery. Students could also videotape the scenes and show the videos to the class.

For ideas on converting book passages to dramatizations, check out Aaron Shepard’s website and books: <http://www.aaronsherp.com/rt/Tips1.html>

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