

Literature Circle Questions

Use the questions and activities that follow to get more out of the experience of reading *The Art of Keeping Cool* by Janet Taylor Lisle.

1. At the beginning of the story, Robert sees big navel guns being hauled through town on their way to Fort Brooks. What do those tools of war look and sound like?
2. Why did Robert, his mother, and his sister move from their farm in Ohio to the Saunders' house in Rhode Island?
3. For most of the story Robert's Father lives overseas. Where is Robert's father, and what is he doing there?
4. The author uses many idioms in the narration and dialogue of the story, such as: "They threw a man in jail so he could 'cool his heels,'" and "He could be 'a real pain in the neck.'" Some idioms were more common during the 1940s than they are today. Select an idiom from the book and explain to your group its literal and figurative meanings.
5. Near the end of the story, when Robert is older, he thinks about mistakes made by members of his family. He is struck by "how your enemy can be someone who lives close to you, where you're most vulnerable, not just on the other side of an ocean." What does Robert mean by that?
6. What kinds of resources--such as books, maps, and interviews--did the author probably use to write the historically-accurate parts of this book? Why would these have been vital to her work?
7. Toward the end of the book, Elliot says: "Everything that happened to [Abel] in Germany is happening all over again here [in America]." What examples can you find in the story to prove that this is true?
8. Through the fighting takes place mainly overseas, the events of World War II strongly affect the lives of each character in the book. Select one of the main characters. Provide examples of how that person's life is changed due to America's involvement in war.
9. The story takes place in 1942, when rapid means of communication, such as email, do not exist. How would events in Robert's life have differed if email had been available?
10. Near the end of *The Art of Keeping Cool*, Abel Hoffman reacts without thinking to the burning of his paintings with a terrible result. Why do you think he acted this way? What else could he have done?
11. Do you agree with the actions of the police in Rhode Island when they arrest Abel Hoffman for the submarine attack? Give reasons for your answers.
12. The townspeople suspect Abel of being a spy for the Germans, in part because he has a German accent and is a recluse. Do you think their reasons are justified? Why or why not?
13. For many years, Robert believes that his father's limp was caused by a plane crash years ago. Describe the incident that actually caused the man's "bad leg." How would you have handled that incident, had you been Grandpa?

Note: The questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-9; Analysis: 10; Synthesis: 11; Evaluation: 12-13.

Activities

1. Based on descriptions in the book, make a map of the local Rhode Island setting, including Robert's home in his Grandparents' house; the village at Sachem's Head, Fort Brooks; Abel's hidden home in the woods; etc. Use the map as a visual aid as you retell the story.

2. Create an article for a local Rhode Island paper in 1942 describing one effect of World War II on the people of Sachem's Head. Examples: the arrival of big guns at Fort Brooks, the death of soldier overseas, the growing trend of housewives working in factories.