The Art of Keeping Cool

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Literature Circle Guide to
THE ART OF KEEPING COOL by Janet Lisle Taylor

Book Summary
The year is 1942, and Robert Saunders' father is a fighter pilot in Europe. Robert's mother has just moved her children from their home in Ohio to a small coastal town in Rhode Island to be near the paternal grandparents her children have never met before. There Robert meets his father's family for the first time, including his controlling, mean-spirited grandfather and his sensitive, artistic cousin Elliot. He also begins to uncover a family secret regarding his father's long-ago rift with his own family. His cousin Elliot has befriended a famous German artist, Abel Hoffman, and Robert is drawn into their circle against his own will. When Abel Hoffman is arrested for espionage, the town is suddenly in an uproar, and a mob of angry townspeople take matters into their own hands, burning down Hoffman's home with him and his paintings inside. At the same time, Robert learns that his father has been shot down over the English Channel. While waiting for news of his father, Robert learns the truth about his father's past: In a fit of rage, his own grandfather shot his father in the leg. Robert's father left home, never to return. Eventually Robert learns that his father has miraculously survived, and he sadly comes to understand the way that his family has covered up the truth for so many years.

Author Information
Janet Lisle Taylor grew up in Connecticut, the oldest of five children. After her graduation from Smith College, she spent a year working for VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), and then decided to pursue a career in journalism. She hoped that as a newspaper reporter, she would help the public understand better the devastating effects of poverty. Instead, she found that she most enjoyed writing human interest stories. In 1981, Taylor moved to New Jersey with her husband and young daughter, and took a writing workshop through which she was introduced to a children's book editor who eventually accepted her first book *The Dancing Cats of Applesap* in 1983. Since then, she has published thirteen books, including *The Art of Keeping Cool*, which won the Scott O'Dell Award.

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Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. At the beginning of the story, Robert sees big naval guns being hauled through town on their way to Fort Brooks. What do those tools of war look and sound like?
When Robert first sees these massive guns, the guns are each chained to two flatbed haulers, and they are so heavy that the trucks can barely move forward (p. 2). The weapons are huge and gray with long barrels, and the noise that they create is deafening.

2. Why did Robert, his mother, and his sister move from their farm in Ohio to the Saunders' house in Rhode Island?
Robert's mother was lonely running a farm without her husband, and when her mother-in-law (whom she had never met) wrote to invite her to move into the vacant cottage next door, Robert's mother quickly agreed (pp. 7-8).

3. For most of the story, Robert's father lives overseas. Where is Robert's father, and what is he

doing there?
Robert's father is with the Canadian Air Force, living in England and flying fighter plans for the Allied Forces.

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 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. Students' answers will vary. Some possibilities are as follows:
a. "There's wing room out here" (p. 8). Literally, there is room to fly a plane. Figuratively, there is a feeling of spaciousness and openness.
b. "Bit off a little more than you could chew?" (p. 16). Literally, a person took too big a mouthful of food than he could easily chew and swallow. Figuratively, a person undertook too large a task than he could realistically finish.
c. "The first chance he got, he'd scoot like a rabbit and get away" (p. 99). Literally, a person would hop quickly like a scared rabbit. Figuratively, a person would move quickly away from something scary.
d. "My mother who. . . had no patience for those who could 'carry on in a coat closet'." (p. 185). Literally, the mother had no patience for a child throwing a temper tantrum in a coat closet. Figuratively, the mother had no patience for a child who couldn't exercise self-control in a trying situation.

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?
Through the events of this book, Robert has witnessed great harm done by family members and neighbors. He has learned how cruel family members can be to one another, hearing how his own grandfather shot his father in the leg in a fit of anger. He has also seen how the inhabitants of his small town turned on Abel Hoffman, a refugee from Nazi Germany, causing his death and the destruction of his art.

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?
To write historical fiction, the author probably interviewed people who lived through these real-life events in 1942. She probably studied maps, including old maps and surveys from the time period, in order to be able to describe the setting. She may have read old letters, journals, and news articles, in order to get a sense of how people felt as they lived through the events here. By doing this kind of research, the author made her book realistic and believable to her readers, even though the characters in the book are fictional.

7. Toward the end of the book, Elliott 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?
Abel Hoffman witnesses his art being destroyed, in Germany at the hands of the Nazis and in America at the hands of angry townspeople. He is also the victim of suspicion and prejudice in both places, in Germany because he is an influential artist and in America because he is a German. In both places, he has reason to fear for his life and doesn't know who he can safely trust.

8. Though 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 American's involvement in the war.
Robert Saunders must live without his father who is a fighter pilot in the war. He moves to Rhode Island to live with the paternal grandparents he has never known. There he learns about his family's secret past as well as the disastrous consequences of overreacting in anger. Abel Hoffman had escaped to America for

safety, but he finds his life is still in danger because he is a German, an enemy. In the end, he loses his life because of the suspicion and prejudice that surrounds him. Robert's cousin Elliot meets Abel Hoffman, who influences him as an artist long after his death, as well as other relatives (including Robert) who remain close to him. (Years later Elliot even comes to live with Robert's family when the boys are in high school.)

9. The story takes place in 1952, when rapid means of communication, such as e-mail, did not exist. How would events in Robert's life have been different if e-mail had been available?
The lack of rapid communication such as e-mail made it possible for Robert's mother to obscure the fact from her husband overseas that she had moved to be near her in-laws in Rhode Island. With e-mail, she would have had to be more forthright with her husband, and perhaps the truth behind the Saunders family secrets would have come out sooner. Also, the lack of e-mail meant that after Robert's father's plane was shot down, his family had to live with the uncertainty about his survival or whereabouts for an extended time. Perhaps with e-mail, Robert would have been able to maintain a closer relationship to his father while he was away, instead of feeling so disconnected from him.

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?
Hoffman walked into the flames burning his paintings, dying as his art is destroyed. Perhaps Hoffman felt so invested in his paintings that when he saw them burning, he felt as though he was already dead. His art had sustained him through many long years of hiding from the Nazis, and with his art destroyed, maybe he felt as though his reason for living had disappeared as well. Hoffman had earlier witnessed the Nazis burning his paintings, and reliving the experience in the country to which he had fled for safety must have been devastating. Instead of acting impulsively, Hoffman could have waited to see what kind of justice he would receive at the hands of the courts, but he instead chose to take his own life.

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.
Because Hoffman is German, the police consider him to be suspicious even without any incriminating actions. The police have other reasons for blaming Hoffman for the attack: He was found in the field near the beach with binoculars, he ran off when an army patrol caught sight of him, and he had a habit of crossing through a slit in a fence to paint in a classified area containing the big guns (p. 128). When the police discover a notebook with detailed sketches of the fort in Hoffman's possession, they arrest him.

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?
Students' answers will vary. The townspeople are not completely unjustified in suspecting Abel Hoffman for being a spy, especially after sketches of the fort are discovered at his home. However, their prejudice clouds their judgment, and the police fail to fully investigate the case against Hoffman. The artist ends up being a scapegoat for the angry townspeople, and he is arrested by the FBI even though the case against him has not been proven and is actually quite weak. (The incriminating sketches were actually the work of Robert's cousin Elliot).

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?
Robert's father refused to apply to college; instead, he wanted to get his pilot's license and fly for the U.S. Postal Service. This plan angered his father (Robert's grandfather), who wanted to push his son into a more conventional occupation. On the day Robert's father announced that he was leaving home permanently, Grandpa Saunders was so angry with his son's foul language, ungrateful attitude, and his

decision to leave that he shot his own son in the leg. Afterwards, Robert's grandfather refuses to acknowledge any responsibility for his action, claiming the gun went off in his hands (pp. 195-7). If Grandpa had been willing to take responsibility for his action and ask for forgiveness from his son, the two could have restored their relationship. It is Grandpa's stubborn refusal to admit his wrong that deepens the rift between father and son.

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

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