

Reading Group Guide for

Out of My Heart

By Sharon Draper

About the Book

"In our schools, most of us are considered misfits. We are often ignored, mistreated, teased, or overlooked. Each of us struggles with something—physical, emotional, mental—that makes us just a little different than others. Sometimes a lot different. But here, we were awesome, we were noble, we were able, and we were cool!" These are the words of narrator Melody, who is smart, knowledgeable, kind, and courageous. But all most people see is her wheelchair, and they don't wait around to hear what she has to say with her voice device. Going to camp for the first time changes that, as Melody and her new friends use a zip line, ride horses, dance, sing, make art, and grow close to one another in this extraordinary story of camaraderie and joy.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does the book open with a firefly? When else are fireflies part of the story? What do they mean to Melody? Why does Noah call her "Firefly Girl"? Discuss the scene where Melody puts drops of orange paint on her angry painting, and Trinity calls them fireflies.
2. Describe Melody's family members. What is her relationship like with each of them? What makes her everyday life and family life different from that of most kids she knows? Why do you think it's been hard for her to make friends with her classmates or other kids her own age?
3. Who is Mrs. V, and what is she like? In what ways is she part of Melody's life? How does Melody feel about her? Mrs. V gives Melody a bag of friendship bracelets before she goes to camp. What does this tell you about Mrs. V and her understanding of Melody?
4. How does Melody come up with the idea to go to camp? Why does it appeal to her? How does she research it? Why does she keep the idea a secret from her parents at first?
5. Describe her parents' reactions to the idea of camp. What looks good to them about it? What are their concerns? How does everyone feel when the camp at first turns down Melody?
6. How does Melody show courage just by applying to the camp? What makes it a difficult thing to do? Why does she do it anyway? What are her hopes for the camp?
7. Identify some of the activities at camp that also require courage from Melody. How does she handle new, exciting challenges? How does Trinity help her?
8. Describe Trinity and how she welcomes Melody. What shows you that Trinity understands how Melody might be feeling? In what ways is Trinity thoughtful in helping Melody?
9. How is the camp set up with these specific campers in mind? What measures are taken to ensure that the campers are safe? Use specific examples in your answer such as the safety features of the playground.

10. What safety measures are part of the horseback riding? How does Melody feel before she rides the horse, and during the initial ride? Explain what happens with the runaway horse and how Melody reacts. How do the safety measures help keep her on the horse?

11. Who are the other three girls in the cabin? Describe each one and how their relationships with one another grow throughout the week. What do they have in common? How are they different? What experiences do they share at camp? What makes them bond into a group of friends?

12. After the four girls sneak away from the cabin while the counselors get picnic food, Trinity says, “Well, we’ve never had a group of campers who started their own revolution!” Why does she call their actions a revolution? Why do the girls want to be with only one another for a while? How does the tension with the counselors get resolved?

13. Describe the dance on the last night and what it means to Melody. How do her actions there show that she’s changed? What does the dance reveal about the relationships she’s formed during the week? How do she and her friends shine at the dance?

14. How does Melody feel about camp coming to an end? What are her reactions to seeing her family? How do her parents react to the closing ceremony? What do they learn about Melody and her time at camp during the ceremony?

15. Why does Melody’s narrative often mention colors? Find some examples and discuss what they add to the story. She explains to Noah that when she hears music, she sees colors. What’s his reaction? Discuss their conversation and why it’s important to Melody. Talk about the scene after the revolution in which Melody hears colors in the counselor’s voices.

16. How important is it that the story is told in Melody’s voice? How would it be different with a third-person narrator? Find and discuss examples of techniques that the author uses to make Melody’s voice lively and immediate, such as the use of questions, exclamation marks, and italics. Talk about the dramatic way that some chapters end, including one-sentence paragraphs and cliff-hangers.

17. Describe what Melody is like as a person. Why does she care so much about belonging? How does camp change her? What role do her cabinmates, Trinity, Noah, and others play in those changes? How do you think her future will be different because she went to camp?

Extension Activities

1. Dear Melody/Dear Mom. Write a pair of letters between Melody’s mother and Melody before camp starts. Her mother’s letter should express her concerns about Melody going to camp as well as why she supports the idea. Melody’s reply should respond to her mother’s letter, explaining why camp is important to her and expressing her range of emotions about going.

2. Welcome to Camp Green Glades. Have each student create an appealing brochure for Camp Green Glades online or by hand, keeping in mind what Melody found attractive in the brochures she collected. Students can find photographs for the brochure or draw pictures of some of the camp activities, and describe them in extended captions. The brochure should explain some of the important safety measures. It should also include quotes from campers that show what they enjoyed about their experiences at camp.

3. Wheelchair Research Project. Discuss as a class how the kids at camp have wheelchairs with different features and appearances. Invite the students to research possible wheelchair features—such as different types of wheels—and tradeoffs—such as the advantages of lighter versus heavier chairs. Discuss why some people might prefer one model over another, keeping in mind different users’ disabilities, limitations, budgets, etc.

4. Think Positive. Melody explains, “I prefer to focus on the things that I can do.” Ask pairs of students to brainstorm a list of twenty things that Melody can do. The items on the list can be something described in the book or something the students feel sure she can do that isn’t described, such as enjoy a picture book. The list can include things as simple as listening to music or as challenging as naming the capitals of every country. Compile an extensive class list and then discuss how the book helps readers see many aspects of Melody beyond her wheelchair.

5. From Tadpole to Guppy to Trout to Barracuda. The author uses wonderful figurative language to convey meaning and emotion. Have students discuss the figures of speech below in terms of the comparisons made and what they evoke. Then have them find more figures of speech in the story to share and discuss with the class.

“My face must have looked like a question mark.”

(About swimming) “Gotta get you from tadpole to guppy”; “I guess I’d graduated from guppy to trout!”; “I might even get beyond jellyfish level!”

“The boat, which was like a foreign country with a different language . . .”

“For me, the inside wires that connect to my physical body are kinda like the ones inside that fixture. They’re pretty much fried. But the wires to my brain—ah! Absolutely, exceptionally excellent!”

(On riding a horse) “I felt a little like a knight in armor about to go into battle.”

Guide written by Kathleen Odean, a youth librarian for seventeen years who chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee. She now gives all-day workshops on new books for children and teens. She tweets at @kathleenodean.

This guide has been provided by Simon & Schuster for classroom, library, and reading group use. It may be reproduced in its entirety or excerpted for these purposes.