

KENNETH OPPEL'S AIRBORN SERIES READING GROUP GUIDE

★ **“This rousing adventure has something for everyone.”**

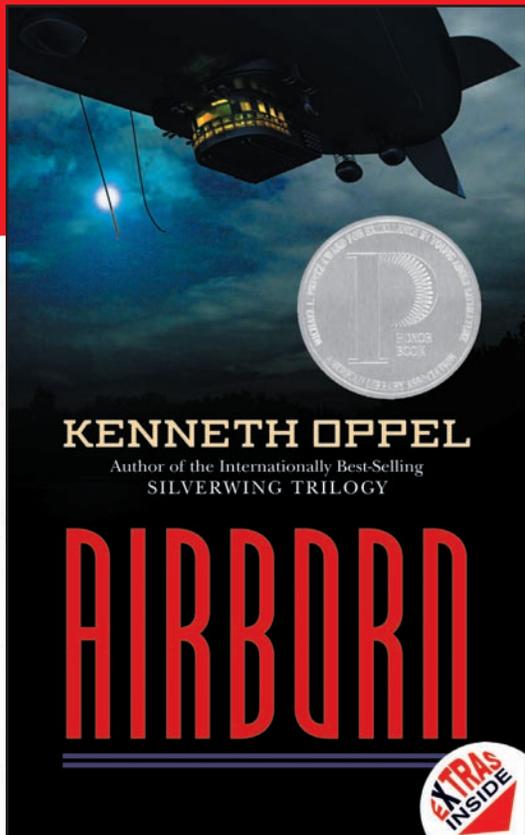
—*School Library Journal* (starred review)

ABOUT THE BOOK

Airborn introduces cabin boy Matt Cruse, who is destined to become a hero on the lighter-than-air luxury passenger ship the *Aurora*. Through a series of adventures, Matt comes to grips with his father's death as he battles pirates, saves the *Aurora* and its passengers from shipwreck, gains the respect of his captain and crew, helps discover a beautiful new creature, and befriends heiress and would-be zoologist Kate de Vries. *Airborn* chronicles Matt's first steps toward the achievement of his dream of one day piloting an airship.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When does *Airborn* take place: in the past, present, future, or a fabrication of one of these times? What clues help you decide? Why do you think the author sets the story in this time period?
2. *Airborn* mentions three kinds of flying machines: airships, balloons, and ornithopters. How do these vehicles stay aloft? Read about the history of dirigibles, zeppelins, and hot-air balloons. Who was Leonardo da Vinci and what does he have to do with ornithopters?
3. What is hydrium? Is it real? Where is it found in the story and what functions does it serve, both for good and evil? What are goldbeater's skin and Aruba gas? Are they real and what are their uses?
4. On numerous occasions, Matt is the first crew member to spot various threats to the aircraft and to the voyage itself. List these instances and explain why Matt is so capable and observant. How is Matt mature for his age?
5. Matt often describes the *Aurora* in anthropomorphic terms, and he also compares himself to various animals. Find examples of both descriptive devices in the novel. What do they reveal about the way Matt thinks? How do they help you better visualize what is happening?
6. On several occasions in *Airborn*, Matt disobeys the orders of his captain. Think about these choices and the motivations behind them. Is Matt a hero? Do you trust his judgment? Would you recommend him for the Airship Academy?
7. Matt's peers on the airship are Kate, Baz, and Bruce. Discuss the relationships among these four young people and the valuable lessons they learn from one another.
8. In what ways does Matt's father's death determine Matt's future and affect his choices? How does Matt resolve his internal struggle over the loss of his father?
9. Compare and contrast how the following characters speak and communicate: Captain Walken, Mr. Rideau, Chef Vlad, Miss Simpkins, Kate de Vries, Vikram Szpirglas, Mr. Crumlin, and Rhino Hand. How does each character's style of communication reflect his or her personality?
10. Compare the maturation and changes of the crippled cloud cat to the ways that Matt grows in the story. How might either character be considered the novel's hero?
11. Kate is a strong character who often surprises Matt with her knowledge, fortitude, courage, and spunk. Together they make a winning team—although not without some frictions. Discuss this blossoming friendship, its potential pitfalls, and its possible future direction.
12. Author Kenneth Oppel is intrigued with flight, both in this series and in other books he has written. In what ways does flying impact the plot of the story and the development of the characters? What constraints and advantages does being airborne place on people and events?



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★ **“Another breakneck flight through the skies of [a] beguiling alternative world.”**

—*The Horn Book* (starred review)

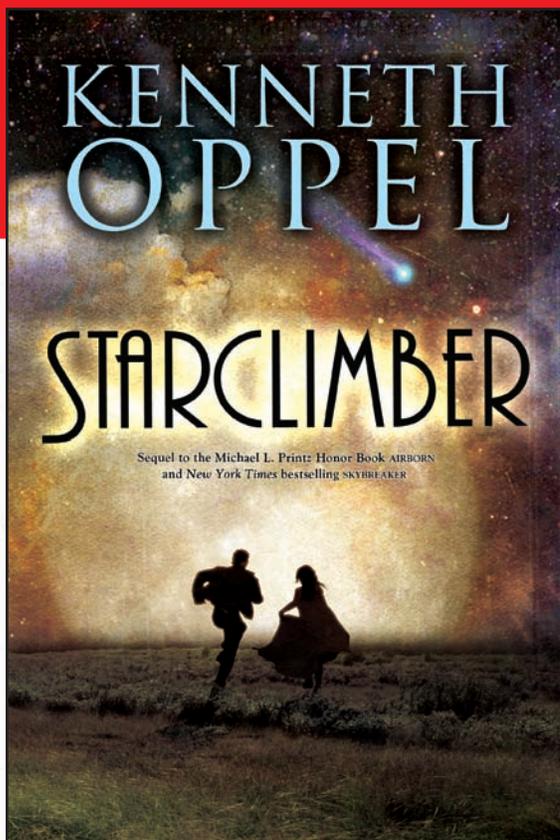
ABOUT THE BOOK

This second book in the Airborn series takes place on a high-altitude airship known as a skybreaker. Matt Cruse, now in the Airship Academy, sights the *Hyperion*, a long-lost airship that has been circling the globe for forty years. Racing against competitors, Matt works together with scientist-in-training Kate de Vries, mysterious gypsy girl Nadira, and skybreaker captain Hal Slater, as they attempt to locate and salvage the *Hyperion*'s rumored treasure. Romantic tensions among the four adventurers heighten the drama, as they face dangers from pirates, the natural world, and even one another.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Compare and contrast the *Aurora*, the *Flotsam*, the *Hyperion*, and the *Sagarmatha* and their captains. How do the names of these ships reflect their characteristics? On which ship and with which captain would you like to travel or serve? Why?
2. Matt leaves the Airship Academy without permission to pursue the *Hyperion*, despite his poor academic performance and upcoming exams. Do you think this choice is a responsible one? Do the ends justify the means? Explain.
3. Four main characters board the *Sagarmatha*: Matt Cruse, Kate de Vries, Hal Slater, and Nadira. Make a chart indicating the contributions each brings to the journey and their reasons for going. Include both positive and negative characteristics in order to appreciate how they antagonize and balance one another in the story. Why do you think Marjorie Simpkins is included on the voyage?
4. A major danger during the search for the *Hyperion* is high-altitude sickness. Is this ailment real? What are its symptoms and treatment? Where might you encounter altitude sickness?
5. Matt and Kate's verbal exchanges are reminiscent of those between Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn in such classic movies as *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). Watch one of these movies and compare its dialogue with that of *Skybreaker*. How does verbal banter suggest romantic tension?
6. Who is Nadira's father? Why does she hold the key? Why is she sometimes considered untrustworthy? Do you think it's natural to distrust people who are different from you?
7. Identify which of the following story elements are real and which are products of the author's imagination: alumiron, ballast, bathysphere, echolocator, ethylene glycol, gramophone, homing device, message tubes, Morse code, phrenology machine, Prometheus Engine, Turing computer, and vivarium. How might the Prometheus Engine be an answer to our twenty-first century energy crisis?
8. Who are the “bad guys” in this story? What are the treasures they hope to find? Since the four “heroes” are also after treasure, should they be considered “bad guys” as well? Discuss the motivations of the various characters and decide who is honorable and who is not.
9. What creature do Kate and Matt discover in *Skybreaker* and what are its characteristics? How does this animal help or hinder the efforts of the skycrews? How does it propel the plot?
10. Who is romancing whom and to what ends? What do you predict might happen with Matt and Kate's relationship in the next book? Do you think it will be “smooth sailing”?
11. Take a moment to reflect on the characters that die in *Skybreaker*. Are deaths necessary for a swashbuckling adventure story to be convincing? Why or why not?
12. How do the four main characters make their rather unique escape to safety at the end of the novel? Do the adventurers win any treasures in the end? Is their voyage successful? Explain.

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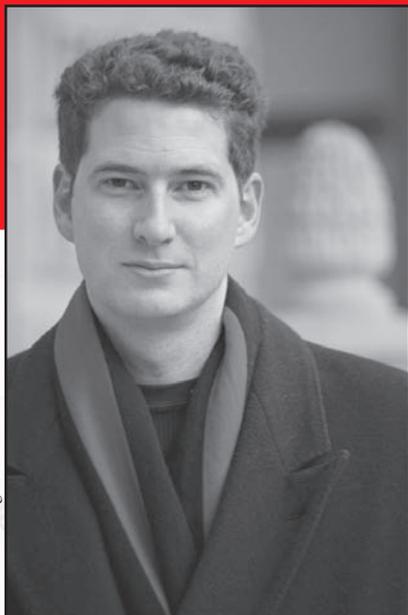
ABOUT THE BOOK

In *Starclimber*, Matt Cruse climbs higher than ever before—this time he's headed to the cosmos. After undergoing rigorous astronaut training, Matt is chosen as a crew member for the first voyage into outer space aboard Mr. Lunardi's *Starclimber*. Kate de Vries has also been invited to take part in the adventure, and before they embark she announces that she's engaged to be married—and not to Matt. Despite this bombshell, Matt and Kate take off into space and, along with the rest of the crew, fight threats from the Babelites, dangers from new life-forms, interpersonal tensions, and scientific failures.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Friendship, jealousy, and competition are conflicting emotions in *Starclimber*. Which characters must balance and resolve these feelings? Have you experienced feelings of jealousy or competition? If so, how have you resolved them?
2. What does Matt give Kate for her birthday? Would you be pleased with this gift? What information do Matt and Kate learn in the observatory that foretells later troubles?
3. Who is Mrs. Pankhurst? Is she a real person? What do the suffragettes have to do with the story? Are women's rights issues still important today? Explain.
4. What physical skills, emotions, and personality traits are prospective astronauts tested on? How do you think you'd perform on the astronaut tests?
5. How is Matt chosen to become an astronaut? What effects do the circumstances under which he's chosen have on him and his relationships with other crew members? Consider the idea of teamwork and how it's important when working with others on any project, but especially in a dangerous environment.
6. Why are Sir Hugh Snuffler, Chef Vlad, Miss Evelyn Karr, and Haiku chosen for the maiden voyage into outer space? Why is Miss Simpkins left behind? If you were to produce a movie of *Starclimber*, which actors and actresses would you cast in these roles? Who would you select to play the starring roles of Matt and Kate?
7. In each of the three Airborn novels, Kate discovers a new creature. What creature does she find in *Starclimber* and what problems does it create for the journey?
8. How does the *Starclimber* "climb" into outer space? When the ship is unveiled, Otto Lunardi reassures the crew that sufficient safety precautions have been taken; however, the systems fail in outer space. What causes these failures and what creative means must the crew devise to allow a safe homecoming?
9. The characters of *Starclimber* deal with the bends, weightlessness, claustrophobia, and astral psychoses. What are these medical conditions and what steps are taken to combat them?
10. To better appreciate the nuances of the novel, identify whom or what the following phrases refer to and how they fit within the narrative: baleen, barnacles, *Bluenose*, broken leg, calm and polite, ether, flatulence, hydrium balloons, George, migraine, narrowed nostrils, parasitic weevil, peacock, the pyramids, seamstress, shark, slide rule, soup pot, tickety boo, *Titanica*, toilet, and tripod.
11. In *Airborn*, Matt carries a compass in his pocket given to him by his father. In *Starclimber*, Tobias carries a meteorite from the Badlands. Why? Do you have an object like Matt's compass or Tobias's meteorite that is special to you?
12. Which of the three Airborn books presents the most tension and excitement for you? Which characters are the most engaging, humorous, or interesting? What suggestions would you make to author Kenneth Oppel for the plot of a possible fourth book in this series?

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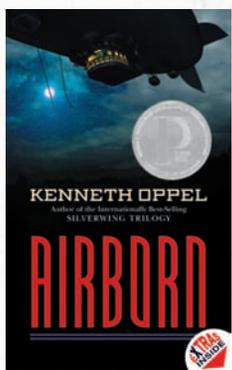


Peter Riddihough

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenneth Oppel, born in 1967, decided in middle school to become a writer after first considering careers in science and architecture. He published his first book when he was a senior in high school and his second while finishing his B.A. degree in cinema studies and English at the University of Toronto in Canada. His many books include *Airborn*, a Michael L. Printz Honor Book and winner of Canada's Governor General's Literary Award, and *Skybreaker*, a *New York Times* bestseller. He is also the author of *Darkwing*, the critically acclaimed prequel to the bestselling *Silverwing* series. Kenneth Oppel lives with his wife and children in Toronto, Canada. Visit him online at www.kennethoppel.com.

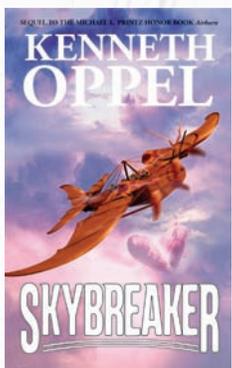
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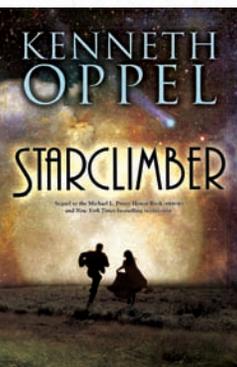
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Guide prepared by Linda Z. Hamilton, Ph.D.,
Leawood, Kansas. 01/09