Literary Guide for Maggie Thrash's

Honor Girl
Summary

Honor Girl, the debut book by graphic novelist Maggie Thrash, is part memoir, part coming-of-age story, and part critical analysis of the discovery of sexuality. Set at an all-girls summer camp in the south, the story follows its author through a summer of confusing emotions, unexpected challenges, and a slew of heteronormative, gender-based assumptions.

Maggie has attended a very traditional sleepaway camp for nearly every summer of her life. It's so traditional, in fact, that campers wear uniforms, sleep in true canvas tents, and can only arrive at camp via barge. It almost goes without saying that Maggie's fellow campers are overwhelmingly white and Christian, and are portrayed as epitomizing what it means to be a budding southern belle. Vanity reigns supreme, trends are set through creative use of barrettes and non-camp-issue socks, and rumors of crushes on the few males to set foot on camp grounds run rampant.

Within this microcosm of southern culture, Maggie discovers that she has fallen in love for the first time. It comes as a surprise and catches her off guard – not only because it's the first time she has ever experienced such feelings, but because the person for whom she falls madly and deeply is Erin, a female counselor a few years her senior. Readers follow Maggie through a summer of torturous teenage love, made all the more difficult by the endless assumptions made about her identity and the taboo nature of her feelings – not only is heterosexuality very much the expected norm, but the age difference between Maggie and Erin is enough to turn heads on its own.

Readers follow Maggie through the emotional torture that is the suppression of self. As she questions and hides her own feelings (largely as a result of the context in which she feels them), Maggie illuminates the major issues that heteronormative culture can present. In a world where everyone assumes that she is not only incredibly feminine but also straight, it's unclear where a Maggie-shaped hole exists. The way in which Maggie and Erin's relationship is treated when discovered by camp staff further illustrates the dismissive nature with which homosexuality is treated within such a culture.
The story is book-ended by Maggie's one post-camp meeting with Erin. Taking place years later when both are college students, the encounter speaks volumes to the importance of and, simultaneously, fleeting nature of teenage love. It's clear that both characters are unsure of how to deal with their past once time and space have come between them, and readers are left to wonder whether their awkwardness is the result of change alone or the uncomfortable circumstances under which their relationship ended.

**Critical Thinking Questions**

These Critical Thinking Questions are intended to help readers process and reflect on what they have read. The questions focus little on the who, what, when, where, and why of the story, and are centered around the portions of the story that meant to make readers think deeply and relate Maggie's experiences to their own lives. The questions are listed in an order that follows the chronology of the story, but some of the questions can be considered again and again throughout the book, as readers' answers and perceptions of the characters involved may change as the story develops.

- Describe the culture of the camp that Maggie attends. What kinds of assumptions might be made about campers based on what you know about the community culture at Bellflower?
- Before Maggie reveals her feelings for Erin (both to other campers and to readers), some information is shared that helps to set Maggie apart from the other campers. What details does the author include that help to give readers the impression that she is somehow separate from those around her?
- Why do you think Maggie excels at marksmanship so suddenly? What need might she be fulfilling through her target practice?
- Maggie speaks volumes about the ways in which camp feels different during the summer in
which the book takes place. What could be contributing to this feeling? What might Maggie be learning about herself and those around her that contributes to this?

– In what ways do Maggie's camp friends show caring and understanding of Maggie's needs?

– Explain the significance of Maggie's haircut. Why did she do it? What does it mean? What need might she have been fulfilling by making such a drastic change?

– Later in the story, once Maggie's feelings for Erin have been revealed, she continues to share details with readers that set her further apart from those around her at camp. What are some of these details? How do they come together to define Maggie's place within the camp community?

– Why was Maggie chosen as Honor Girl? Consider what the camp staff might have wanted Maggie to learn from the experience.

– How does the camp session's culminating event further “other” Maggie? In what ways do the camp staff's actions and assumptions complicate her concept of self?

– Was it reasonable for the camp staff to reward Maggie for keeping quiet about her relationship with Erin? Do you think this was appropriate or respectful? Explain.

– Maggie shares with readers that following her return from camp, she suffered years' worth of deep depression. Where do you think this depression stemmed from? What do you think Maggie would have needed in order to feel more fulfilled?

– The beginning and end of the story bookend Maggie's experience at camp and offer a frame within which readers see the story. Explain why this frame is important to readers' understanding of the story.

**Mini-Lesson**

Designed for teenage readers, this mini-lesson encourages close examination of the ways in
which graphic novels tell stories. Unlike traditional novels, graphic novels utilize both textual and visual elements in order to tell a story, relying on pictures to share information about information that lies above the surface (setting, physical characteristics, etc.) and text to share information that lies below the surface (characters' invisible emotions and thoughts, for example). In this lesson, readers will work to identify moments in the story when the author shares details through words and other moments where details are shared through pictures. Readers will also examine the close relationship between the two, and can choose to try their own hand at visual-textual storytelling.

**Telling Stories Through Words and Pictures**

1. Ask readers to explain what they perceive to be the role of pictures within a graphic novel. Be sure to discuss the distinction between graphic novels and the more traditional comic books that are their close cousins. While the role of pictures in both is similar, graphic novels serve a different purpose and their elements should be considered accordingly.

2. Explain to readers that they'll be working on identifying the close relationship between words and pictures within the book *Honor Girl*. Remind readers that as they worked their way through the story, they were not only reading the words, but reading the pictures. Discuss the ways in which picture reading and text reading are both similar and different.

3. Ask readers to identify a panel (or series of panels) in the story where the pictures do most of the storytelling. Have readers share their selections, once chosen, and discuss the elements included in each image that tell the story.

4. Repeat step 3, but search for moments when the story's text does most of the storytelling. Share the panel (or panels) in which this takes place, and discuss possible reasons for the author's choice to rely mainly on text in the moments shown.

5. Ask readers to once again identify important moments from the story, but this time allow them to choose moments where the author has utilized the storytelling power of both text and images
equally. Have readers share their selections, and talk (and perhaps write) about the connection between the images and the text.

6. Create a list with readers of the types of information that can be shared through images and the types of information that can be shared through words. Note any overlap – information that can be shared either way. Consider the scenarios in which an author might choose words over pictures (or vice versa) for types of information that can go either way.

7. To allow readers a chance to process what they've learned, ask them to create their own short graphic novel memoirs. Have readers choose important moments in their lives, and allow them to plan their stories both in terms of structure and in terms of the ways in which information will be shared. Initial plans should include plans for both the story's words and its pictures. Challenge readers to use what they've learned from examining *Honor Girl* to create a short memoir that succeeds in tying together text and images in order to tell a compelling story.

**Extension Activities**

Each of the following activity suggestions are designed to support readers in not only deepening their understanding of this particular story, but in strengthening their skills in connecting what they've read to the world around them. Loosely written so as to allow for adaptability, the activities have been designed with readers ages 13-18 in mind.

*Research Skills and Detective Work*

The name “Camp Bellflower” was created for the book, so as to keep the true identity of Maggie's camp and her fellow campers private. However, by paying close attention to detail and by utilizing numerous web-based tools, it's possible to uncover the real-life camp that Maggie attended. Challenge readers to do some creative detective work by gathering details from the story that might help to identify the camp, then turn to the internet for further support. Readers will need to consider
the specificity of their search terms (consider the relationship between input and output), look carefully at maps, and persevere in their efforts. While such an activity may at first seem invasive, it's a fantastic test of web literacy and both research and problem-solving skills.

*Products of a Culture*

The cultural context in which the story takes place has a lot to do with the ways in which Maggie experienced her first love, and has even more to do with the emotional turmoil she felt after leaving camp. Ask readers to use information shared in the text to paint a picture of both the community culture at camp and the family culture that Maggie experienced at home. Literally creating a picture or diagram of this can be a great way to conceptualize Maggie within these two contexts: by placing the author at the center and connecting (or disconnecting) her from these two similar cultures, readers can explore the ways in which she both is and is not a product of the context in which she experienced her first love.

*Gender Expectations and Heteronormativity*

What does it mean to be heteronormative? And what effect might heteronormativity have on individuals and communities? In order to better understand the challenges that Maggie encounters, readers can explore the meaning of the world “heteronormative” and can find ways in which heteronormativity arises in the story. Look closely to identify moments when heteronormativity comes into play in subtle ways, and consider, too, the gender qualities and characteristics that are imposed on the campers as a result of their gender. Often, such beliefs and expectations are the result of beliefs whose roots lie in the culture of a community. In what ways are gender expectations and heteronormativity connected in this story? In what ways are they connected in our everyday lives? How are our experiences like (and unlike) those of Maggie as a result of where we live?
Concept of Self

It would be fair to argue that much of Maggie's post-Erin depression stems from the suppression of her sense of self. Readers can better understand Maggie's experiences by exploring their own sense of self, either through writing or art pieces. Creating a self portrait through words and/or pictures can be a useful exercise for revealing inner self; imagining what it would be like not to be able to be the person in the self portrait is a useful exercise for understanding Maggie's depression.