

Literature Circle Guide to
SURVIVING THE APPLEWHITES by Stephanie S. Tolan

Book Summary

With his spiked hair and all-black clothing, 13-year-old Jake looks the part of the juvenile delinquent he's supposed to be. He's moved from Rhode Island to rural North Carolina to stay with his grandfather, and the only educational institution that will have him is the Creative Academy, the homeschool run by the zany Applewhite family. The Applewhites, from four-year-old Destiny to grandfather Zedediah, are all creative, talented, artistic types, and their haphazardly run school is more of a self-education opportunity. E.D., the almost 13-year-old daughter of the clan, feels like the odd one out—her talents lie in organization, not in art, writing, dance, or theater, like the rest of the family. But when her director father undertakes a local production of *The Sound of Music*, all the Applewhites throw themselves into making it a success. E.D. is indispensable as stage manager, and Jake gets a starring role in the play and discovers a passion for the stage. Just like the butterflies they hatch from caterpillars as part of a self-directed science project, the two adolescents find their wings.

Author Information

Stephanie S. Tolan's earliest memories involve books -- those that were read to her and those she read to herself. She always thought there was a special magic in the little black marks on paper that could turn into whole worlds and real people. Born in Ohio and raised in Wisconsin, she wrote her first story in the fourth grade. It was thrilling to discover she could make the magic herself, and she decided then and there to be a writer.

Other ambitions came and went, but writing stayed on, and she majored in creative writing at [Purdue University](#), then went on to a Master's Degree in English. Marriage and the sudden addition to her life of three young stepsons, and then a son, forced writing into the nooks and crannies, but she wrote poetry and plays for adults as she taught college English. In the mid-seventies, Stephanie began working in the Poets-in-the-Schools program in Pennsylvania. Her first group of students were fourth and fifth graders, and she found among them a new generation of intense readers, still using the flashlight-under-the-covers trick. Mrs. Tolan currently lives on a little lake in the big woods in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. What is the “Creative Academy” and how does Jake Semple end up going there?
Creative Academy is the Applewhite home school (p. 3). Jake Semple has been expelled from the local public school, Traybridge Middle School, and Aunt Lucille Applewhite thought the Applewhites could educate Jake at their school (p. 3).

1. List all the members of the Applewhite family and explain what each of their talents or jobs is.

Grandpa Zedediah (the Applewhite patriarch) makes and designs furniture with his son (p. 12).

Aunt Lucille is a poet who conducts workshops at Traybridge Middle School (p. 3).

Uncle Archie (Lucille's husband and Zedediah's son) is a furniture maker and designer (p. 12).

Randolf Applewhite (son of Zedediah) directs plays (p. 18).

Sybil Jameson (wife of Randolf) is the best-selling author of mysteries about a florist who is an amateur detective (p. 12).

Hal (oldest son of Randolf and Sybil) is a painter (p. 65), a sculptor, and a set designer (p. 211).

Cordelia (eldest daughter of Randolf and Sybil) is a composer and a choreographer (p. 65).

E.D. (youngest daughter of Randolf and Sybil) is a dedicated student whose talent is organization (p. 21).

Destiny (youngest son of Randolf and Sybil) has an eye for color and a talent in the visual arts (p. 64).

3. What is involved in E.D.'s Butterfly Project? What does she need to do to complete it?

The project plan was to catch, photograph, and catalog every butterfly in the *Butterflies of the Carolinas* (p. 33). She needs to catch, photograph, and catalog one last butterfly to complete the project, the great spangled fritillary (p. 33).

4. Why does E.D. think she is different than the other Applewhites? What are they like? What is she like?

E.D. thinks that she is different than the other Applewhites because to be a true Applewhite means that whatever creative activity you put your mind to will turn out well (p. 15). Applewhites are enormously talented and thrive on chaos (p. 16). E.D. does not view herself as talented and she enjoys order and sense (p. 16).

Applewhites like spontaneity while E.D. likes schedules; Applewhites crave freedom while E.D. craves structure (p. 16).

5. Why doesn't Jake run away from the Applewhites and Wits End? What would happen to him if he did?

Wits End and the Creative Academy is Jake's last chance to succeed before he is put into juvenile hall (pp. 41-43). If he runs away and is caught, that is seen as a failure and Jake would then report to juvenile hall.

6. What project would you be working on if you were at the Creative Academy? What would you do there all day long?

Grandpa Zedediah tells Jake that in order for him to create a program for himself at the Creative Academy, he needs to discover what gives him joy (pp. 123-124). Have your students reflect on that question and have them examine the different schedules that E.D. and Cordelia have. Would their days be spent like E.D. in a more structured and ordered way, or like Cordelia who gets lost in her project for hours?

7. On page 87, the author writes “The Jake he knew, the Jake he had always been, was disappearing. And there was nothing—nobody—to put in his place.” What does that mean? How is Jake changing and why?

Jake can no longer wear his spiked collar or his black clothing because it is too hot at Wits End. No one cares when he swears except E.D. and Destiny. He can’t listen to music or watch TV, nor does he want to kick the dog when it whines for attention (pp. 84-87). “Nothing he’d done before to show people who he was and what he stood for worked here (p. 85). But Jake is not sure who he is anymore if he is not the angry, sullen young man who swears, listens to music, and lashes out at people and animals. Jake is becoming someone more open and caring and he is not sure how to accept and deal with the changes in himself.

8. What is “color-blind casting?” Why is it important to Randolph Applewhite? How does it transform his theatrical production? What do you think the author is saying about appearances and the way we judge people by them?

Color-blind casting is casting the best people for a part regardless of race or ethnic background. This is important to Randolph Applewhite because he wants to cast the people with the most talent in his play (pp. 113-114). It transforms his theater production because the production becomes bigger than a play. It becomes a statement on appearances. As Jeremy says, “What better way to hold a mirror up to our own prejudices than to cast this particular show across racial lines....Probably the first time *The Sound of Music* has ever been done this way. And it’s being done in the South (p. 115).” The author is saying that an appearance is just the surface of a person, a projected character, but to really understand and get to know someone and their talents, you have to dig deeper.

9. How does the play transform E.D. and Jake? Why is it such an important experience for each of them?

Jake is transformed because he is able to be a part of something. He is enjoying himself and succeeding at his tasks. He is able to drop the pretense of the angry young man and become a happy young man pursuing something that makes him feel happy and invigorated. Jake finds joy in life, something that he will carry with him forever (pp. 213-215). E.D. is able to use her organizational skills to support her family and to help them put together and pull off a successful show (pp. 188-189). Her quick thinking also saved the last scenes of the show after the power went out (pp. 208-209). E.D. comes to see that she is talented as well, just in a different way than the other Applewhites.

10. In what ways are some of the characters like butterflies? Which ones? How? What is the symbolism of the Butterfly Project in this book?

Many of the characters are like butterflies in that they began as caterpillars and later emerged as totally different, but beautiful, butterflies. Jake literally sheds his old image of a spiky-haired kid who wears spiked dog collars, black clothes, and piercings. He comes to see that he does not need to put up that front because that is not the person he is now, nor ever was (pp. 191-192). E.D. blossoms because she is able to accept that she is different from the other Applewhites, and she is her own unique person who has wonderful talents as well. Hal emerges from his bedroom at the end of the novel like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis. He is ready to stop hiding and face the world (p. 210).

11. Why do you think Hal hides in his room? What might he be thinking about? How do you imagine he feels about Jake, Guru, the play, his family? Will he and Jake become friends? Why? Why not?

Hal might be hiding in his room to avoid his family, to cultivate his image as a recluse, or to get work done. Because Hal stays hidden, he seems to be indifferent to Jake, the Guru, the play, and his family, until he becomes the set designer. Once he becomes invested, he leaves his room to help with the project (p. 182). He and Jake are about the same age, and have both been loners at one time, which might bring them together. Have your students discuss how they might feel having someone come live with their family. Would they accept the person immediately or view him or her as an intruder?

12. What do you imagine will happen to Jake after the last chapter? Where do you think he will go and what will he do?

Have your students think about the fact that Jake has now discovered what brings him joy (p. 215), which is a very powerful thing. Jake has had positive experiences in which he was a success and was able to transcend his former identity of the bad kid and become Jake the actor with the ‘mellifluous singing voice’ (p. 213). Discuss how these positive experiences will change Jake’s outlook and how he might continue to pursue acting and singing.

13. Do you think the Applewhites are good parents? According to you, what makes a good parent?

Help your students to realize that even though the Applewhites gave their children a lot of freedom, there were still expectations placed upon them to achieve. The family was also very nurturing and supportive. Some children cannot deal with that level of independence. Discuss different parenting styles and try not to be judgmental of what is better or best, focusing instead on the strengths of each parenting relationship that kids might introduce.

14. In your opinion does the Creative Academy work? Is it an effective school? Why? Why not?

Have your students think of their most powerful learning experiences. What were they like, and what made them special? The Creative Academy would not be the right school for every student. Discuss the myriad ways kids learn in school: They learn social interaction, cooperation, as well as reading, writing, social studies, etc. Discuss what is lacking at the Creative Academy that students might find at a public or private school and vice versa.

Note: The following questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-7; Analysis: 8-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-14.

Activities

1. Research homeschooling in your community and invite some of the children and parents in to talk to your class. Interview them about how they structure their days, what they learn and how, and then discuss with your class the benefits and drawbacks to homeschooling.

Provide your students with Internet access. Form groups to investigate a handful of different homeschools so that the class can examine a few in depth. This would be a good opportunity for a written report at the end comparing and contrasting the different schools, as well as opinion pieces on which might make a better educational model.

2. "Find your joy" urges Zedediah Applewhite. What is your joy? What project would you begin if you were at the Creative Academy? What would you most want to learn and create? What do you need to do to start it today?

Have your students think about subjects they enjoy most in school and out of school? **What do they look forward to the most? Could they instruct themselves or would they need a mentor? This is great opportunity for students to share their passions in a written piece, a short play, or any other form.**

3. What will be the next Applewhite theatrical production? Imagine a rehearsal and describe it as though you were Stephanie S. Tolan.

Have your students think about whether or not it would be a musical. What would the themes be? Would the casting be color-blind? Why or why not? Would Jake have a starring role? How would each family member fit into the production? Would they have the same jobs they had during *The Sound of Music*? The students could be placed into groups, each devising its own version of the rehearsal in order to see the different interpretations.