



Record Breaker

Robin Stevenson

Interest level: ages 9-12

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AR Quiz #160860

Book Summary

It's 1963, and Jack's family is reeling from the death of his baby sister. Adrift in his own life, Jack is convinced that setting a world record will help his mother recover. But world events, including President Kennedy's assassination, threaten to overshadow any record Jack tries to beat—from sausage eating to face slapping. Rather than helping, Jack's record attempts just seem to get him in trouble. He is about to give up when a new friend suggests a different approach—one that involves listening to, not breaking, records.

Author Biography

Robin Stevenson is the author of many novels for teens and children, including the Silver Birch Award nominated *Record Breaker* and *Attitude*, which is part of the Orca Limelights series about teens in the performing arts. Robin's other novels include *Impossible Things*, *Liars and Fools*, and *Dead in the Water*. Robin was born in England, grew up mostly in Ontario, spent a couple of years in Australia, and now lives on the west coast of Canada with her partner and their son. She writes, edits and teaches creative writing to people of all ages. She is currently writer-in-residence at a middle school in Victoria, BC, which means she gets to spend lots of time talking with kids about two of her favorite topics: reading and writing. Robin loves hearing from readers and can be reached through her website at www.robinstevenson.com.

Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel

The Writer's Craft

Record Breaker is set in Ontario in 1963. The author uses numerous details to create a sense of time and place. For example, Jack's mother is listening to Perry Como (ch. 1); Mrs. Miller has curlers in her hair (ch. 2); Jack mentions playing Yahtzee (ch. 2). What other details has the author included that give a sense of the time period in which this novel takes place?

Connecting to the Curriculum

Language Arts

- Write a letter from one of the characters in the novel to another—for example, a letter from Kate to her mother; from Allen to Jack; or from Jack's mother to Jack.
- Imagine that Jack has been keeping a diary or journal. Write an entry, trying to capture his voice.
- Make a list of what Jack and Allen might have in their backpacks. Make sure all the items you include would have been available in 1963!

History

The story in *Record Breaker* takes place fifty years ago, in November of 1963. A number of important historical events are referred to in the book. As a research project, invite students to learn more about one or more of the following:

- **JFK assassination:** On November 22, 1963, the American president John F. Kennedy was fatally shot while he and his wife Jacqueline Kennedy were driving through Dallas Texas in a presidential motorcade. Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested, but shot and killed two days later while being transferred from the police station to jail. The shooting was captured by news cameras as part of a live broadcast. In *Record Breaker*, Jack—like many children—is sent home from school early when the news of the assassination broke. He also witnesses the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald on Allen's television (the original footage can be found on YouTube). The truth behind the JFK assassination remains a mystery and has been the subject of numerous conspiracy theories, which students might enjoy reading about.
- **The Cold War:** Jack's worries about nuclear war are best understood in the context of the Cold War. The Cold War (so named by British writer, George Orwell, in his essay "You and the Atomic Bomb") was a state of ongoing tension between the United States and its allies, and the east, dominated by the Soviet Union, which began after the Second World War and continued during the fifties, sixties, seventies and eighties. Both the US and the USSR—the superpowers—possessed nuclear weapons, and people feared that a war would lead to mutual destruction.
- **Cuban Missile Crisis:** Jack's father steps up work on the backyard bomb shelter because "the Russians put nuclear missiles in Cuba" (ch. 2). This refers to a historical event known as the Cuban Missile Crisis (<http://library.thinkquest.org/11046>), which is generally regarded as the closest the world has ever come to nuclear war.

It began in October of 1962, when the Americans obtained reconnaissance photographs showing that the Soviet Union was building missiles in Cuba. What followed was a thirteen day confrontation between Cuba and the USSR on one side and the USA on the other. Millions of people—like Jack and his family—feared that the world was on the brink of a nuclear war.

- **McCarthyism:** Kate tells Jack and Allen that her mom lost her job in the USA because she “wrote something the government didn’t like.” Mrs. Levine explains, “Those were difficult times...Everyone so paranoid about Communism, people spying on their friends and accusing their neighbours” (ch. 16). The “difficult times” she is referring to is the McCarthy era, a period in US history lasting from about 1950 to 1956. During this time, fears of Communism and Soviet spies led to thousands of Americans being accused of being Communists or Communist sympathizers. Many were investigated and forced to appear before panels for questioning; and some lost their jobs and careers (like Kate’s mother and many of her friends). Some were even imprisoned.

Art

In his quest to help his mother, Jack ultimately turns to music. Oliver Sacks, the famous author and neurologist, said that “Music can lift us out of depression or move us to tears—it is a remedy, a tonic, orange juice for the ear. But for many of my neurological patients, music is even more—it can provide access, even when no medication can, to movement, to speech, to life. For them, music is not a luxury, but a necessity.” Invite students to share their favorite songs or pieces of music. What emotions do they elicit? Do they intensify emotions? Soothe them? Provide an opportunity for students to discuss their emotional responses to the music and/or represent the emotion through visual art (painting, collage, etc.).

Connecting to the World

Topics for Discussion and Discovery

Read about “Canada’s #1 Record Breaker,” Suresh Joachim, who has broken over fifty world records and used his success to help raise money for children living in poverty (www.sureshjoachim.com). Challenge students to think of records they could attempt to break—as individuals, as a class, or as a school!

Resources

Books

Fiction

- Almond, David. *The Fire Eaters*.
Cushman, Karen. *The Loud Silence of Francine Green*.
Lawrence, Iain. *Gemini Summer*.
Levine, Ellen. *Catch a Tiger by the Toe*.

Nonfiction

- Olmsted, Larry. *Getting into Guinness: One Man's Longest, Fastest, Highest Journey Inside the World's Most Famous Record Book*.
Winter, Jonah. *JFK*.

Online

Information about JFK and footage from his funeral and his final days:

www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/November-22-1963-Death-of-the-President.aspx

Bert the Turtle Civil Defense Film, used to teach children to “duck and cover” in the event of a nuclear war:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKqXu-5jw60

The official website of the *Guinness Book of Records*. Includes how-to videos explaining how to become a record holder:

www.guinnessworldrecords.com/explore-records