

## Literature Circle Guide to STARGIRL by Jerry Spinelli

### **Book Summary**

Stargirl. From the day she arrives at quiet Mica High in a burst of color and sound, the hallways hum with the murmur of “Stargirl, Stargirl.” She captures Leo Borlock’s heart with just one smile. She sparks a school-spirit revolution with just one cheer. The students of Mica High are enchanted. At first.

Then they turn on her. Stargirl is suddenly shunned for everything that makes her different, and Leo, panicked and desperate with love, urges her to become the very thing that can destroy her: normal. In this celebration of nonconformity, Newbery Medalist Jerry Spinelli weaves a tense, emotional tale about the perils of popularity and the thrill and inspiration of first love.

### **Author Information**

Growing up, Jerry Spinelli was really serious about baseball. He played for the Green Sox Little League team in his hometown of Norristown, Pennsylvania, and dreamed of one day playing for the major leagues, preferably as shortstop for the New York Yankees. Spinelli lives with his wife and fellow writer, Eileen, in West Chester, Pennsylvania. While they write in separate rooms of the house, the couple edits and celebrates one another’s work. Their six children have given Jerry Spinelli a plethora of clever material for his writing. Jerry Spinelli is the author of more than a dozen books for young readers, including *Maniac Magee*, winner of the Newbery Medal. His latest novel, *Stargirl*, was *The New York Times* bestseller and an ALA Top Ten Best Book for Young Adults.

### **Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

1. When Stargirl arrives at Mica High School, people notice her. Name three ways in which her appearance or behavior differs from that of other students.

**Leo provides his first detailed description of Stargirl on page 4, including her full length white dress, the ukulele hanging over her shoulder, and the large canvas bag with the sunflower, all of which distinguish her from the crowd. Other distinctive features include her pet rat, her habit of cheering even when the opposing team scores a basket, and her practice of singing “Happy Birthday” to students in the cafeteria.**

2. By December 1 of the year, Stargirl has become the most popular person in school. Describe what other students do to show admiration for her.

**On page 38, Leo says, “We honored her by imitation. A chorus of ukuleles strummed in the lunchroom. Flowers appeared on classroom desks. One day it rained and a dozen girls ran outside to dance. The pet shop at the Mica Mall ran out of rats.” The other students also show admiration by applauding and cheering Stargirl when her cheerleading antics are still welcomed and appreciated.**

3. Think about the setting of the story, which takes place in an Arizona desert community. Identify passages that help you “see” the plants, animals, terrain, and climate in Leo’s town.

**References to cacti, the sun, and the desert abound throughout the story. There are several particularly rich passages which evoke the natural surroundings. First, beginning on page 16, Leo relates what he sees as he follows Stargirl out of town and into the desert. On page 40, Leo discusses the frogs that sleep in the mud, waiting for the rain to come. Then, on page 87, Leo describes the saguaro cacti, a recurring theme in the book.**

4. Archie is a mentor and friend to Leo and other kids in the neighborhoods. Cite examples from the book that show how Archie helps one of the main characters.

**Throughout the story, Archie helps Leo understand Stargirl and his feelings about her. One specific example is on page 104. When Leo seeks Archie’s counsel about Stargirl and conformity, etc., Archie responds by posing the book’s central question: “whose affection do you value more, hers or theirs?” This helps Leo see his dilemma clearly and, ultimately, to make his choice.**

5. Identify a character in the story who shows courage. Explain how the character is brave.

**Courage is a subjective term and answers will vary depending on each reader’s sense of the word. Some readers may think Stargirl is courageous for cheering when opposing players score in a basketball game or for going to The Hot Seat with Kevin and Leo. Others may think Leo demonstrates courage for dating Stargirl even though he knows it is causing him to be shunned by the other students or that Dori Dilson demonstrates courage by sitting with Stargirl in the cafeteria.**

6. What does Archie mean when he says, “When Stargirl cries, she does not shed tears, but light”?

**This is not the first use of light to describe Stargirl. On page 107, for example, Leo says, “She was bendable light: she shone around every corner of my day.” Readers may therefore want to approach the question as though Stargirl is made of light. In that sense, Archie might be implying that when Stargirl cries, she is giving something of herself. Alternatively, light can be taken more literally to mean something that helps people see. In that sense, Stargirl’s emotions could be said to have the quality of helping people to understand themselves or the world around them.**

7. What questions would you ask Leo if you interviewed him as an adult?

**Readers may want to ask Leo about his high school experience, his memories of Stargirl, or his career as a set designer. The author leaves other questions unanswered such as why Leo does not have family fifteen years after high school or why he doesn’t talk about his family during the course of the story. Readers who notice that Leo becomes a keen observer of the natural world around him may want to ask if he misses the desert.**

8. Stargirl notices and cares about bad things that happen to other people but often seems to be unaware of bad things that happen to herself. If she were to visit your school today, what would she notice? What would she ignore? Give reasons for your answers.

**Leo's account offers several hints about what Stargirl might notice. On page 49 he says, "...but she gave most of her attention to the little things." He lists examples: a student picking up a candy wrapper, a new pair of earrings, a broken arm, or a bug by the bike rack. On page 52, Leo adds, "If we were hurt, if we were unhappy, or otherwise victimized by life, she seemed to know about it, and to care, as soon as we did. But bad things falling on her – unkind words, nasty stares, foot blisters – she seemed unaware of." This is also a hint to readers about what Stargirl would NOT notice. Finally, on page 108, Leo describes the things Stargirl notices around town, including the man sitting outside the shopping village, a row of ants on the sidewalk, or a blue door that was once green.**

9. Over the course of the book, Leo changes. Compare and contrast Leo's appreciation of "little things" in life at the beginning of the novel and at the end.

**After Stargirl teaches Leo to see "the little things" (see #8), he begins to notice these things himself. At the end of the novel, long after he has last seen Stargirl, Leo says, "I throw myself into my work and keep an eye peeled for silver lunch trucks, and I remember. I sometimes walk in the rain without an umbrella. When I see change on the sidewalk, I leave it there. If no one's looking, I drop a quarter. I feel guilty when I buy a card from Hallmark. I listen for mockingbirds." In contrast, there are no such passages early in the novel, when Leo's focus is on the behavior and appearances of his immediate peers. On page 2, he says, "It did not occur to me that I was being watched. We were all being watched."**

10. When Archie and Leo drive out to the desert, Archie writes a single word on a scrap of paper and stuffs it in a hole. What do you think is written on the paper?

**The text offers no hints beyond what readers should know about Archie: that he is a fairly eccentric retired paleontologist who lives in a house decorated with fossils and bones and has a distinctly spiritual connection to the natural world. He describes himself as "a man of bones. You can't be up to your eyeballs in bones and not believe in enchanted places." Also, in the hole is the skull of Barney, the Paleocene Rodent. Archie tells Leo on page 182, that he does not "have the energy to return Barney to his original stratum in South Dakota. In that sense, the note could be seen as a farewell message. While the question is open-ended, answers must be consistent with Archie's unique character and his views of the world.**

11. Create a new scene for the book in which the two discuss Archie's message.

12. When Leo returns to Arizona after living in the East, someone else is living in Archie's house. Where, in your opinion, is Archie? How does that fit with Archie's view of the universe?

**See #10. Important passages illustrating Archie's view of the universe are found on pages 75, 103, and 177. Archie believes man has a physical connection to the**

primordial elements supplied by the stars. Of Stargirl he says, on page 177, “I think every once in a while someone comes along who is a little more primitive than the rest of us, a little closer to our beginnings, a little more in touch with the stuff we’re made of.” In that sense, readers may want to speculate that Archie has once again become a part of the cosmos. At the end of the novel, Archie does allude that he is tired. (See #10.)

13. Toward the end of the book, Leo chooses membership in his peer group over his affection for Stargirl. What is your opinion of Leo’s choice? Why?

**Although the question is subjective, one approach might be to evaluate whether Leo remains true to himself when he chooses his peer group over Stargirl. While Leo is clear about his affection for Stargirl, he also asserts the importance of general social acceptance. On page 126: “I had never realized how much I needed the attention of others to confirm my own presence.” On page 128: “I pretended she would become more like them and they would become more like her, and in the end I would have it all.” On page 130: “I felt a sudden, strange kinship with Hillari Kimble: I understood why she had commanded Stargirl not to sing for her. I felt spotlighted on a bare stage.” On page 135, he says to Stargirl, “I’m in touch with everybody. I’m one of them.” Thus, Leo is honest with himself about the importance of being connected and is true to himself in choosing the crowd over Stargirl. On the other hand, Leo is moved and changed by Stargirl. As such, readers could make an equally strong case that he betrayed her and his feelings for her by choosing the crowd.**

14. Do you think Leo’s life is improved for having been involved with Stargirl? What makes you say that?

**Though the question is entirely subjective, one possible approach might be to examine Leo’s concluding passage on page 186 in which he says, “Though I have no family of my own, I do not feel alone.” This could be seen as an improvement from Leo’s prior dependence on others for companionship and affirmation.**

*Note: The following questions are keyed to Bloom’s Taxonomy: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application 7-8; Analysis 9; Synthesis; 10-11; Evaluation 12-14.*

## **Activities**

1. Stargirl and Leo have fun playing a “greeting card” game: After reading an advertisement on a bulletin board (“Odd Jobs-Ask for Mike”), they decide what that person most needs and create a card, such as a “keep-your-chin up” card. Carefully observe a stranger for 10 minutes. Create a greeting card that he or she needs.

**Stargirl teaches Leo the greeting card game on page 114.**

2. Stargirl won the state’s public speaking contest. Prepare a short speech for an oratorical contest on a topic such as Have the Courage to Be Yourself. Outline your speech on note cards. Visualize yourself winning the contest. Then deliver your speech to the group.

**Speeches will vary.**

3. Create a time line of major events in Leo's life, including his age at the time and short description of the milestone. Project the time line into Leo's future, after the book has ended. Present your work to your group and discuss.

**The facts of Leo's life according to the text are: he and his family moved from Pennsylvania to Arizona when he was 12; after high school he went to college, then took a job back East as a set designer; and fifteen years after high school, he has no family of his own.**