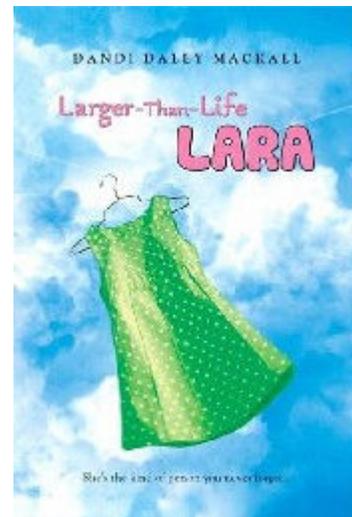


Larger-Than-Life LARA

By Dandi Daley Mackall

Discussion guide for use in Grades 4-8



INTRODUCTION

Most students have been teased and made fun of at some point in their lives. And most have done their share of the teasing and making “fun.” Students who generally find themselves in the role of the teaser, the one who gets the laugh at someone else’s expense, might not think they’re being anything except funny.

But stories have the power to creep inside the reader and hold up a mirror. Stories can help us see ourselves in new ways. And when that happens, change may not be far behind. It’s part of the magic of story that *story + you = something new*.

This isn’t about me. This story, I mean. So already you got a reason to hang it up. At least that’s what Mrs. Smith, our English teacher, says.

So writes Laney, our narrator, in the first words of *Larger-Than-Life Lara*. But the story *is* about ten-year-old Laney Grafton, who feels the air change the day Lara Phelps walks into her class. Lara is fat. Really fat. How a kid who looks like this one, big as a sofa,

could just sneak into a room, Laney doesn't know. All she can think is that finally, there will be someone else for kids to pick on.

But when the new "victim" doesn't react the way they expect, students are forced to take a deeper look at Larger-Than-Life Lara. What's more, they're forced to take a deeper look at themselves.

COMMENTARY BY DANDI

Larger-Than-Life LARA

When I write most books, I plan, pray, and plot, taking notes, brainstorming, getting to know my character before I commit a word to paper. But Laney Grafton, the narrator of LARGER-THAN-LIFE LARA, had other plans. This tough little character with a big attitude woke me up at three in the morning to announce: "This isn't about me. This story, I mean. So already you got a reason to hang it up." I got out of bed, walked across the hall to my office, and wrote down Laney's words. In the morning, I typed those words into my computer. Then Laney continued to boss me through the entire book day after day.

Fortunately, Laney tells her story much like I tell mine, much like most fiction writers tell theirs: a character has a problem that gets bigger and bigger, making the character a better and better person, until there's a climax, and then the character solves the problem.

People have asked me if I had mean brothers like Laney. No. One sister, rather nice. Other readers have asked if I used to be fat like Lara. No again. I've never been skinny, mind you, but not fat either. But I've known Laney and Lara. We all have. I don't think I was ever the bully tormentor, like Joey—but I'm afraid I didn't stand up against the meanness like I should have.

I suppose my heart goes out to people who are a bit “different.” My own special-needs daughter has put up with more than her share of teasing. She's taught our whole family a lot about keeping a joyful spirit in spite of the cruel words and actions of others. It hasn't always been easy. I remember once in elementary school when a kid named Michael made fun of the way Katy talks. Katy came home and cried into her pillow as I struggled with words I could say to encourage her. “Katy,” I tried, “the next time Michael does that, you tune him out and think about what Dad and I say about how terrific you are, and what God says about you, his beautiful, unique creation.” Katy answered, “I try. But you and God were whispering in the bottom backside of my head, and Michael was screaming in the front, so I couldn't hardly hear you guys.”

An author has to feel emotion for her characters, and I had no trouble feeling for the people in this book. I love Laney for her honesty and matter-of-fact truth-telling. She discovers the good and bad about herself. She has a dream and makes it happen. I love Lara for the way she faithfully returns good for evil, offering smiling couplets instead of insult for insult. She makes me think of the Lone Ranger, who rides into town and changes everyone there, then rides off into the sunset. I even like Joey Gilbert and Eric and Wayne and Sara—all kids I grew up with in Hamilton Elementary in Hamilton, Missouri.

Laney narrates a story within a story, giving readers and writers what they need to know about storytelling. And if story does what it should do, a light goes on, and change is just around the bend.

ABOUT DANDI DALEY MACKALL

Dandi won her first writing contest as a ten-year-old tomboy. Her fifty words on “Why I Want to Be Batboy for the Kansas City A’s” won first place, but the team wouldn’t let a girl be batboy. It was her first taste of rejection.

Today she is the bestselling author of over four hundred books for children and adults. She’s a frequent guest on radio talk shows and has made dozens of appearances on TV, including ABC, NBC, and CBS. She does countless school visits, conducts writing assemblies and workshops, and keynotes at conferences and young-author events.

Dandi lives in rural Ohio with her husband, Joe, their children, Jen, Katy, and Dan, and a menagerie of horses, dogs, and cats.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Laney begins: “This isn’t about me. This story, I mean.”

Do you agree with her? Whose story is this? Who’s the star of the story? Who changes? Laney also claims: “Only it’s not me what’s got the problem. And I’m not a better person than I was three months ago when all this stuff happened....”

Do you agree or disagree with her? Prove your case. You might even hold a debate.

2. Why do many authors start with “character” in crafting a story? What makes a strong character? What do you mean when you say about someone: “He or she is such a character!” Which characters stand out to you in the story and why? Laney writes: “Lara is the kind of person you never forget.” What does she mean? Have you met any unforgettable characters?
3. Discuss the meaning of the nickname “Larger-Than-Life” in the story. Why do you think Joey starts calling Lara that name? By the end of the story, does “Larger-Than-Life” have a different meaning? What does Laney mean at the end when she says: “Only I figured she had her places to go. There had to be a lot of elementaries what needed a Larger-than-life Lara in them”?
4. Laney doesn’t talk directly about her home life or herself. Discuss what’s revealed about Laney’s home life and her relationship with her dad and brothers.

How does the reader gather this information and these impressions? What do you think Luke did to get in trouble, and why did he quit talking?

5. Why do you think Joey Gilbert teases Lara so much? Some people believe that cruel or thoughtless teasing says more about the one doing the teasing than it says about the person teased. What do you think? Discuss ways to handle teasing when you're the one being teased. Discuss ways to react when you see others being teased. Is all teasing cruel? How do we know the difference between funny and cruel teasing?
6. What do you think about Mrs. Smith, Laney and Lara's teacher? Discuss her strengths and weaknesses. Do you think she handled auditions and the play as well as she could?
7. Peer group dynamics play a big role in *Larger-Than-Life Lara*. Discuss Sara's behavior when she's with her friend Maddie. Discuss Joey and the boys. Laney says: "I knew that people like Maddie Simpson had to be careful who they sit themselves next to. Their reputations are at stake. . . . What I hadn't figured on before right then was that a person like me had to think about the same thing." Is she right?

8. Where do you think Lara got the strength to return insults with a smile and a rhyming couplet? What kinds of reactions did she get for her unexpected responses?

9. After the play, Mrs. Smith tells her class: “Do you children understand what you did to Lara?” and “Do you understand what Lara did for you?...Lara Phelps took all the blame for you.” Explain what she means. Discuss sacrifice and blame.

10. In the end, when the students make nice signs for Lara, Laney comments: “And it felt real good to see this part of all of us, the good-sign-making part. And I wondered if Lara had seen it first, this good-sign-making part, under all the bad-sign-making part. And it felt like maybe the air in our classroom was changing back again.” Discuss what Laney means about the two parts of her classmates and herself. Name some actions that may have come from each part. Do you think Lara saw the good? How?

LESSON PLANS

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Language Arts

- Discuss Laney’s definition of story in Chapter One and apply it to other novels you’ve read. In *Larger-Than-Life Lara*, apply this “skeleton outline” to Laney. What does Laney want? What is she willing to do to get what she wants? What’s her opposition? Where is the climax to Laney’s story, and how does she resolve her problem?
- Do the character exercises at the end of Chapter One, using yourself as the subject: *I am the kind of person who _____*. Try the same exercise with other “characters,” such as your teacher, the principal, your brother or sister, a friend, a character in a story you might write.
- Write three dynamite first sentences for a story you’ll never have to write. Try to capture the reader’s attention and make that reader want to keep reading. Make a list of great first sentences from books you’ve read and enjoyed. Share them with the class.
- Write a personal “frozen moment.” Recall a big moment in your life. Then detail everything you can remember. Run through the senses. What did you hear? smell? etc.
- Laney tells the reader that a person’s room should reveal something about the person, although she doesn’t think her room says anything about her. Describe Laney’s room. What does it tell you about her? Now describe your room, picking out the “setting” that will show who you are.
- Pair off with another student and have a pretend argument, perhaps trying to decide what to do after school. Then have each person write up the argument in dialogue form. Compare the two versions and discuss the differences. More advanced writers should hone point of view, adding their thoughts to the dialogue.
- List all of the “opposition” to Lara Phelps from Day One at Paris Elementary. How does she choose to handle conflict and opposition? Be specific.
- Make up definitions of *suspense* and give examples of suspenseful situations in this novel and in other novels. Select half a dozen novels and compile a list of “cliffhangers” from the ends of chapters.
- Do the “Detail” exercises in Chapter Thirteen. List one day’s activities using only verbs. List the next day’s activities limiting your details to verbs. Discuss Laney’s lists and determine what really happened to her.
- Find the climax in this story. Then locate the climax in five other books you’ve read this year.
- Writers and critics talk about a character’s “epiphany.” Look up the definition of the word and decide what it means in literature. Do you see an epiphany for Laney? Lara? Joey? Others?

Social Studies

- Ask parents and grandparents for “frozen moments” from their past. What moments in time will they never forget? Interview them for the details.
- Compile a frozen moment journal for the class, using “firsts” most students experience: a moment from the first day of kindergarten; a moment from the first time you embarrassed yourself at school; a moment of realization that you could do something well. Students might keep an ongoing “frozen moment” journal, including dramatic and unforgettable moments of this school year.
- Talk about Laney’s home life and what she might have to do to get out of her situation.

History

- Memorize the Declaration of Independence by dividing the words into rhythmic sections, the way Lara taught Laney to do.
- Laney thinks Shakespeare invented plays. Research the origin of the first documented plays we know of.

English

- Laney mentions Shakespeare’s writing a play within a play. Which play is she talking about? Explain the nature and purpose of the play within a play in that story. Then discuss the purpose of Laney’s “story within a story” narration.
- Lara responded to abuse with couplets. Compose rhyming couplets of your own, responding to something you consider abuse.
- Write a paragraph about Laney as if you were Lara. Write another paragraph about Laney as if you were Joey. Sarah. Theresa.
- Discuss Laney’s diction. What is diction? How can a writer capture a voice?

Science

- List possible reasons or contributing factors for obesity.
- Pigs are much maligned in our world. What are some good characteristics of pigs?
- Writers talk about the “momentum” of a story. Give a scientific definition of “momentum.” How does that definition relate to novels?

Math

- Find out the average weight for females and males your age. Find the average weight for females and males your age ten years ago. Fifty years ago. Find out the recommended or ideal weight for males and females your age. Is there a difference between the average weights and the recommended weights?
- Make a chart of the average teen weight in various countries.
- Transpose from pounds to kilos the weight of five people you know.

Art

- Imagine what the signs made by Laney's class might have looked like. Make secret rhyming signs of your own to encourage students to read more. Try your hand at Lara-like couplets. For example: *Maybe you should take the lead. Come on, students! Read! Read! Read!*
- Make a congratulations card for someone in your school who reached a goal.
- Draw the scenery for *Fair Day*.
- Sketch the important objects in your room at home, objects that reveal who you are.