

How to Ruin Your Life: and Other Lessons School Doesn't Teach You

Carolyn McTighe

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In just one afternoon, nine-year-old Penelope Jane Parker, better known as PJ, may have ruined her life. While practicing for the big fourth-grade track meet, PJ, who has always been the best runner in the grade, decides to encourage her best friend Katie by slowing down and letting her win the practice run. She is shocked, then, when Katie breezes by her, even when PJ tries her hardest. Angry, jealous, and hurt, PJ struggles to deal with her emotions without losing her best friend.

As the story continues, PJ's fears that she will lose the big race overcome her, and even though she knows that Katie's friendship is worth more than the race, she can't quite get over her jealousy and anger. Even when it seems like the two girls will reconcile, PJ's competitiveness gets the best of her, and she is faced with the consequences of truly hurting her friend. To do what's right, PJ must own up to her mistakes and make one of her first steps into adulthood.

Author Carolyn McTighe clearly has insight into the world of nine-year-old girls; she is attuned to how girls can behave towards each other, and how young tweens' emotions, including anger and insecurity, are considerably heightened. The note-writing, the search for a new best friend, and her dramatic declaration that she is "never going to apologize" make PJ's distress believable. Although she doesn't have great depth, PJ is a character who, even at her worst moment, is relatable and, more importantly, likeable.

While such a simple plot could easily get bogged down with the melodrama of PJ and Katie's quarrel, McTighe lightens the story with her humorous, honest storytelling. PJ's views and commentary on her family, friends, and teachers is amusing, and her training attempts, including a disgusting drink concoction recommended by her brother, add comic relief. Although the title seems to imply a more dramatic novel, the story's lighthearted elements and universal situation create a nice balance in this book for girls just like PJ.

Although the publisher recommends the book for kids aged ten and up, the simplicity of the book makes it more suitable, fun, and enjoyable for eight- to eleven-year-olds. With its strong message about friendship and learning what's truly important, *How to Ruin Your Life* is a great middle-grade book for girls.

ALICIA SONDHI (November / December 2010)

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