



## A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO

### *The Pull of Gravity*

by Gae Polisner

Frances Foster Books

Farrar Straus Giroux (BYR)

ISBN: 978-0-374-37193-7 / \$16.99

Grade range: 6 and up / Age range 12 and up

### **About the book:**

While Nick Gardner's family is falling apart, his best friend, Scooter, is dying from a freak disease. The Scoot's final wish is that Nick and their quirky classmate, Jaycee Amato, deliver a prized first-edition copy of *Of Mice and Men* to the Scoot's father. There's just one problem: the Scoot's father walked out years ago and hasn't been heard from since. So, guided by Steinbeck's life lessons, and with only the vaguest of plans, Nick and Jaycee set off to find him.

Characters you'll want to become friends with and a narrative voice that sparkles with wit make this a truly original coming-of-age story.

### **About the author:**

Gae Polisner is a wife, mother, and family law attorney/mediator by trade, but a writer by calling. When she's not writing, she can be found swimming in the open waters off Long Island. *The Pull of Gravity* is her first novel. Gae would be pleased to pay a Skype visit to your classroom. Visit her online at [www.gaepolisner.com](http://www.gaepolisner.com) or [www.thepullofgravity.com](http://www.thepullofgravity.com)

### **Reviewer comments:**

"Although the teens' best laid plans go oft awry, they discover that the force of the universe is with them—or at least friendship, family and romance. Pulls the heart in all the right places."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Polisner's first novel begins with a bang and ends with another. . . . There is a great deal to enjoy throughout, and literary kids will surely enjoy a subplot involving John Steinbeck."

—*Booklist*

“Characters feel real . . . and the plot zips along, championing strength in adversity.”

—**School Library Journal**

“Scooter, Nick, and Jaycee are real, and they’re funny. I love how they yearn for something beautiful, warm, and true to lift them from the lousy, sad absurdity of their circumstances. And I love the unlikely places where they find it: Yoda. A possibly misguided bus trip. Red wax lips. Real lips. And each other. I love that they find it mostly in each other.”

—**Lynne Rae Perkins**, Newbery Medal-winning author of *As Easy as Falling Off the Face of the Earth*

“Part love story, part adventure story, funny and serious, *The Pull of Gravity* is a delightful read.”

—**Francisco X. Stork**, author of *Marcelo in the Real World*

“Gae Polisner writes with fluidity and grace. *The Pull of Gravity* will draw you in and keep you thinking long after you've closed the book.” —**K.L. Going**, author of *King of the Screwups*

“*The Pull of Gravity* is the whole package—realistic, quirky, fun, and weepy. Polisner is an author to watch.” —**Mary E. Pearson**, author of *The Miles Between*

“*The Pull of Gravity* is a clever, masterfully told tale of loyalty and redemption that will pull you in and hook you 'til the last page. —**Chris Crutcher**, author of *Deadline*

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## Student Study Guide: Chapter by Chapter Questions

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### Chapter 1:

- Within the first chapter, Nick tells us about his family background and leads into the story of “the craziest weekend” of his life. What predictions can you make? How did you visualize him and his family?
- Building Vocabulary: Febrile seizures (p. 3), wafting (p. 4), audit (p. 4)

### Chapter 2:

- Describe Nick’s hallucination. Recreate his hallucination by either drawing it, piecing it together with magazine pictures, painting it, etc.
- Why did Nick’s dad leave his family? Put yourself in Nick’s place. Explain how you would react to his dad’s email on page 9.
- Building Vocabulary: wielding (p. 8), trapezoidal (p. 8), delirious (p. 8), pariah (p. 9)

### Chapter 3:

- “Mom doesn’t seem all that broken up about it.” Is Nick’s mom *really* okay with his dad leaving? Explain your thoughts.
- What does Nick mean when he says “Not hanging out and not caring are two very different things” (18).

### Chapter 4:

- What is the Scoot’s real name? Why is Nick upset when Jeremy uses his real name?
- Describe the dynamics of Nick and Jeremy’s relationship.
- Prediction: Who is Jaycee Amato? What part will she play in the story?
- Why do you think Nick’s dad is sending him email updates? Do you think he’s sending them to Jeremy or the Scoot? Explain your thoughts.
- Building Vocabulary: omen (p. 19), naïve (p. 20)

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### Chapter 5:

- How would you characterize Nick’s mom at this point in the story?
- Nick’s surprised by Jaycee’s interaction with the Scoot. How do you think they know each other? Could they be friends? Explain.
- Figurative Language Practice: Find examples of similes within the chapter.
- Building Vocabulary: suffice (p. 27), militant (p. 27), ogling (p. 28)

### Chapter 6:

- Why does Nick become uncomfortable in front of his friends when Jaycee talks about his friendship with the Scoot?
- Prediction: What do you think will happen on Nick’s “date” with Jaycee?
- Building Vocabulary: fiasco (p. 34), warped (p. 38)

### Chapter 7:

- Nick and Jaycee discuss money and the benefits of living with the “Doofus.” Does money buy happiness? Is Jaycee happy? Why or why not?
- Why do you think Jaycee has the Scoot’s notebook and his copy of *Of Mice and Men*?
- Building Vocabulary: atrocity (p. 45), ostracized (p. 48), waylaid (p. 57)

### Chapter 8:

- Would you help Jaycee and the Scoot? Explain.
- From what we’ve read so far, what’s your opinion of the Scoot’s dad? What do you think of the Scoot’s goal to find him?
- Building Vocabulary: melodrama (p. 60), pendula (p. 63)

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### Chapter 9:

- As Nick and Jaycee get to know each other, Nick learns that Jaycee currently knows the Scoot better than he does. During the conversation about how Jaycee and the Scoot met, Nick wonders why the Scoot didn't tell him. Jaycee responds "Well, I'm sure you didn't ask" (70). What does Jaycee mean by that?
- What are your thoughts on how the Scoot is handling his declining health?
- Building Vocabulary: deterred (p. 71), periodically (p. 72), crocheted (p. 75)

### Chapter 10:

- Jaycee says even though *Of Mice and Men* takes place pretty much over a weekend, you get to know George and Lennie pretty well. Do you feel that way about Nick and Jaycee? Do you think you feel that way by the end of the novel? Explain.
- How did you react when Nick tells us the Scoot died?
- How are MaeLynn and Nick's dad similar?
- Nick and Jaycee discuss the foreshadowing in *Of Mice and Men*. Find examples of foreshadowing (so far) in *The Pull of Gravity*.
- Building Vocabulary: migrant (p. 78), alienation (p. 87), oversimplified (p. 90)

### Chapter 11:

- Nick really enjoys listening to Jaycee read to him. Do you enjoy being read to? Did anyone read to you as a child? If so, who?
- When have your plans gone awry? Are you a planner like Jaycee, or are you more like Nick when it comes to making plans?
- Building Vocabulary: aberration (p. 96), awry (p. 97), infamous (p. 105)

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### Chapter 12-14:

- Define foil character. How is the Scoot's dad (what we know about him) a foil to Nick's dad?
- On page 123 Nick says "To its right are cans of Cherry RC Cola. Just like in the vending machine. And that's when it hits me. The water tower. The cherry cola. And, now, the fever. *I should have seen it coming.*" What is he referring to? Why is this important?
- How are the dynamics of Nick and Jaycee's relationship changing?
- Building Vocabulary: contribution (p. 109), freelance (p. 111), trifecta (p. 125), rouse (p. 128), valor (p. 132), stupor (p. 133), melancholy (p. 137)

### Chapter 15-16:

- Prediction: What do you think is the name of the luncheonette?
- Should Nick tell Jaycee about the poster? What do you think of the poster and its connection with the restaurant and possibly the Scoot? Explain.
- Building Vocabulary: vortex (p. 140), affiliate (p. 141), haughty (p. 145), vestibule (p. 152)

### Chapter 17-18:

- Much is uncovered and discovered in chapter 17 (i.e. Nick's dad with MaeLynn). Did you predict any of this happening? Find examples of foreshadowing that lead us to this point in the novel.
- What do you think of Nick's response to his dad's relationship with MaeLynn? To MaeLynn's information about Guy Reyland? How did you respond?
- How has Nick's attitude changed in chapter 18? Why is he acting this way?
- How do you think the conflicts in this novel will be resolved?
- Building Vocabulary: immaculate (p. 166), urgently (p.166)

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### Chapter 19-20:

- How could Nick or Jaycee be characterized as a hero?
- Define comic relief. What examples do we have in these two chapters?
- Building Vocabulary: concierge (p. 172), idling (p. 175), gloating (p. 180), embankment (p. 184)

### Chapter 21-22:

- Do you think others would catch Jaycee's reference to *Of Mice and Men* when she tells the new bus driver, "We were killing a dog and buying a ranch to tend bunnies!"
- What do you think the Scoot has written to Nick?
- How would you feel about the Scoot's letter? Was the Scoot's plan a good idea? Explain.
- What do you think Nick will do with the book? What would you do with it?
- How do you feel about the end of the story? What do you predict will happen with Nick and Jaycee? How about Nick's family?
- Building Vocabulary: damper (p. 191), claustrophobic (p. 198)

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## Student Study Guide: *The Pull of Gravity* Essay Topics

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### **Character Analysis Essay**

Choose a character from *The Pull of Gravity* and think about how that character developed throughout the story. What motivated him/her to action? How did the character influence other characters? What are his/her positive and negative traits? This essay is an opportunity to examine and understand a character you related to, loved, or even a character you didn't like.

### **Gender Issues**

*The Pull of Gravity* is a novel that both male and female readers will enjoy because it has male and female main characters. For your essay, think about how gender influences the actions and personalities of Nick and Jaycee. How would these characters, and the story, be different if their roles were reversed?

### **Realism and Setting**

Nick and Jaycee are written as pretty average teenagers, who go on a journey to fulfill the wish of their dying friend. Most of the setting takes place in upstate New York over a long weekend. As teenagers, do you think you could set off on a journey like Nick and Jaycee? For your essay, think about how prepared, or not prepared, Nick and Jaycee are for this trip. How would you compare on a similar journey? How would you prepare for this? What would you pack? What should Nick and Jaycee have packed that they didn't?

### **Essays Comparing and Contrasting *The Pull of Gravity* with *Of Mice and Men***

These suggested essay topics are provided in the following Connections section of the guide.



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## Student Study Guide: Making Connections Between *The Pull of Gravity* & *Of Mice and Men*

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### Discussion Topics

- Both *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pull of Gravity* explore themes of friendship and loneliness. How have the characters in both novels displayed important acts of friendship? What other common themes do the two books share?
- How have plans gone awry for George and Lennie? For Nick and Jaycee? Do plans ever pan out?
- How are the timelines in both books similar? How have Steinbeck and Polisner created characters that invoke strong emotions in the reader in such a short time period?
- Jaycee's reading of *Of Mice and Men* aloud to Nick is a means of carrying Nick from Glenbrook to Rochester in much the same way as the telling of the story of the new ranch with rabbits is a means for George to carry Lennie to the new ranch. Explain.

### Figurative Language

Both novels have strong examples of foreshadowing, imagery, idioms, symbolism and more. Do a mini-lesson and/or PowerPoint or Prezi presentation comparing the figurative language used in both novels, possibly using one of the following “jumping off” points:

- Foreshadowing:
  - In *Of Mice and Men* Steinbeck foreshadows the ultimate act of friendship and the demise of George and Lennie’s dream.
  - In *The Pull of Gravity* Polisner foreshadows an upheaval with Nick’s family and problems with the journey.
- Idioms:
  - Both *Of Mice and Men* (Chapter 1) and *The Pull of Gravity* (Chapter 2) use a form of the idiom “bust a gut.” Compare and contrast idioms found in *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pull of Gravity*. Does the use of idioms create a particular voice or

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feeling in these books? Do idioms “date” a story? Are they particular to setting? Or are they able to transcend place and time?

### Using Graphic Organizers

For better understanding of the two novels, use Venn diagrams to compare Nick and Jaycee to George and Lennie. Use Venn diagrams to compare major themes in both novels such as friendship, loneliness & loss, loyalty, etc.

To understand the plot development of both stories, fill out story maps.

- <http://www.readwritethink.org/> (sponsored by NCTE and the IRA) supplies a number of graphic organizers that can be used in the classroom.

### Suggested Essay Topics

- Joseph Campbell introduced the concept of the Monomyth or "[Hero's Journey](#)"--the main elements being Departure, Initiation, and Return (also sometimes referred to as Separation, Initiation and Return), and each main element having sub-elements such as The Call to Adventure, Refusal of Call (both during Separation or Departure) and Belly of the Whale (at outset of Initiation). Both *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pull of Gravity* follow this monomyth in many ways. For example, both stories have strong examples of "The Belly of the Whale," defined as the final separation from the hero's known world and self, a/k/a a character's "lowest point," ("Often the hero will appear to actually be physically swallowed up in something much larger than he is"). It is the point when the character is transitioning between worlds or selves.

Give examples of The Belly of the Whale in *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pull of Gravity*, or choose another element of Campbell's Monomyth to discuss and compare and contrast between *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pull of Gravity*.

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## Student Study Guide: Making Connections Between *The Pull of Gravity* & *Of Mice and Men*

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### Suggested Essay Topics (continued)

- Write a compare/contrast essay focusing on common themes in both *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pull of Gravity* such as The American Dream, Friendship, Loyalty, Loneliness, etc.
- Write a compare/contrast essay focusing on common elements of story telling e.g. figurative language, idioms, etc

### Using Technology

- Google Maps
  - Have students make the journey with Nick & Jaycee and George & Lennie.
- PowerPoint/Prezi
  - Prezi is a wonderful (and free!) alternative to PowerPoint that students can access at home since everything is stored online.
    - Students can create presentations about the different uses of figurative language, their favorite character, author biographies, etc.

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## Student Study Guide: *The Pull of Gravity* Unit Project Ideas

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### Character Journal

This project allows you to show your creativity while also showing your ability to analyze the characters more thoroughly.

- First, choose a character from *The Pull of Gravity*. It does not *have* to be the main character. Stepping into the mind of a minor character can make it more interesting to write and read!
- Next, write journal entries from this character's point of view. Your journal does not have to cover the entire novel. You may choose to begin the journal in the time before the novel begins or end it after the novel ends. However, some of your journal entries should take place during the time of the novel. Make your choices based on how interesting the journal would be to write and read. Tease the reader of your journal into reading the book.
- Your journal should be 3-5 pages. However, this is a guide for length. You should be creative with the format you use to present the journal. There is no set number of journal entries required; put in as many as appropriate.
- Please include a cover page with the novel's title, author, character name, as well as your name and class hour.
- Remember, be creative! Make the emotions of the character come alive for the reader!

### Redesigned Cover

Many covers lately have models that "look" like the character(s) in the novel they're representing. Create a new cover for *The Pull of Gravity* without using models. Your cover must include the following:

1. The title and the author's name.
2. An "advance praise" blurb—the type another author would offer for the back cover of the book . This can be either your own, or one from another student or friend who has read the book.
3. Symbol(s), key ideas, objects/tokens from the novel.
4. Your own jacket flap (book description/hook) that will grab a reader's attention and interest.
5. An explanation of how your cover connects to *The Pull of Gravity* (use formal writing, paragraph form, one page minimum, and stapled to the back of your cover).

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## Student Study Guide: *The Pull of Gravity* Unit Project Ideas

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### Novel/Movie Soundtrack

Create a soundtrack for *The Pull of Gravity*. Choose music that relates to the theme, mood, an event, a character, an idea, etc. Remember, as this is a school project, please use school-appropriate song selections! Please include the following in your Novel/Movie Soundtrack project:

1. Design a cover jacket for your CD soundtrack. You will need to examine other album jacket covers in order to do so. Consider the title, cover art, artists included, etc.
2. Choose at least five songs that you would include on the soundtrack. Place these selections on your CD cover along with their artist.
3. Include an explanation of the connection between each song and the book, including when each song would be played and excerpts from the lyrics that demonstrate why it should be played.

Remember:

- Be creative!
- *Extra Credit: Turn in your actual soundtrack burned on a CD (10 pts.)*

### Book Trailer

Using a program like Windows Moviemaker or JayCut ([jaycut.com](http://jaycut.com)), develop your own book trailer for *The Pull of Gravity*. Book trailers can serve as a “preview” of the book to grab a potential reader’s attention, or it can be created to highlight the main points of the novel. A great book trailer includes images and text that fit with the novel, along with music that suits the mood of the novel.

Book Trailer Checklist:

- ✓ Is your book trailer 1-1 ½ minutes long?
- ✓ Does it include pictures that fit with the story?
- ✓ Is there audio? (This is a MUST for a good book trailer!)
- ✓ Do you have text to go along with the pictures?
  - Is this text easy to read (font/color)?
  - Are the transitions timed long enough for others to read?
- ✓ Have you included the major points/themes?
- ✓ Have you checked for any grammatical/spelling errors?