

# **Ace Hits Rock Bottom Short Guide**

## **Ace Hits Rock Bottom by Barbara Beasley Murphy and Judie Wolkoff**

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## Overview

Delacorte Press published Murphy and Wolkoff's novel *Ace Hits Rock Bottom* in 1985. In this second book of the Ace series, Ace and the gang are back on the streets of New York City—in debt. Their movie careers fizzled quickly, and they need jobs to pay for all the goodies and gadgets they bought in advance of their earnings. Desperate for acting work, they leap at their shady agent's offer to work at the Wartzburg Theater in the Bronx, only to discover that it is not a theater at all—but a rest home for aging actors.

The gang's new jobs happen to be in the territory of a rival gang, the Piranhas. After facing the dreaded Piranhas in *Ace Hits the Big Time*, Ace and the gang do not want to cause trouble. How Ace and the Falcons deal with the Piranhas, earn the muchneeded money, and serve the aging actors, delights and entertains readers.

# About the Author

Barbara Beasley Murphy was born to Dr.

William De Ford (a physician) and Henryetta (Kurtz) Beasley on February 4, 1933 in Springfield, Ohio. When Murphy was a child, her mother read children's books and recited poetry to her regularly.

As Murphy grew up in Ohio, and then in North Carolina during World War II, many issues touched young Murphy—including cultural diversity, violence, and racism. In addition to her love of children's books, and reading and writing for children, Murphy believes that these early experiences began to set the stage for her future career as a writer.

As a young adult, Murphy attended Drake University from 1951-1953. She earned her bachelor of arts degree from the University of North Carolina in 1955. After graduation, Murphy pursued a career in junior high education as a teacher of English in Euclid, Ohio (1956-1957). She became a high school teacher of speech and drama in New York City (1957-1962). Her career also included an acting stint during the summer of 1957 at the Wilmington Summer Theatre in Ohio. The author later married Bill Murphy, a cartoonist and designer, in 1961, and raised their two children: Stephen and Jennifer.

Murphy told *Contemporary Authors* (1984): "I'm in love with the visual, with seeing.

I'm not naturally good with words as many writers are. Words sometimes come slowly.

But I can't draw or paint so I write."

The author continued, "When I write, the story comes to me in pictures. I try to describe them well enough for a reader to see what I see. After the sentences are down, I mess around with the words, smoothing them like adobe, or plumping them up like pillows. It seems egotistical writing down your images for a year or so then waiting impatiently for other people to read them.

My only excuse is that I'm grateful for the other writers who do it. Their words have added such richness to my life, I forgive the vanity and appreciate their impulse to share."

The author believes that several things in her life helped her to get started writing books. As she experienced racial prejudices firsthand in the South during WWII, she grew concerned about this tension. It motivated her to write *Home Free*. Writing helped her to work through the problems she had with racism.

The author continued to write books about deep issues. She mitigated them with humor to present the issues kindly. Murphy wrote the book *No Place to Run* in response to the violence she heard about in New York news reports. This book tells how a New York

City boy deals with his guilt, experiences self-forgiveness, and gains acceptance after he helps his friends spray paint a sleeping vagrant.

School board members in Calhoun County, Alabama, banned the book for "vulgar" language, and later placed the book on the restricted shelves of school libraries. Murphy, a deeply religious person and child advocate, fought the ban with the aid of the P.E.N. American Center with the belief that banning books "leads to the diminishment of human life."

At the same time Murphy wrote *No Place to Run*, Murphy helped build the Saint Peter's Church in Manhattan at Citicorp Center. For eight years, she served on the design and building committees and the church council. They tore down the old structure, had the new one designed, comforted the congregation during the move, maintained a ministry to the city, and watched the new church rise. Murphy believes that "a book is an interpretation of what life is." To her, building and writing are "very passionate things."

Murphy lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

To begin her day as a writer, she looks at the cascading view of mountains from her home.

On a clear day, she can see Colorado one hundred twenty-five miles away as she "attends the dawn." Murphy then goes to her studio and writes her latest project. She takes time out to have "her dog walk her."

The author stays active in associations as a member of P.E.N., the Authors Guild, Phi Beta Kappa, and the New Mexico Book Association. She is a founding member of Children's Writers and Artists Collaborative. She also serves on the International Women's Forum for successful women in business and law. Murphy is currently working on a project with the Museum of New Mexico and the Museum of New Mexico Press.

She believes that young adults interested in writing can read to expand their vocabulary and to learn about story pacing. They can also listen to develop a good ear for dialogue.

Murphy's cowriter on the "Ace" books, Judie Wolkoff, was born to John Robert Edwards and Edna Godfrey on December 23, 1939 in Lewiston, Montana. As a child growing up with two siblings, Wolkoff always wrote. She recalled one poignant memory in an interview to Michelle Prebilic (July, 2000). She was a housebound eightor nine-year-old child with measles, and her mother read her numerous books in an effort to entertain her. Even then, Wolkoff remembers the desire to write books.

In high school, Wolkoff served as assistant editor for the newspaper, writing editorial articles and feature stories. Wolkoff later graduated from the University of Utah and pursued careers in teaching and writing. She taught elementary school in California and in New York City. As a teacher, she took the opportunity to read her stories to her class, although she did not tell them she had written the stories.

Wolkoff says that she "never knew where to send her stories" for publication. As she raised her two children, she wrote picture books. She says that her characters seemed to "grow up with her children." As Wolkoff began to send the picture book manuscripts to publishers, she received letters in return saying that she should publish her ideas in a novel. Then, she sent a picture book to Murphy's editor. He returned the manuscript, also suggesting that the idea would be perfect for a novel.

She decided to write her first novel, Wally.

Because of this editor's assistance, Wolkoff published her first book, and continued to write and publish novels. She also wrote television scripts.

Wolkoff's books presented realistic problems faced by young people in books lightened with humor. She wrote one serious book, *Where the Elf King Sings*, which she researched and wrote for a year and a half.

She presented the conflicts of the Vietnam War through the eyes of the children whose fathers served. The book met with harsh criticism due to the country's division over the Vietnam War. Many people saw it as an anti-war novel. Wolkoff decided that she felt more at home writing humorous tales.

In the summer of 1978, Wolkoff met coauthor Murphy in a workshop at New School University in Greenwich Village, New York. As students taking this writing for children class, Wolkoff and Murphy both seemed to laugh at similar situations.

They bonded through their senses of humor. Inspired by humor, by New York, and by the sympathy that they felt for boys struggling to become men, they decided to write a book together.

They wanted Ace to be humorous and to give hope to children. As they wrote the book over the next year, Wolkoff and Murphy did a lot of laughing as they came up with the zany cast of characters. Along the way, they got "lots of male advice."

Writing a book together "turned out to be a lot of fun," notes Murphy in an interview with Michelle Prebilic (July, 2000). As they wrote, the authors learned the struggles typical of rewriting a co-authored book for publication. They worked through the many disagreements inherent in this process. At the request of their editor, they wrote a second book in the series, *Ace Hits Rock Bottom*.

Wolkoff found the perfect idea for the sequel. Inspired by a 60Minutes show about a retirement home for aged opera singers in Rome, Italy, Wolkoff believed it to be the perfect backdrop for the next round of adventures with Ace and the gang. She contacted Murphy, who bought the tape to view the show. The idea came to fruition in the sequel as Ace and the gang find jobs at the Wartzburg Theatre, a rest home for aging actors.

Critics tout *Ace Hits the Big Time* and *Ace Hits Rock Bottom* as some of Wolkoff's best books. Filled with humor and action, critics believe they capture the attention of reluctant readers.

Wolkoff believes that young adults interested in a writing career should write about their own experiences or memories that they have from childhood. She believes that forming a good editor relationship is essential, as well as having a good sense of humor.

Wolkoff does not write now. Her creative imagination inspired her to take up creating ceramic masks. However, she believes that she will write again.

Wolkoff lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Murphy and Wolkoff continue to keep in touch with each other.

# Setting

The authors develop the setting by bringing readers right into the sights and sounds of New York. The novel starts in "The Pits," Ace's New York apartment, with a scene that any teen can relate to. Flo, Ace's mom, yells for him to wake up. Ace, whining that it is summer vacation, pulls the covers over his head. He reminisces about his stardom the previous school year as the lead actor in *Bound and Gagged*. At first a big hit, the movie fizzled quickly, leaving Ace and his friends, the Purple Falcon gang, with credit-card bills to pay. Now Flo expects Ace to get a job over the summer.

Desperate for money and not wanting to work at Gristede's, the grocery store where his mom works, Ace accepts an acting job from his shady agent, Jerry Cone. Cone tells Ace that the job will be at the Wartzburg Theater in the Bronx. Ace dons his trademark eyepatch to head for the Dumont Health Club where the Falcons work out to build muscle. Ace persuades the Falcons to join him, and they head for their interviews.

The setting continues to develop as the Falcons travel on the New York subway.

Suffering in un-air-conditioned cars, the Falcons move from car to car in hopes of finding relief. As they cross between cars, Ace smells corroded air that leaves "a metal taste" in his mouth. The train lurches and jerks to a stop, and the lights go out. Ace describes himself as feeling like "a poached egg" in his jeans. This scene typifies New York and brings readers right into the action of the city.

As Ace exits the train to see the Bronx for the first time, the authors take us vividly with him. Ace anxiously hopes to see Yankee Stadium. Instead, he notices a poor shopping-bag lady picking through a trash can. As the Falcons look out from the Grand Concourse, the main drag, Ace sees luxury buildings "going to seed," with a couple of buildings that look like "burned-out shells."

These scenes place readers in New York City using sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste.

As the Falcons' adventures unfold, readers experience New York, including the Bronx, in a realistic and vivid way: living in an apartment, walking on busy city streets, riding the crowded, un-air-conditioned subway to and from the Wartzburg, and racing through the streets in a yellow Checker cab.

The authors go into such detail that they show Ace concentrating on the "silver spire of the Chrysler Building" while Freddie glues his attention on a plane headed into La Guardia Airport.

Back at "The Pits," Murphy and Wolkoff add realism by describing the typical life of the Hobarts: Ace's dad sitting in a Barcalounger either snoozing or watching television, Nora sitting on the floor counting her money from her dog-walking job, and Ace's mom sitting at the kitchen table in a pink robe, poring over a stack of bills.



From the Falcons' first day of work, Murphy and Wolkoff draw readers vividly into the issues through adventures and action.

For example, Ace and the Falcons begin to develop a mature perspective on the value of money as they wait tables, tend the landscape, and deal with the aging actors. Ace learns that acting and earning money takes practice, perseverance, and sometimes courage.

Increasing the effectiveness of the setting, Murphy and Wolkoff create a background with people contemporary to the mid-1980s. Ace thinks he sees Dustin Hoffman working on his biceps at the Dumont Health Club. Slick practices entrechats and tour jetes in front of a mirror as if he is admiring Rudolf Nureyev. George does aerobics with a group of Broadway chorus girls, and Freddy chins himself to the top bar with muscles that would make Arnold Schwarzenegger envious. Like Paul Newman, a method actor, Ace learns to observe people and knows how they feel inside.

To further enhance their re-creation of the era, the authors set the mood of the time through gadgets, games, and clothing. Gadgets and games include Monopoly, Barbie, Nautilus exercise equipment, and an Apple computer. The clothing of the time includes references to Cross-Your-Heart Bras, a white macrame bag, Adidas sports bags, and French-import designer sunglasses. George wears Joe Weider weight-lifting suits—one for every day of the week.

The use of expressive slang typical of New York teenagers helps to create believable characters. For example, the boys' conversations (like "Get George first, would ya, Ace? I wanna do a few plies. Whaddya think?" and "Message? Umm . . . naw. No thanks. I'll call tomorrow") sound realistic and keep the pace of the novel active and entertaining.

The authors also use references to the foods of the time to add humor. At the Wartzburg, the cook serves "cow's brain," mashed potatoes, baby peas, and melon balls. At Ace's home, Flo serves a steaming casserole of leftovers: gummy noodles, bornagain vegetables, and tuna-bake. Today's family would have most likely ordered a take-out meal instead of picking at gummy leftovers. Throughout the novel, the authors interject the food of the 1980s: Schlitz beer, La Yogurt breakfasts, Kool-Aid, and graham crackers. These foods not only bring out the humor but also help readers identify with the characters and the era.

# Social Sensitivity

Murphy and Wolkoff show sensitivity to the world they create in their story. They accept the diversity of cultures in New York—African American, Indian, Caucasian, French, and Latin—showing respect for their differences. They describe each culture accurately, using typical mannerisms and dialects.

The novel portrays compassion and respect for the homeless. Ace experiences hunger as he rides the subway dressed as a bag lady. He cannot take his eyes off the fresh-baked chewy pretzel with rock salt that a little kid eats in a seat directly across from him. The kid's mother catches Ace staring, and moves to another seat. As the subway reaches the 125th Street station, the mother passes Ace on her way out the door.

She hands him a dollar bill saying, "Buy yourself something to eat . . . You look hungry."

Another social issue the authors deal with is gangs and gang violence. Arson gangs regularly spark fires in the Bronx, burning down many businesses. The Wartzburg residents, the Falcons, and the Piranhas spend time figuring out who is destroying the buildings. In the end, the Piranhas give Nora, Ace's sister, a tip on the mastermind behind the arson gangs. Nora turns the lead in, and collects reward money for her information, much to Ace's dismay.

An appropriate level of family feeling is depicted in the concern that Ace's family shows for one another. As the family watches Ace on television news during a subway fire, Flo cries. As Ace returns home, Nora hollers that Ace is home and he is not burned. Flo embraces Ace in a hug. Barney squeezes in between Flo and Ace and pats Ace's shoulder. Barney shows concern again by asking Ace if he inhaled smoke; little does Barney know that seeing Raven waiting in the living room has rendered Ace speechless.

Murphy and Wolkoff tactfully develop Ace's relationship with Raven, while maintaining the integrity of the characters, and their enduring friendship. Ace still believes that she is "the goddess of J. F. Kennedy High." Her velvet skin with a deep coppery summer tan, her black silk hair floating over the sleeves of her ruffled organdy blouse as she is all dressed in white, make Ace feel that she has never been more beautiful. Although the authors show Ace plotting to have time alone with Raven and thinking of the private things he can do with her, Ace spends most of the novel trying to secure a kiss.

# Literary Qualities

Murphy and Wolkoff use first-person point of view to present Ace Hits Rock Bottom. This technique allows readers to know what Ace knows, and to experience his adventures personally. Flashbacks appropriately provide readers with needed information, like Ace's movie adventure in Ace Hits the Big Time.

The authors evoke a sense of New York City, the Bronx, and the characters, using images of taste, sight, smell, hearing, and touch to bring the scenes alive. For instance, Ace uses a sponge, hot water, and disinfectants to clean food cans that he organizes alphabetically in the hot Wartzburg pantry.

Desperate to block out the radio as it broadcasts the baseball game at Yankee Stadium where the other Falcons and the residents are, Ace sings loudly. Sir Cecil bursts into the pantry, uttering a command that startles Ace, almost knocking him off a tall ladder. Sir Cecil has heard Ace's singing and wants to teach him to expand his diaphragm and to project his voice.

Murphy and Wolkoff also use the narrative technique of interior monologue to record Ace's thoughts, memories, and feelings. Readers hear Ace think something that differs from what he says. This reveals Ace's depth of character, and adds verbal irony. For example, Ace wants to tell agent Jerry Cone how the Falcons really feel about being mislead to a retirement home instead of an acting job. He mutters as the phone rings "Boy, you just wait, Mr. Jerry as-indairy Cone as-in-ice-cream! Who do you think you are, Huh? Sending us, the Purple Falcons, up to an old folks home. We're actors. Movie star actors! And we demand ... " As a receptionist answers the phone, Ace politely asks for Jerry. After a five-minute hold, she tells Ace that Jerry went out to lunch, at five-thirty! Readers feel Ace's internal struggle over his fear of confrontation. It is only at the resolution of the novel that Ace musters the courage to leave a message to Jerry, firing him and telling him exactly how he feels.

The authors use comedy throughout the novel to deal with the issues of debt, self-esteem, and acceptance. Ace faces these issues in many adventures, emerging from them with a greater sense of freedom. He learns that he must be responsible for the choices that he makes; and the things that he buys, including his Gravity Guide System. He learns that he enjoys acting in front of live audiences, and that he can handle the Piranhas.

To create believable characters, the authors make extensive use of figurative language—describing one thing in terms of another. For example, figures of speech describe characters or actions, such as "cat walking over a pencil" to mean effortlessly, and "face carved out of lava rock" as Ace refers to Freddy's features in the dark. Figurative language regularly describes scenes and situations: "snap like a turtle," "break a leg," "heart started galloping like a runaway horse" at the "goddess of J. F. Kennedy High," and cheeks "pouched like a hamsters'."

The use of the New York City subway places readers directly in the region of the novel. If readers refer to a map of the New York City subway system as they read the book, they can literally follow the adventures of Ace and the gang. For example, the Falcons travel from Times Square to the Sixth Avenue subway station and hop an uptown train. They ride in a hot, crowded subway to the 170th Street station, which takes about half an hour. That is about the time it takes today's travelers to go between those stations. The authors successfully integrate the region into the story.

# Themes and Characters

The protagonist, Horace "Ace" Hobart, is a mischievous sixteen-year-old boy who has just finished his first year at Kennedy High and started summer vacation. Readers who met him in *Ace Hits the Big Time* will be familiar with Ace's ability to look at himself and his life objectively. He relates his reactions, feelings, and shortcomings in a humorous, light-hearted way.

In a typical misadventure, Ace travels, at his agent's suggestion, to the Garden Room at the Starlight Hotel to meet Myron Evans, the head of properties for Global Studios.

Ace daydreams about the exciting opportunities this meeting will unveil and the fancy restaurant he is heading for. Instead he finds the place run down and dirty, and he meets "Stab" Evans, a member of the Piranhas. Realizing Evans tricked him, Ace tries to avoid food poisoning by ordering hot tea and three hard-boiled eggs. As they eat, Stab tells Ace about the ringleader responsible for the Bronx arsons. Stab explains that the Piranhas cannot call the police because they would "get their throats slit."

Needing the ten-grand reward money, Ace decides to call the police and turn in the ringleader. When the police sergeant tells Ace that the name and address he provides matches that of the New York City Police Commissioner, Ace realizes that the Piranhas set him up. Humiliated, Ace walks home and calls himself an "Idiot! Moron!

Jackass!" He punches himself and kicks his shin, imagining that the Piranhas are sitting on a stoop laughing at him. He swears that he will carry his "gullible role in the Piranha con game" secretly to his grave. But as the novel ends, Ace has gained a new maturity as he uses sarcasm and humor to successfully avoid being set up by the Piranhas a second time.

Among the many facets of Ace's rounded, dynamic character is his vulnerability, first revealed in *Ace Hits the Big Time*, and a central theme in this novel. When the Falcons take the jobs at the Wartzburg Theater in the Bronx, and subsequently realize that they will be on Piranha turf daily, Ace has to solve the problem. He remembers Nevada Culhane, his favorite fiction character, and the solution presents itself: disguise. Ace removes his eyepatch and puts on torn runny Supp-Hose, dirty tube socks, decayed leather slippers, a grungy sack dress, two sweaters, and a horse blanket. Ace and the Falcons successfully protect themselves from being discovered by the Piranhas and hide their vulnerability.

Ace's developing maturity is another theme in the novel, along with self-realization, beauty and love, retaliation, and aging. As the novel begins, Ace is forced to face the reality that he must be responsible for his debt. As Flo points out, Ace owes money for a water bed, black sheets, a wallmounted stereo, a tape deck, an Atari set, no-fog clock, a chiming telephone, many Claude Clerc shirts, and his Bloomingdale "nylon zebra pajamas." Flo insists that he get a job immediately. As Ace's luck has it, Jerry Cone, the Falcon's questionable agent, calls to offer him work at the Wartzburg Theater.

The Falcons interview for the job and discover that the "theater" is an actors' retirement home. Ms. Otterbridge, the Director, assigns Freddy and Slick to work at noon as gardeners and later clean up tea dishes and set the table for dinner, while J.D., Ace, and George are to report to work at 3:00 P.M. to bus and wait on tables. The jobs earn minimum wage for six hours a day, seven days a week. The Falcons take a five-minute conference to wrestle with their dilemma. Should they take these menial jobs or wait for an acting job? Feeling demeaned and ready to give up the jobs, the Falcons realize they need the jobs. As Freddy says, "Man, we got to take those jobs!"

biting the words as if they were a "piece of tough meat." "We gotta do it. No dinero, no life! I'm half a guy without money."

As they perform their daily chores, all the Falcons gradually mature and grow in understanding themselves. They learn to like the actors and appreciate their jobs.

They realize the hard work that goes into running a retirement home and dealing with the many personalities. Slowly, Ace pays off his debts as he takes financial responsibility. Sir Cecil, an actor living at the rest home, takes a liking to Ace. He decides to give Ace daily acting lessons to perfect his skills. These lessons prepare Ace to take the lead role in the Wartzburg's annual Dramafest. As Ace works through his intense fear of performing, and does a stellar job in the play, he realizes that he likes "having a breathing, live audience."

He describes it like "being on a roller coaster to play a part in front of people. I was a happy guy." This self-realization boosts Ace's confidence and shows that Ace has matured enough to work through his fear to try new things.

The significance of beauty subtly weaves itself through the novel. Raven Galvez's physical beauty and kindness captured Ace's imagination from the first day of school in *Ace Hits the Big Time*. Her charm continues in this novel, although she does not play as active a role. Raven's beauty distracts Ace, as does her impeccable style. Their relationship is built on an innocent teenage love.

Ace dreams of the things that he and Raven can do together, yet they never come to fruition. Readers share Ace's hope but are not surprised when he discloses in the novel's resolution that "she's some kisser!"

Retaliation, another of the novel's themes, threatens the Falcons' unity. Angry that Slick has been acting like "Mr. Fancy Pants"—fooling around on the job and not doing his share—Freddy retaliates by describing to the Falcons how he "smooshed his [Slick's] nose and stretched the corner of his mouth to his ear." However, Freddy misses Slick at work and feels tremendous remorse as he relates the incident to the other Falcons.

When Slick recovers, Freddy and Slick make peace with each other. They create a new level of understanding, realizing that each person has special traits. Freddy, a sensitive boy, feared that Slick would end up "a no-good disco bum." In response, Slick gave up

"discos and bun-hugging pants forever." Freddy realizes that Slick's talent is for classical dance—"it's his ticket to the future." Freddy even visits Slick's classes on occasion and reports his progress to the Falcons, who have grown in maturity as they work through their feelings of anger.

Aging is another theme that the authors explore in *Ace Hits Rock Bottom*. When the Falcons first meet the actors at the retirement home, the teens want to quit. At best they are uncomfortable and awkward at their care-taking jobs. As the story unfolds, the Falcons hear the spunk, see the vitality, and witness the humor of the aging actors.

Readers, along with the Falcons, learn to like the actors and feel enriched by the experience. As the Falcons complete their summer jobs at the novel's resolution, a tearful line of actors says goodbye.

Murphy and Wolkoff characterize the protagonist, Ace Hobart, indirectly by showing him in action. Readers hear him speak, think, and feel throughout the novel. The authors show readers how Ace's thoughts differ from what he says, and how he behaves towards others, making him a believable character. Readers can see his dynamic character grow and change. His confidence builds as he plays the lead part in the Wartzburg Dramafest.

Friend Raven Galvez, a smart and conscientious teenager, helps bring Ace back to his passions, his fears, and his roots, as true friends do. In *Ace Hits Rock Bottom*, Sir Cecil hopes to entice Ace to play the lead role in the French play *Cyrano de Bergerac* at the Dramafest. As the event approaches, Ace tells Raven that acting does not appeal to him. Raven knows Ace too well, and she does not believe it. She suggests to Ace that he is scared. Later, Ace realizes that he feels frightened of going on stage. Raven helps Ace learn his lines, smiling when he messes up a word and giving him the correct one.

The fear that Ace feels intensifies on opening night, almost preventing him from going on stage. Readers see and hear him mature as he works through his intense fear. Raven becomes instrumental in Ace's transition to maturity.

Ace's family continue in this sequel to provide a backdrop of conflict inherent in most teenagers' lives. His mom, Flo, provides a necessary level of conflict, urging Ace to get a job and to take responsibility, as any mother would. She shows concern for his job and his travels to the Bronx, but keeps enough distance to show that she trusts his choices. Both she and his dad, Barney, show concern over Ace's prolific spending habits in light of his lack of money.

Ace's sister, Nora, continues to provide the most conflict. She entertains the Piranhas when they visit Ace, confides in Raven, and tells Ace that he will never be a good actor.

She is the perfect younger sister.

The Falcon gang is back and their characters have changed. For example, they have become "The cleanest, best-smelling gang in the city," according to Ace. As they

prepare to interview at the Wartzburg, they shower and shampoo at the Dumont Health Club in Times Square where they exercise.

They have given up their black leather jackets and they carry Adidas sports bags.

Freddy is the farthest in the Nautilus exercise program and his muscles show it.

J.D. looks conservative—he has cropped his Afro and removed the zigzag part.

George does aerobics and lifts weights in a different outfit for every day of the week.

Slick has body perm in his hair, wears leotards and tights, and does leg stretches, disco, and plies like a ballerina. He no longer spits.

Nevada Culhane, the cool cowboy herodetective in the books that Ace reads, continues to be Ace's mentor and source of inner strength. As Ace encounters tough situations, he recalls the cowboy's mottos and words that propel him into action.

Sir Cecil becomes vital in developing Ace's acting abilities. The greatest Shakespearean actor of his day, knighted by the king of England in 1939, Sir Cecil acts like a race car driver in his wheel chair as he teaches Ace the discipline needed to be a great classical actor. Ace learns how to use his diaphragm, project his voice, and observe. Sir Cecil asks Ace to play the lead role in the annual Wartzburg Dramafest.

Ace finally accepts, and meets his day of reckoning as he overcomes his stage fright.

Sir Cecil helps Ace open up to new passions as he realizes that he enjoys acting in front of a live audience.



# Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss Ace's relationship with Raven. How does Raven support Ace? What impact did she have on Ace as he matures during the story?
2. Discuss Ace's relationship with Jacqueline. What did he learn by co-starring in the Dramafest with her? What impact did she have on Ace?
3. Describe how the Falcons matured during the novel. What life lessons did they learn as they worked at the Wartzburg over the summer? Do you think they would work there again?
4. How do the authors use the technique of flashback? Interior monologue? Comedy and humor?
5. What significance does the cool cowboy Nevada Culhane play in Ace's life? How and why does he help Ace? Do you have a fictional character that you admire and "lean on"?
6. Characterize Sir Cecil. How does he help Ace become a better actor? To mature?
7. Humor plays a mitigating role in dealing with several issues in the novel. What issues do the authors address and how does humor develop the ideas?
8. Characterize your favorite actor at the Wartzburg. What makes him or her special to you? How do you think he or she helped the story develop?
9. How do the authors address the issues of arson? Of fear? Of personality differences?
10. Ace bought several items, including a Gravity Guide System, when he expects to earn money as an actor. The money never materialized. How did he handle this financial responsibility? Describe a situation in which you bought things you could not afford. How did you handle the responsibility and what did you learn?
11. Slick enjoyed learning to dance, performing plies, entrechats, and tour jetes. What do you think inspired him to dance? What would a career in dance be like?
12. Ace and the Falcons felt uncomfortable traveling through Piranha territory to report to work each day. Discuss when you have felt uneasy in a new setting and how you coped. Compare it with how Ace coped.

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What characteristics in young adults cause them to form gangs? To commit arsons? What prevents gang violence?
2. Describe a summer job that you took that turned out to be very different than you originally thought. How did you handle it?
3. The authors use the New York Subway system as a backdrop for the regionalism in the novel. How has the subway system changed in the last twenty years? How will it change in the next twenty years?
4. Have eating patterns changed in the last twenty years? If so, how? How does this affect health of teenagers today?
5. Describe the skills that you would need if you wanted to be an actor. What kinds of movies or plays would you like to act in? How would you develop those skills and why?
6. With the aging of the "baby boom" population, retirement homes will become more common. What credentials does someone need to be a retirement home director? What would an ideal retirement home have and why?
7. What skills does it take to become a professional dancer? What would a typical day entail? How do you prepare for this profession?
8. Health clubs have become more sophisticated and service-oriented in the last twenty years. How have health clubs changed? How do health clubs use modern technology to help people exercise?

## For Further Reference

"Murphy, Barbara Beasley." In Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series, vol.

20. Detroit: Gale, 1984. Detailed autobiographical essay.

"Wolkoff, Judie (Edwards)." In Contemporary Authors, vol. 159. Detroit: Gale, 1984.

Detailed autobiographical entry.

"Murphy, Barbara Beasley." Telephone interview with Michelle Prebilic, author, in July 2000.

"Wolkoff, Judie." Telephone interview with Michelle Prebilic, author, July 2000.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

According to Murphy, Random House plans to release the series (Ace Hits the Big Time, Ace Hits Rock Bottom, and Fly Like an Eagle, possibly renamed as Ace Flies Like an Eagle) as part of a new print-on-demand service in 2000. Readers can place an order online and have a copy printed and mailed to them.

Also according to the author, several of Murphy's books, No Place to Run (now called Tripping the Runner), Fly Like an Eagle, Annie and the Animals, and Annie at the Ranch will be back in print through the Authors Guild.

Using the online service Backinprint.com, authors offer their private book supplies and quality paperback editions of their books.

Murphy and Wolkoff set the first novel in the series, Ace Hits the Big Time, in the New York City. It describes the adventures of Horace "Ace" Hobart, a sixteen-year-old boy, as he moves with his family from Guttenberg, New Jersey, to Manhattan, New York, so that his father will not have to "sweat the traffic anymore." On his first day of school, Ace meets the Purple Falcons, the toughest gang in Kennedy High.

How Ace greets the Falcons, meets the most beautiful girl he has ever known, and becomes a star propels readers through this lively comedy.

In the last sequel of the series by Murphy, Fly Like An Eagle, Ace's forty-year-old dad, Barney Hobart, decides to search out his natural parents. He asks Ace to accompany him on the journey. In a beat-up Volkswagen, they head to the Ohio orphanage where Barney lived as a child, then to Kansas to visit Barney's spunky grandmother and her twin sister, then to a New Mexico Pueblo, where Barney and Ace meet their new, extended family. Ace learns that he is a quarter Indian. He learns to love and respect his dad by the story's end. He grows comfortable in the circle of his new family and more confident of his place in the old.

If readers like reading about young adults working with aging people, they may enjoy Being with Henry by Martha Brooks. When a confrontation with his latest stepfather turns violent, sixteen-year-old Laker boards the first bus bound for anywhere and ends up panhandling on the street. He meets eightythree-year-old widower, Henry, who cannot adjust to life alone. The two develop a friendship that spans the generations.

Summertime drama will lure readers to Robin Friedman's How I Survived My Summer Vacation: And Lived to Write the Story. It reveals the story of thirteen-year-old Jackie Monterey who wants to write a novel the summer before he starts high school. Yet he cannot get past the first sentence. His friends are no help. It looks like Jackie might find inspiration when he joins the swim team and falls in love with the coach's daughter, but events with his friends start to get weird.

Before the summer ends, everything Jackie counted on has changed.

Stage Fright, by Erica Field, develops the story of sixteen-year-old Alison and her new friend Kayla as they work summer jobs at an Elizabethan village. They meet a lively collection of characters, including a reckless young street entertainer. An escalating series of sabotage incidents convinces Alison that something evil lurks about in this bizarre Elizabethan village.

## Related Web Sites

"Barbara Beasley Murphy Papers." De Grummond Collection: McCain Library and Archives, University Libraries, University of Southern Mississippi. (Author and Illustrator Index to Finding Aids.)

<http://www.lib.usm.edu/degrum/findaids/murphy%2Cbarbara.b.htm>. Material donated by Barbara Beasley Murphy from 1981 to 1995. Contains: Biographical Sketch; Scope and Content; Related Collections; Series and Subseries.

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