

Ace Hits the Big Time Short Guide

Ace Hits the Big Time by Barbara Beasley Murphy and Judie Wolkoff

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Overview

Delacorte Press published Murphy and Wolkoff's novel, *Ace Hits the Big Time*, in 1981. It recounts 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 Horace greets the Falcons, meets the most beautiful girl he has ever known, and becomes a star propels readers through this lively comedy.



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 eight or 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 Prebilib (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 novel opens with a scene to which any teen can relate. Ace, lingering in the bathroom of his new apartment that he calls "The Pits," stares in the mirror in disbelief at a red, swollen sore on his eye.

He can hardly see over the big yellow lump on his bottom lid. In forty-five minutes, he starts his first day at his new high school.

Horrified by his eye, which had been normal the night before, he dons an eye-patch that he finds in his sister's room to cover up the blemish. Then he leaves his family's three-bedroom apartment on the top floor of Twenty-third Street, for his adventurous first day at Kennedy High.

The action takes place at Kennedy High and in its New York surroundings. The realistic setting typifies New York: living in an apartment, riding the bus to and from school, and dealing with crowds and traffic. When Ace arrives at school the first day, he uses the candy store across the street to survey the scene. Kids are wearing the typical clothes of the time—jeans, denim jackets, and T-shirts.

From the first day of school, the authors draw readers into the issues through adventures and action. For example, Ace meets Raven, the most beautiful girl he has ever seen. She happens to be a member of the Purple Falcons, touted as the toughest gang.

Donned in black leather jackets with Purple Falcon embroidered on the back, the gang immediately asks Ace to join. They are intrigued by his eye-patch.

That same day, the eye-patch draws the attention of a couple in a maroon Cougar.

Ace eventually learns that his pursuers are movie producers Francois and Marilyn Maroon from Los Angeles. They want him to star in a low-budget film called *Bound and Gagged*. Dressed in the flair of Hollywood, Marilyn wears clothes like a brown leather get-up dripping with fringe. Later she wears a white skirt and maroon silk shirt with rolled cuffs.

The authors enhance the settings by relating the more mundane details of the characters' surroundings. For example, during a tense pause in conversation between Ace and the Falcons, Ace hears a tractor-trailer truck rattle down Eighth Avenue. He can hear all eight wheels rumble over a manhole cover. As the Falcons and Ace grow in their friendship, they share typical moments leaning on hydrants, eating at pizza parlors, and sitting through boring classes. References to the Falcons filming near Pier 42 off Morton Street, then tiptoeing up to the corner of Morton and Washington, running across Washington where they find a burned out streetlight, and passing two evil-looking Dobermans, round out the lives of the characters and put readers right into the settings.



Murphy and Wolkoff write of places and events typical of people of this decade and continue to keep readers involved and laughing. Ace's ten-year-old sister, Nora, checks out their new neighborhood, finds McDonald's, meets six other ten-year-olds, and tells him in her know-it-all style about the Purple Falcons being the toughest gang at Kennedy.

The authors reference the popular foods typical to a family of the 1980s: from warm orange juice and soggy toast at breakfast, to a bagged lunch of bagel and banana or salami, grape soda, meatloaf at dinner, and after dinner snacks of potato chips.

Moreover, including the typical gadgets of the time makes the novel believable. The authors mention Bic pens that do not write on the first stroke, Nora's Flintstone stickers that she applies inside her red loose-leaf notebook, and her Outer Space Adventure lunch box that replaces her rusty Donald Duck one.

Murphy and Wolkoff also cite people contemporary to the times such as comedian Bill Cosby, actor Burt Reynolds, and the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall.

The use of language typical of New York and teenagers creates believable characters.

The characters speak English and use expressive slang common to teenagers of the time and place. For example, slang sayings like "Let's just hang around, waddya say..."

"We're gonna star in the movie," and "Heh Heh. Ha ha. Us?... Starrin' in a movie?"

sound realistic and keep the pace of the novel active and entertaining.

Social Sensitivity

The authors show sensitivity to the world they create. 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 African American sports a closely shaven Afro with a crooked part running zigzag over the top, representative of the 1980s. The Indian mutters words in Spanish. Each character portrays features that represent his or her culture, yet mesh into the novel like the melting pot that New York City is.

Respect for the different cultures shows sensitivity. The authors use the scene on a national television program, *This Morning*, to emphasize that the mixture of backgrounds and races in the Purple Falcons does not matter—that it is what is inside that counts. "Birds of a feather... Falcon together."

The novel deals with the issues of gangs and gang violence. It portrays some key elements that cause teens to form gangs—the desperate need to belong and the protection they think gangs provide. It deals with these elements using the protagonist to give us a close view of the issues. Moreover, the novel uses comedy, and creativity to show how the Falcon gang overcomes violence.

Ace's family shows concern for one another. Ace decides not to make a big deal about his lunch when he sees his distraught mother pondering the mounds of wooden crates she must unpack. He does not want to make her cry. Nora shows concern for Ace by warning him about what she knows.

Barney puts his arm around Ace's shoulder and empathizes with how difficult it must feel to get used to new ways and new people. The scene ends up in a family hug.

The authors show an appropriate level of sentimentality for a typical American family.

The authors tactfully develop Ace's relationship with Raven, portraying a big kiss, a friendly look, a pat on the leg, or the two arm in arm. In this way the authors maintain the integrity of the characters and their enduring friendship. They also show that Ace knows how to direct his attention: "She was so rosy cheeked I had to quit looking at her or I'd have gotten excited... Don't mix business and pleasure unless you can take the heat!"

Literary Qualities

Murphy and Wolkoff employ a number of literary techniques including: first person point of view using flashbacks, imagery, interior monologue with verbal irony, comedy and humor, interesting language structures including parallel structure, metonymy (a figure of speech where alternate words with similar characteristics are used for what is meant), and regionalism (the use of dialect).

The authors expertly lead us through *Ace Hits the Big Time* using the first person point of view. The authors appropriately use flashbacks to provide needed information to the readers. At first, readers learn of the reason for the Hobart's move to Manhattan—Barney's eighteen years of commuting. Flashbacks also provide the backdrop for most of the tough situations Ace faces. When he feels embarrassed or concerned about a situation, he flashes back to what he learned from Nevada Culhane and wonders what Nevada would do. Then he acts like he thinks Nevada would. These flashbacks provide Ace with a source of strength and a voice of direction throughout the novel.

The authors use imagery to evoke a concrete sensation of New York and the characters. Although many of the senses appeal to the readers' sight, Murphy and Wolkoff use the senses of taste, smell, hearing, and touch as well. For instance, as the Purple Falcons hide to avoid an erupting gang fight, Ace dives into a trash can and notices the stench as his legs go knee-deep into a mound of slime. Watery cottage cheese drips over his head. He gags as strands of cold spaghetti slither down his neck. As he hears the Piranhas come by, he hears Dobermans snarling.

The authors use a narrative technique of interior monologue that records Ace's thoughts, memories, and feelings. This reveals Ace's depth of character, as well as his verbal irony. Readers hear Ace think something that differs from what he says. For example, when Raven says "I can't wait to hear what you tell the Falcons" after they request that Ace join the gang, Ace tells Raven "Neither can I" yet wonders, "What am I going to tell them?" Readers hear him describe himself in Latin as "non compos mentis" i.e., out of it. Mentally deficient...

i.e., ME!" as he describes his state of mind.

When Ace sets out to confront the Piranhas as they hold George captive, readers hear Ace struggle with his fear and then readers see him muster up the courage from Nevada's words on how to deal with the situation. In this scene readers can also see an example of how the authors have him say one thing when he means something else. As Ace walked across a field towards the Piranhas, he whispers to himself, "Be cool, think, think th—" He is grabbed from behind and he reminds himself to be cool. Think. Yet, he says, "How are you? Fine, I hope" as if he is not experiencing any fear. He manages to force a yawn, even though it is far from how he feels.



The authors use comedy throughout the novel to deal with the issues of gang violence, self-esteem, and acceptance. As Ace faces many adventures with these issues, he emerges from them into a greater world of freedom. He learns how to handle a gang without violence, develops a stronger self-esteem as he is chosen to star in a movie, and realizes that the Falcons accept him without his eye-patch. Murphy and Wolkoff use humor, especially while using interior monologue, to bring us light-heartedly through these issues.

Murphy and Wolkoff use interesting language structures including parallel structure, metonymy, and figures of speech to create believable characters. The authors use the figures of speech a boy Ace's age would use to describe characters or actions, such as "was really built" to mean large breasts, "me, myself, and I" as Ace refers to himself, "painting the town," "tickled pink," "lickety split," "birds of a feather," and "walking like flamingos on grass." They use metonymy, such as "the Big Apple" to put readers into the time and place of the region. In addition, they use parallel structure to create drama: "The Maroons were happy... The Falcons were happy... I was happy."

At times, passive verb tense detracts from the interesting language structures. Adding action verbs could help keep readers more passionate about the book and its characters.

The regionalism of the novel takes us through the streets of New York with the kids. From the bus rides to the Pier to the street corners, readers experience New York.

On one street sits an old tan and brown sedan without an engine, stripped of its back wheels and jacked up on cinder blocks.

Readers hear the sounds of the city from the calls of gang members "ca-wa-waoooo-eee aich aich!" to the roar of Dobermans "Gggggggggg-rrrrrrrr!". The speech of the Purple Falcons reproduces the attitudes of the kids of the region: "Where ya from, Ace?", "C'mon, Ace," and "It's lunchtime, ain't it?" These speech patterns and city sensations help us experience the uniqueness of the New York region.



Themes and Characters

The protagonist, Horace "Ace" Hobart, a mischievous sixteen-year-and-four-month-old boy, talks to and confides with readers.

Readers experience Ace's ability to look at himself and his life in a light-hearted manner. Throughout the novel, he humorously relates his reactions and feelings. He has the capacity to look at his shortcomings and shares them with readers in a good-natured and witty way.

For instance, his perceptive sister Nora knew a year before him that his Uncle Jake spent time in jail before he started his wholesale rice business. Nora told Ace that Uncle Jake evaded his income tax. Instead, Ace believed his Aunt Betty's explanation that Uncle Jake went into the hospital for T.B. he contracted while in the merchant marines.

Therefore, Ace sent Uncle Jake a get-well card. These self-disclosures throughout the novel bring light-heartedness and humor to Ace's adventures and mitigate the more serious issues underlying the action.

Furthermore, as Ace meets tough situations, he describes his reactions and feelings. When the Falcons crowd around him for the first time, Ace describes them as flies and himself as the flypaper. He takes a deep breath, praying that his knees will not start knocking like a "pair of castanets."

Ace's round character contains many dimensions, which makes it easy to identify with him. From the beginning, readers see his vulnerability as a teenager. Fearful that the blemish on his eye will ruin his life at Kennedy High, he hides it behind an eyepatch. This eye-patch becomes a source of mystery and intrigue to students, including the Falcons, as well as a protection for Ace.

It protects him from his fear of being rejected by strangers.

It only makes sense that his eye-patch breaks as the story approaches resolution.

When Ace loses his cover, he confronts his fear of being exposed for who he really is.

He turns to run, only to trip on the sidewalk, and stumble into a window full of books. As he hits his head, he opens his eyes to see his favorite author, Nevada Culhane's, latest book. Seeing his mentor, his hero, and remembering his words, gives Ace the courage to carry on.

Now he must face a gang, the Piranhas, by himself, and rescue his friend and gang member, George. Wondering how to meet this challenge, Ace uses subtle humor. He passes a bakery on his way to the gang. He buys the Piranhas a pink twenty-four-inch cake decorated in rose buds. Ace inscribes a get-well message for an injured Piranha in the hospital after a gang fight. He uses this cake as a peace offering, and successfully rescues George without his eye-patch and without any violence. George bursts into



laughter when he realizes that Ace fooled them all with his eye-patch. Ace describes George's laugh as "higher than a goat's...

crazier than a maniac's."

Dealing with acceptance provides the main theme in Murphy and Wolkoff's novel.

It is with the struggle for acceptance that the authors open the novel. Ace wants desperately to fit in, like most sixteen-year-olds. His eye blemish forces him to wear an eye-patch on his first day of school. The eye-patch helps him feel more courageous and meet the new challenges head on. It serves as his protection. The kids are intrigued by it. It helps land him the part in the movie with the Maroons. He wears the eye-patch at school for the entire novel. It is hot and uncomfortable, but he fears the result of taking it off more. Only when it breaks beyond repair during the rescue of George from the Piranhas does he realize that his friends accept him anyway. They think it is hysterical that he fooled them into thinking he had been injured in another gang fight.

Murphy and Wolkoff exemplify the themes of maturation and self-realization as Ace earns the respect of his family, the Falcons, including Raven, and the readers. A caring, thoughtful, and imaginative boy with a keen sense of humor, Ace learns that others hide their vulnerabilities, too. With the Falcons, he realizes that they are "birds of a feather" pretending to be tough gang members which they are not. As the tension of the novel increases towards George's capture and rescue, the things that once protected Ace become unavailable. The eyepatch breaks, and the other Falcons cannot come with him on the journey. He must rely on his own resources. This is where his internal strength, derived in part from his admiration of Nevada Culhane, helps him mature. He frequently remembers words of Culhane's from the many detective novels he has read. These help to spur Ace on to resolution.

The significance of beauty interweaves itself subtly throughout the novel as Ace finds love for the first time. Raven Galvez's physical beauty and kindness capture Ace's imagination from the first day of school.

Since she is a second cousin to Freddie, Ace first believes that Raven acts as the Falcon's bait. Raven's beauty often distracts Ace.

Her satin skin, long black hair, and Spanish flair keep Ace in awe. She encourages him to earn good grades since she takes school seriously and gets excellent grades herself.

Readers see Ace and Raven's friendship develop naturally in their little symbols of love—a gentle touch, a sweet smile, and a kind word. The level of love displayed in the novel stays in line with that typical of an innocent first love.

A theme of retaliation begins when the gangs start their street wars. The Piranhas, Wart Hogs, and Monsoons as well as a couple of unknown gangs, take part in a street fight that sends several boys to the hospital. The gang war explodes at night on the streets of



New York as Ace and the Falcons complete a filming scene at the Pier. They spend the evening hiding in trash cans and then use Uncle Jake's hearse to get home safely.

In retaliation for the gang war, the Piranhas kidnap George from school. They ask Ace to pick George up in an abandoned area. The scene can only lead to violence, but not with Ace in charge. Through his quick thinking and compassion, Ace gives the Piranhas a decorated cake for the hospitalized boy. He keeps the Piranhas from using violence by falsely leading them to believe that he personally knew the gangs mentioned in the paper. This scares the Piranhas into leaving the Falcons alone.

Ace retaliates in non-violent ways, a satisfying resolution to gang violence.

The authors 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. These characterizations of vulnerability and self-talk make Ace appear more believable to readers. Readers can see his dynamic character grow and change. His shyness subsides, as he becomes a sought-after actor for the Bound and Gagged movie.

Friend Raven Galvez, a smart and vivacious teenager, gives Ace courage as well as provides a distraction. They befriend each other during Ace's first day of school, and their friendship experiences the typical conflicts inherent in any relationship—enough conflict to make it feel real. The conflict does not affect the humor of the novel, but rather adds an interesting and real element.

Barney (dad), Flo (mom), and Nora (sister), Ace's family, provide a backdrop of conflict inherent in most teenagers' lives.

They provide support to Ace by being involved in his life. Flo reminds Ace to take his lunch, be prompt, and get enough rest.

Barney takes interest in Ace by asking how he is adjusting to New York. Nora provides the most conflict by warning him of the Falcons and appearing at inopportune moments. She helps develop the aspect of vulnerability in Ace as many younger siblings do by being at the wrong place at the wrong time. In the end, Nora shows respect for Ace and awes him by being impressed with his film success.

Purple Falcons Freddy Cruz, J.D. Jackson, George Wyciewski, and Tony "Slick" Vaccaro, have been named the toughest gang in school. With Raven, they approach Ace the first day of school and ask him to become a member. Reluctantly, Ace joins.

Even though the authors lead readers to believe that the Falcons "mug old ladies and beat up any new kids they think look funny," readers find out the Falcons are harmless. The gang's diverse cultures and backgrounds add a fascinating dimension to the novel, making the story twist and turn so that the readers stay involved. The conflict between Ace and the Falcons helps to demonstrate and to develop Ace's vulnerability, his struggles with self-acceptance, and his confidence. Readers also learn of his desire to



fit in. As the story develops, readers see Ace become confident in handling a variety of situations.

Webber, a clerk at the Riviera Hotel, takes messages for Ace in exchange for a daily snack. This assistance helps Ace to keep distance between the Falcons and himself in the beginning of the novel. It helps Ace coordinate his movie appearances and interactions with Francois and Marilyn Maroon. Francois and Marilyn Maroon from the Maroon Movie Machine see him on the first day of classes with his eye-patch. They want him to star in their latest feature film Bound and Gagged. Their flashy personas, the descriptions of the movie sets, the crew, and the filming scenes help the readers experience Ace's stardom as the lead actor.

Calvin Freckelworth, a friend from New Jersey who visits Ace, is instrumental in developing Ace's maturation. Ace feels that his mother dumps Calvin on him. Ace asks Calvin to run the Riviera desk for Webber while Ace goes to an eye doctor's appointment. Ace promises that he will show Calvin New York afterwards. Calvin's face turns purple with anger at sitting in the Riviera "all day handing out mail and keys to drunks, dopes, and other dips." He yells at Ace that his mother is "always forcing" Ace on him. As Calvin blurts that out, Ace reaches a new level of compassion and develops empathy. He knows how Calvin feels!

Nevada Culhane, the cool, cowboy herodetective in the books that Ace reads, provides Ace with a mentor and hero. Ace uses the cowboy's mottos and attitudes to guide him in difficult situations. As Ace believes, "nothing's too tricky to stump Nevada."

Instead of retreating from a situation, Ace recalls the motto "scheme, surprise, and trick.

Answers are in front of your nose," and uses that motto to problem solve. Without Nevada Culhane, Ace would not have been able to muster the courage to face the new challenges ahead of him.



Topics for Discussion

1. How would the setting in this story be different in the 2000s than in the 1980s?

How would electronics and the Internet play a part in the students' lives? How would it change the story?

2. Discuss Ace's relationship with little sister Nora. What positive effects does she have on Ace that help him become a better person? How does their conflict help Ace change?

3. Describe how the Falcons started as a gang. How do you think that they select new members? Do you think they are "the toughest gang" at Kennedy?

4. How do the authors use the technique of flash back in the novel? Interior monologue? Comedy?

5. What significance does the cool cowboy Nevada Culhane have on Ace's life? How and why does he help Ace?

What would happen if Ace did not have Nevada to rely on?

6. How did Raven get involved with the Falcons? What role does she play?

7. How does Ace's fear of rejection play a major role in his identity? How does he begin to overcome it?

8. Humor plays a big role in dealing with several tough issues in the novel. What issues do the authors address and how does humor develop the ideas?

9. Characterize your favorite gang member. Why do you like him or her? What would happen in the story if he or she tried to leave the gang?

10. Characterize Ace's family. What works well for him in his family? What do you think he would change if he could?

11. How would the story be different if Ace did not wear an eye-patch that first day of school?

12. How do the authors address the issues of violence, self-esteem, and acceptance in the novel?

13. What groups do you belong to? What makes you feel like you belong? Compare this with how you belong in your family.

14. Discuss when you have felt weird in a new setting and how you coped. Using a Venn diagram, compare it with how Ace coped.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What characteristics in kids cause them to form gangs? How do gangs become violent? What can readers do to prevent gang violence?
2. How realistic is life portrayed for the teenagers in the novel? How does it differ from life in a rural town?
3. Describe the benefits of living and going to school in New York City. Describe the drawbacks.
4. How has public transportation changed in New York City in the last twenty years? How will it continue to change in the next twenty years? How will it affect students?
5. Have eating patterns changed in the last twenty years? If so, how? How does this affect the health of teenagers today?
6. Describe the tasks of a telephone repairperson. How do the tasks differ between wire line and wireless phones?
7. What credentials does someone need to be a high school teacher? How has teaching changed over the last twenty years?
8. Who are the Flintstones? Who created them? What made them so popular in their time?
9. What kinds of violence do students experience in schools today? What can readers do to prevent it?

For Further Reference

"Murphy, Barbara Beasley." In *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series*, vol. 20.

Detroit: Gale, 1984. Detailed biographical essay.

"Wolkoff, Judie (Edwards)." In *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 115. Detroit: Gale, 1984.

Brief biographical entry.

"Wolkoff, Judie (Edwards)." In *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 159. Detroit: Gale Research, 1984. Detailed biographical entry.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Director Martin Tahse adapted the authors' book, *Ace Hits the Big Time*, into a CBS "School break Special" in 1985. Competing with MTV, they cast it as a musical.

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, iuniverse.com, 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* (1977), now called *Tripping the Runner*, *Annie and the Animals* (1989), *Annie at the Ranch* (1991), and *Fly Like an Eagle* (1994) will be back in print through the Authors Guild. Using the online service Backinprint.com, authors offer private book supplies and quality paperback editions of their books.

Murphy and Wolkoff set the sequel *Ace Hits Rock Bottom* in the streets of New York.

Ace and the gang's short movie careers fizzle and they are searching for any kind of acting work. They leap at their sleazy agent's offer to work in the Bronx at the Wartzburg Theater, only to discover that the theater is a rest home for aging actors. To complicate things, the Wartzburg sits on the Piranhas' turf. The Falcons want to stick out the Wartzburg job to pay for the things they bought in anticipation of stardom. Nevertheless, can they face the dreaded Piranhas again? This sequel to *Ace Hits the Big Time* is a fast-paced comedy with *Ace* and the gang that will entertain readers.

In the last sequel of the series, *Fly Like an Eagle*, written only by Murphy, *Ace's* fortyyear-old dad, Barney Hobart, decides to search out his natural parents. He asks *Ace* to accompany him on the journey. In a beatup 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 surer of his place in the old.

If readers like reading about the street life, they may enjoy *Being With Henry* by Martha Brooks. When a confrontation with his latest stepfather turns violent, sixteenyear-old Laker boards the first bus bound for anywhere and ends up panhandling on the street. He meets eighty-three-year-old widower, Henry, who can not adjust to life alone. The two develop a friendship that crosses the generations.

If inner city life grabbed the readers' attention, try *Scorpions* by Walter Dean Myers. It won the 1989 Newbery Award for its honesty, realism, and vitality. It explores the difficulty of life in today's inner city.



Tightrope, by Gillian Cross, develops the story of a good-hearted teenager named Ashley. As she tries to escape her ailing, invalid mother, she scales walls and paints them with graffiti in her gang-infested neighborhood. It keeps her on the brink of trouble. Through her escapades, she captures the attention of a local gang leader named Eddy. Temporary involvement with the gang teaches Ashley about loyalties and fortitude.

Related Web Sites

"Barbara Beasley Murphy Papers." De Grummond Collection: McCain Library and Archives, University Libraries, University of Southern Mississippi, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~degrum/findaids/murphy%2Cbarbara.b.htm>. Material donated by Barbara Beasley Murphy from 1981 to 1995: biographical sketch, scope and content, related collections, and series and subseries.



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