

# Close to the Edge Short Guide

## Close to the Edge by Gloria Miklowitz

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# Contents

<a href="#">Close to the Edge Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>



## Overview

Jenny Hartley appears to be living a dream life. She is smart, beautiful, rich, and popular. She drives a Porsche, vacations by skiing in Aspen, and has a handsome boyfriend. She lives in a nice house, has lots of friends, and seems to have a limitless future. But it is all a facade; her life, in her own mind, is a nightmare that she is trying to escape. As the book opens, Jenny comes "close to the edge" of ending her life as she is racked with deep, dark feelings of depression, loneliness, and hopelessness. When she returns, she finds that her best friend, Cindy, has also attempted to kill herself.

Close to the Edge chronicles Jenny's attempts to help Cindy, to help others through volunteerism, and to find meaning in her own life.



## About the Author

Gloria Miklowitz was born May 18, 1927, in New York, NY. Her father, Simon, was president of a steamship company and her mother's name was Ella. Miklowitz's writing career began very early. In third grade when a composition of hers earned an A, her parents told her she was going to be a writer one day. After graduating from high school in New York, she attended Hunter College (now Hunter College of the City University of New York) during the years 1944-45. She broke into journalism by working on the newspaper staff in both high school and college. She graduated from the University of Michigan with a B.A. in English in 1948. She did graduate study at New York University the same year at night while working by day in publishing as a secretary at Bantam Books. On August 28, 1948, she married college professor Julius Miklowitz. They raised three children, all sons.

Miklowitz's first job as writer was working for a small town newspaper in New Mexico writing a column called "Shopping Around with Gloria Miklowitz." She also worked jobs as a substitute teacher, a bank teller, and a legal secretary. When her family moved to Southern California, she took a job working as a secretary in a navy office.

She soon expanded her job by persuading her superiors to let her work on writing scripts for the various instructional films the navy produced. As Charles Duke noted, from this experience: She learned how to research subjects, develop scripts, and even assist with the shooting of the film. Her books show the influences of these early experiences. Her research skills are reflected in both her fiction and nonfiction works because they are filled with details taken from real life.

Her novels, in particular, show an influence of script writing because they have well-developed plots, strong characters, and convincing dialogue.

After her second son was born, Miklowitz left her job to devote herself full time to her family. During this time, she took a class on writing at a local junior college. There she learned about a writing contest which she entered and won with *Barefoot Boy*, a children's story which became her first book.

Much like the characters in her books, who grow by giving back to the community, Miklowitz decided to teach writing to other would-be authors. She worked as an instructor at Pasadena City College and as an instructor for Writers Digest School. She has also written several articles for magazines aimed at writers about how to write stories for young adults. She belongs to several writing organizations in Southern California, and formerly served on the board of directors of the California Writers Guild.

Miklowitz counsels writers to begin with a clear idea of the plot. In her own writing, her plots normally follow what she calls the "purpose achieved" story where the main character has a goal to reach or problem to overcome, and does so by the end of the book. *Close to the Edge* is a textbook example of this type of plot device. Similarly, she believes that teen characters need to appeal to readers, as if they are friends. They



need to be likable enough and interesting enough so readers will care what happens to them in the story. Jenny in *Close to the Edge* certainly fits this description. Miklowitz also notes that it is important to have a strong antagonist as a source of conflict, something that is lacking in *Close to the Edge*. That said, Jenny in effect serves as her own antagonist, because the real conflict in the book is between the two parts of her self: the side that wants to be a caring person and the side which feels nothing but hopelessness. Her best friend, Cindy, although not a source of conflict, is someone who is facing the same problem as Jenny, but chooses a different path.

Miklowitz's books, regardless of the plot or characters, are about sending messages.

Her books have strong moral themes and she uses characters to try to teach lessons to young people. The lessons are usually traditional, simple, and lasting. The theme of *Close to the Edge*, for example, is summed up in the last paragraph, when Jenny says, "Living takes guts." Miklowitz's books are mostly about subjects, issues, and problems that allow characters to act out conflicts, show the consequences, and then arrive at a resolution. The plots are not nail-biting and most of the characters do not stand out, but in all of her books, it is very obvious what she is trying to say, trying to teach, and trying to help her young adult readers learn.

While she has written nonfiction and some books for children, writing about teen problems in her work is her main vocation. She noted in an article about her in *Authors and Artists for Young Adults (AAYA)* that "teenage problems interest me. Young people are still malleable enough to be influenced to construct change. I try to offer or suggest alternatives to destructive behavior in my books." Or, more simply, she explained, "I want to be everyone's mom."

Unlike many young adult novelists, Miklowitz is not writing "her own story," but rather writing stories which are torn from the headlines. Each of her books is about an issue in the news, such as child abuse, rape, AIDS, or religious cults. She also writes novels which combine these larger social issues with an adventure theme, such as *After the Bomb*. In order to write these stories, she spends a great deal of time doing research, but not just from books or interviews. She noted in her interview for *AAYA* that "to write the 'Love Bombers'...

I stayed with the Moonies for a short time.

To write the rape novel, I served on a rape hotline for year.... It isn't until I've thoroughly understood every aspect of the problem that I feel qualified to write with conviction."

Her first teen novel, *Turning Off*, was published in 1973. In many ways, it foreshadows her later works, in particular *Close to the Edge*. In *Turning Off*, the main character is a drug addict whose life is going down hill, but he is "saved" when he gets involved in a job which teaches him lessons about life. In the same way, *Close to the Edge* features a character who is contemplating suicide, but turns around when she becomes involved volunteering with senior citizens.

After *Turning Off* was published, Miklowitz received a letter from a publisher. The letter contained a list of problems, such as runaways or drug abuse, that the publisher wanted books on, written from a female point of view. Although Miklowitz did write some books for this publisher, a majority of her work has been issued by Delacorte, including *Close to the Edge*.

Jenny, the main character from *Close to the Edge* is, according to Miklowitz, one of her personal favorites. She told the interviewer for AAYA that the older characters in the book "taught me as I wrote the book, why people hang on to life." Miklowitz had wanted to write about teen suicide for years, but had never found the right story.

From the beginning though, she knew that she wanted to send "a message so positive about life that no child would consider suicide as a way out," telling the interviewer for AAYA that "I've had letters from kids who have said that *Close to the Edge* stopped them from committing suicide." *Close to the Edge* was also one of Miklowitz's more popular books, winning several awards including the Iowa Books for Young Adults Poll.

*Close to the Edge* is not her sole awardwinning book. In fact, most of her books have been honored, starting in 1977 with an award from the National Council for Social Studies and Children's Book Council, honoring *Earthquake!* In addition to *Close to the Edge*, three of her other books were named in the Iowa Books for Young Adults Poll: *The War between the Classes*, *After the Bomb*, and *Goodbye Tomorrow*. *Goodbye Tomorrow* and *Secrets Not Meant to Be Kept* were both named Recommended Books for Reluctant Young Adult Readers by the American Library Association, while *Secrets Not Meant to Be Kept* was also a winning title in the 1989 International Reading Association Young Adult Choices contest.

# Setting

Close to the Edge is set in a fictional wealthy suburb in Southern California called "Upper Hillcrest" filled with "half-acre lots and white two-story colonials." The sun is always shining; it never rains (except on the day that Cindy takes her own life). Jenny's life takes place against the backdrop of country clubs, her high school, endless parties ("there'd be so many parties!") and the beach. It is Southern California as a dream place, a "Beach Boys" song come to life. It is, readers might imagine, as wonderful as it seems on the teen television shows set in the same locale. The book, however, begins in the beauty of Aspen, another "fantasy" land where people go to have fun and to live life to the fullest. This is the setting where Jenny thinks about killing herself.

These fantasy landscapes are contrasted sharply against the three other settings that make up the rest of the story. The first is the senior citizens center where Jenny volunteers. Miklowitz contrasts the beauty of Jenny's environment—which save a cameo or two by her parents is filled only with young people like herself—with what she encounters at the center: "an old green stucco building with peeling paint." Inside, the building is filled with people, who in their physical appearance are also "old" with "peeling paint." Some use canes, one uses a walker, and each has some ailment.

Again, Miklowitz contrasts the physical surroundings with the emotional landscape: these seniors are alive, youthful, and optimistic.

Although it takes just a small portion of the book, one key scene takes place at "Third near Fair Rose" a part of Hillcrest Jenny does not know well. Miklowitz describes the environment as a "shtetl"—a little Jewish village. On the street, Jenny sees Orthodox Jews in black suits and round flat hats, markets which open up to the street, strange music, and the air filled with the sounds of broken English and perfect Yiddish. The scene seems like a place from another time, and is symbolic of Jenny trying to get in touch with her Jewish heritage.

The final "setting" of the book is Jenny's own mind which is filled with doubt and fear. On the outside she is beautiful; on the inside she is a mess. She admits to creating a facade, when she is at school and with her family/friends, of a "self-confident, self-sufficient teenager who had it made." She knows, however, that she is acting a part. In reality, she has "two selves. The public one and the private one." Miklowitz has filled the book with such contrasts; each setting means something. While the book could have been set anywhere, the mystique of Southern California in all of its beauty slamming up against the darkness in Jenny's life, coupled with the contrast of Jenny's youthful life bouncing off the senior center, drive home the themes in Miklowitz's story.



## Social Sensitivity

In *Close to the Edge*, Miklowitz confronts a problem many teens struggle with: depression. Depression takes many forms, but most teens, even if they are not clinically depressed, share many of the feelings Jenny expresses. She feels cut off, that no one loves or understands her, that she does not care about anything, and that life is not worth living. This is, in many ways, compounded by the fact that she "has it all" and should be happy. Her perspective is further contrasted with the seniors she meets who have lived through so much, suffered such a great deal, and perhaps should have given up, but instead refused to do so.

Miklowitz uses *Close to the Edge* to write about issues she cares deeply about, and she believes that her teen readers need to know about. In many ways, *Close to the Edge* is an open letter to teen readers. She is saying very clearly that life is worth living and discovering the things in life that really matter. In *Close to the Edge*, Miklowitz provides two characters who are depressed: one has attempted suicide, the other has considered it. Both are depressed, both share similar feelings of hopelessness. But one takes charge of her life, and through work, service to others, family, discovering her heritage and religion, using her time constructively, through music, and through gaining perspective, Jenny lives, while Cindy, who does none of these things, decides to take her own life. Both characters were "close to the edge"—one falls over, while the other survives. The things that made Jenny survive are the things that, according to Miklowitz, give life purpose and structure. In *Close to the Edge*, as in all her young adult novels, Miklowitz has one mission: to show teens that they have choices in life and can choose to leave a constructive existence rather than one filled with destructive behaviors. That is what Jenny does in *Close to the Edge* and almost every character in a Gloria Miklowitz novel achieves.





## Literary Qualities

Miklowitz's primary technique in *Close to the Edge* is a series of juxtapositions: young against old; public self against private self; selfishness against caring. Settings, characters, and scenes contrast with each other. For example, in one incident Jenny sits in a near empty shopping mall on a Friday night, recalling the story one of the women at the senior center (Hannah) told her about how she spent Friday nights as a young woman: surrounded by family, celebrating Shabbos, and praying together. The contrast between the lack of family, the lack of religion, and the lack of tradition in her family against that of Hannah's pushes Jenny toward action: she puts out candles for dinner that Friday night.

The book is told in first-person, so readers are privy to the "battle" in Jenny's mind between the emptiness she feels so often with the rays of hope which start to shine through. Miklowitz makes heavy use of questions, which mirror nicely Jenny's search for answers: "was I so different?" In a sense, the book is about Jenny finding the answer to these internal questions. Related to this discovery is Jenny's relationship with her grandmother, to whom she writes a letter in the middle of the book; In addition to aiding plot development, the letter is also important stylistically. It serves, in particular for poor or reluctant readers who may be intrigued by the subject of the book but have difficulty reading it, as a summary of the book thus far. In the letter, Jenny succinctly tells her grandmother (and thus the reader) about her feelings toward and about her family, friends, school, her boyfriend, etc. In this letter, she asks her grandmother lots of questions, which also serve to guide the reader.

Miklowitz makes heavy use of italics to add emphasis, especially during scenes of dialogue. There is not a great deal of action in the book; it is mostly Jenny's thoughts followed by her interactions. The book is not loaded with teen slang, but it is filled, delightfully, with Yiddish inflections when Jenny interacts with the Jewish seniors that make up the Sunshine Club. For example, rather than asking Jenny "do you read music," she is asked, "You read a little music, maybe?" Rather than saying, "Would you like some coffee," Rose asks "So, Jenny darling. You want I should get you some coffee." The contrast to the blandness of Jenny's conversations with her friends is obvious. There are some Yiddish expressions, but the texture of the characters shines through mostly in their grammar.



## Themes and Characters

Close to the Edge is Jenny's story; it is told in the first-person so all events are filtered through her eyes. More importantly in a novel dealing primarily with the psychology of a central character, readers are privy to Jenny's thoughts beginning with the first sentence of the book: "I can't remember when I'd felt so empty and hopeless." The story develops as Jenny grows, changes, and, in the end, gains a new perspective on life. That journey is the story of Close to the Edge.

The book starts with her skiing "downhill" thinking of suicide, then the rest of the novel is the trip up the hill. We see her in a variety of situations, interacting with different kinds of people. We see her alienated at first from her family, but later grow closer to them. We see her grow from a selfish, young person concerned mostly with material things (boys, skiing, and race cars), to a young woman who gains perspective on life. We see her go from someone not involved ("in nearly three years at Hilcrest, I'd joined nothing") to someone who becomes involved in her community. We see her grow from someone who does not know or care about her family to a young woman who makes a connection not only with her past, but also with her heritage. Jenny makes a journey from being a person who believes that "the secret of life" is just staying busy, to becoming one who finds deeper meaning. At the beginning of the book, Jenny is a stereotypical spoiled rich girl, but by the end of the book, she is a real person who realizes that giving, sharing, and loving are the things that give value to her life.

The other characters are not as well developed as Jenny. Cindy, Brian (the first boyfriend), and Paul (the new boyfriend) play important roles in Jenny's life, but Miklowitz takes little time with them. There are also friends at school (April, Susan, and Michelle) whose purpose seems to reinforce negative stereotypes of spoiled rich girls. Jenny's parents make an appearance at the beginning of the book, acting almost boorish at first, never showing affection, instead spoiling her with gifts, like the Porsche given to her for her 16th birthday.

By the end of the book, they also have come to realize the need to be grow closer to Jenny ("you're not alone. We love you and we do love each other. We are a family.") Her siblings, Amy and Eric, make few appearances, but the one family member who plays an important role in both the book and in Jenny's transformation is her grandmother.

Jenny admits to a teacher that she knows little about "old people" and is barely in contact with her grandmother. She recalls that the last time they met, Jenny had promised that she would write to her, but then fails to do so. And yet she also realizes that she had consciously decided not to. But by the end of the book she is pleading with her grandmother to come live with them, cherishes her letters and phone calls, and worries about her health. She is curious: she asks her father to tell her about his mother, they go through a photo album together, and she learns about all the struggles in her grandmother's life. It is through this relationship, built on telephone conversations (her grandmother lives on the east coast) and a thoughtful letter that Jenny pens, that Jenny learns her lessons about life.



The role of family is another theme in *Close to the Edge*. By connecting with her family and her grandmother in particular, Jenny sees the value in her life. She tries to substitute her friends without success. When April proclaims that their clique is "family," Jenny realizes that "they weren't enough." She realizes while she and her friends may have fun together, they do not really know each other. They share information and insults, but do not provide Jenny with the intimacy she wants or needs.

Unable to break through at the beginning of the book, she resolves, "It's better not to think too much, especially about parents," adding that "I had my problems, they had theirs." Jenny is not sure of their affection or attention, so she keeps them at arm's length. Her parents are unsure of how to reach her and instead of showing her the love she desperately needs, they shower her with gifts and other material things.

What Jenny primarily needs is something to center her. Her money and beauty fail to provide her a foundation, and her feelings of hopelessness and purposelessness due to this lack in her life lead her to thoughts of suicide. Jenny's mental health is also a major concern of the book, although Miklowitz makes Jenny a real person, not just a case study. Full of contradictions, Jenny reveals her depression through her actions. She says one thing, and then does another. She proclaims not to care about something, when in fact she deeply cares. She knows that her "image" is a facade, and she is afraid of others finding her true self. Perspective, or lack thereof, is another major theme in the work. Perspective comes with context, which comes with experience. It is only when Jenny finally interacts with people who have had much experience that she can put her own experience into context. She learns, in effect, that while she has "problems," they can not compare with the problems others have fought through and triumphed over.

The cover of the hardback edition features an illustration of Jenny driving in her red Porsche with the windows rolled down, her hair blowing back in the wind. Behind her is her two-story colonial house with palm trees in front: everything a girl could want. Wrong. According to a reviewer writing in the *English Journal*, Miklowitz is writing about "a teenager who seems to have all the materialistic trappings for living the life but none of the important cornerstones: self-esteem, heritage, and real love." In effect, Miklowitz uses Jenny to demonstrate the truth behind the cliché "money can't buy happiness." When she realizes that her boyfriend Brian is too concerned about money, maybe cares about it even more than he cares for her, Jenny decides to end her relationship with him. Her friends, such as April and Cindy, are equally privileged, but all the cars and clothes do not seem to make a real difference.

In essence, Jenny's life, with its various comforts, has been easy as she has been growing up. When she enters her teen years, however, she begins to realize how difficult life can be. The things she thought she did not need, such as family or true sense of her self, become important to her. Yet, she has invested so much in keeping up a facade of not caring and not needing any help, that when she starts to feel bad, she has no place to turn. With nowhere to turn, Jenny sinks into depression. The depression portrayed in the book, with the nagging doubts and feelings of hopelessness that beset Jenny, make it easy for readers to feel empathy for her. At the same time, readers may



also feel sorry for Jenny. Things begin to change in her life only after she stops feeling sorry for herself, but more importantly, after she begins to care about other people, thus giving herself an opportunity to begin caring about being alive. Jenny considers suicide because she perceived no reason to live and felt it was too hard to go on. As she gains perspective, Jenny finds a reason to live and realizes her problems are small compared to what others have lived through. The message that life is worth living, even if there is suffering chimes loud and clear through every page of the novel.

Jenny finds value in her own life in various ways, one of which is music. At the beginning of the book, it seems to be just something she does, and not anything that brings her particular joy or value, or even a sense of achievement. By the end of book, when she has helped the Sunshine Seniors put on their concert, Jenny not only takes pride in her work but is also appreciative of the joy that music brings to others. Her work with the seniors starts for a selfish reason: to have something to put on a college application, but it becomes more than that. It gives her life meaning and value, much more than a single line on an application. Much the same, religion plays a similar role. Jenny has no belief system; her family's Jewish heritage is non-existent. She even asks her grandmother: "what does it mean, being Jewish?" When she starts to reclaim her faith (including dating Paul, who is Jewish) and her heritage, Jenny again adds real value to her life.

Similarly, friendship brings value to Jenny's life. After she learns of Cindy's suicide attempt, she draws much closer to her. She knows the only way to help Cindy is to become a true friend, which means giving of herself. Through the book, she visits with Cindy and tries her best to pull her out of depression. In Cindy, she sees many of the same things that plagued her, and she wonders if Cindy might have lived if she had learned to give of herself, to embrace life and to rediscover living through working with seniors.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Close to the Edge is a series of contrasts; discuss all the different juxtapositions which Miklowitz uses in the book.

2. Near the end of the book, Jenny pleads with her grandmother to come live with her family. Do you think this will happen? How will Jenny react if it does?

How would it change her life?

3. Volunteering at the senior center gives Jenny's life great value. Discuss opportunities in your community for young people to volunteer and make a difference. What value does volunteering bring Jenny? What value would it bring to your life?

4. Is Cindy's suicide handled well? Is it obvious how deeply depressed she is?

Can you identify "warning signs" in her behavior? Was there anything Jenny could have done to prevent this from happening?

5. In Close to the Edge, Jenny is unsure of whom to ask for help for her depression. What types of services are available in your community to kids in trouble? What would you say to a friend who was thinking of taking his or her own life?

6. If you were casting Close to the Edge as a movie, who would you have play the roles and why? Would you change anything in the movie version?

7. Several characters in the book are Holocaust survivors. One of them talks about their will to live to "spite" their enemy. From your experiences with movies, television, and books, what else helped Jews survive during the Holocaust?

8. Jews were not the only groups sent to concentration camps. What other groups were to be exterminated by the Nazis?

9. Jenny wonders about her friendship with Cindy, asking herself "what was our connection?" What is it that makes them become and stay friends?

10. Jenny goes from "close to the edge" of taking her own life to a deeper sense of meaning? How realistic does the book seem to you? Are the events which change Jenny believable?

11. Jenny seems to have all the trappings of a good life, so what is missing? What elements does Jenny lack in her life?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. At the time *Close to the Edge* was written, teen suicide was considered a huge problem in the United States. Is this still true today? How wide-spread is the problem? What are the signs and symptoms of a depressed teen?
2. Since *Close to the Edge* was written, there have been several breakthroughs in the treating of depression. Research the medical advances which have helped cure many of those suffering from depression.
3. Several of the seniors in the book are Holocaust survivors. Research Holocaust survivors, including reading at least one survivor's tale.
4. Many Jews were rescued from the Holocaust by "righteous gentiles" like Oscar Schindler in the film "Schindler's List." Research the role that gentiles played in saving Jews during the Holocaust.
5. Jenny gains new perspective in her life through community service. Service learning is now required in many schools. Research this trend in education.
6. Jenny comes to gain perspective on her life through interacting with older adults. Research the benefits of this type of intergenerational relationship.
7. Books like *Close to the Edge*, which discuss a problem like teen suicide, can be used as part of bibliotherapy, that is, using books as part of psychological therapy. Research bibliotherapy, in particular its use among teenagers.
8. Jenny's interaction with the seniors gave her insight into how different their lives as teenagers were from her own. Do research on conducting "oral histories," then interview an older relative, neighbor, or friend about their teenager years.
9. Jenny never seeks help from a counselor at her school. What role do school counselors play in dealing with teens in crisis?
10. Read one first person narrative of depression and one general nonfiction book about teen depression. How real of a portrayal is Jenny's depression? Are Jenny's signs and symptoms true to life?



## For Further Reference

Craver, Kathleen. *School Library Journal* (May 1983): 83-84. Short positive review of *Close to the Edge* that points out the book's strong characters and sense of empathy.

Duke, Charles. "Gloria D. Miklowitz." In *Writers for Young Adults*. New York: Scribner, 1997. Long article featuring quotes from books and from the author.

Divided into sections on author's career and her writing technique, looking at her research, themes, plots, and characters.

Article notes that Miklowitz primarily works in the problem novel genre but the essay is primarily descriptive, not evaluate.

*English Journal* (September 1983): 88. A review of *Close to the Edge*.

"Miklowitz, Gloria." In *Authors & Artists for Young Adults, Volume 6*. Detroit: Gale, 1991. Long essay with lots of quotes from the author about her major young adult novels, featuring photos of book jackets.

"Miklowitz, Gloria." In *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series, Volume 51*. Detroit: Gale, 1996. Short biographical sketch filled with quotations from the author.

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Short essay featuring biographical details and discussion of major works.

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Edited by Donald Gallo. *National Council of Teachers of English*, 1990. Autobiographical essay where author discusses her start in writing, her motivations, and her writing techniques.

Miklowitz, Gloria. "Writing the Juvenile Short Story." *The Writer* (March 1994): 13. Short article by the author on the elements of a successful story for young people, focusing on different types of plot lines.

"Miklowitz, Gloria." In *St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers, 2nd edition*. Edited by Tom Pendergast and Sara Pendergast.

Detroit: St. James Press, 1999. A biographical essay about the author.

Zvirin, Stephanie.Boofc/fsf (April 15, 1983): 1089. Short, mainly positive review of *Close to the Edge* featuring a plot summary, and discussion of Miklowitz's writing style.



## Related Titles

Although not part of any series, *Close to the Edge* fits well into Miklowitz's history of writing novels for teens about various problems. Teens interested in subjects like suicide would also be interested in other titles by Miklowitz that deal with serious subject matter. In most of these books, the "formula" is the same: a first person narrative of a young person dealing with a serious issue who grows, becomes stronger, and overcomes (or learns to cope) with the problem. Examples include *Secrets Not Meant to Be Kept* (sexual abuse), *Did You Hear What Happened to Andrea?* (rape), *Anything to Win* (steroid abuse), and most recently violence and guns in *Camouflage*.



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