

Fly Like an Eagle Short Guide

Fly Like an Eagle by Barbara Beasley Murphy

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Overview

Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers published Murphy's novel, *Fly Like an Eagle*, in 1994. In this third book of the "Ace Hobart" series, Ace plans to get an acting part in a Broadway show in New York with his girlfriend Raven during their summer vacation. He figures that when they do not have rehearsal, they will hang out with the Falcon gang until they start their senior year of high school.

However, Ace's father, Barney, adopted at an early age, makes different plans. Barney wants Ace to help him find and meet his birth parents so that he can discover his "bliss." Reluctantly, Ace agrees and they head west in a beat-up yellow Volkswagen.

Ace expects to have a long and boring summer vacation until he ends up farther west than he expected and meets some very interesting people. Ace's journey changes his view on life, and his relationship with his father too.

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. As a child, Murphy's mother read children's books and cited poetry to her. As Murphy grew up in Ohio, and then in North Carolina during World War II, many issues touched her, including cultural diversity, violence, and racism. Her love of children's books, including reading and writing for children, set the stage for Murphy's career as a writer.

She weaves the issues she faced as a child into her books.

As a young adult, Murphy attended Drake University from 1951 to 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 an English teacher in Euclid, Ohio (1956-1957). She progressed to become a high school speech and drama teacher 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 married Bill Murphy, a cartoonist and designer, in 1961, and raised their two children: Stephen and Jennifer. In 1970, she received a fellowship to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Murphy believes that several things have helped her to write her books. As she experienced racial prejudices first hand in the South during WWII, she grew concerned about this tension. It motivated her to write *Home Free* as she sorted through the problems she had with racism. The author continues to write about multifaceted issues. She mitigates 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, self-forgiveness, and 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 belief that banning books "leads to the diminishment of human life."

At the same time she wrote *No Place to Run*, Murphy helped build the new 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 a 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."

She received the Christopher Award in 1979 for her work on the New York Kid's Book. The author told *Contemporary Authors*, in 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."

Murphy lives in Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico, and uses her knowledge and love of New Mexico as the backdrop for *Fly Like an Eagle*. San Ildefonso Pueblo, only eighteen statute miles from Santa Fe, becomes instrumental in the evolution of the characters and the story.

The author stays active in associations as a member of PEN Authors Guild, the Authors Guild, Phi Beta Kappa, and the New Mexico Book Association. She helped found the Children's Writers and Artists Collaborative and she 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 story pacing. They can also develop a good ear for dialogue by listening.

Setting

Murphy starts the novel with the Hobarts eating leftovers for dinner in their New York City apartment called "The Pits." As Barney dreams about moving out west, Ace's mother, Flo, refuses to consider the idea. Yet, as Ace tells the readers right from the start, this conversation seems to happen whenever they have leftovers. This everyday setting quickly evolves into the entertaining twists and turns characteristic of Murphy's novels.

Murphy takes a slightly different approach in this third book of the series. Written without coauthor Judie Wolkoff, Murphy moves the scenery away from New York City and the gang and, instead, centers the action deep in the journey out west where Ace and Barney become deeply involved in Indian culture. The action takes place over a five-week summer vacation.

Ace and Barney experience significant events that alter the Hobarts' life forever.

As the adventures unfold, readers experience Ace's surprise at learning that his grandparents adopted Barney from an orphanage at the age of five. The readers follow the adventurous and surprising journey; from the drive west on U.S. Route 80 in the beat-up, puke-colored Volkswagen Bug, to the reunion of Barney with his spry grandmother and sister in Kansas City, to the finding of Barney's father in San Ildefonso Pueblo, New Mexico.

Increasing the effectiveness of the setting, Murphy cites people contemporary to the 1990s. Television personality Joseph Campbell inspires Barney to find his "bliss" which leads him to find his birth parents.

Heading west, Barney shifts gears like racer Al Unser, Jr. Ace writes in a postcard to his friend George that Barney sings like Joe Williams. Sister Nora relays the message to Ace that the Arthur Murray dance studio called to sell dance lessons. These references continue to place readers in the era.

To further enhance the setting, Murphy gives keen attention to detail, bringing readers into the elements in a vivid way. For example, in the ninety-four-degree drizzling rain, Barney and Ace begin their quest.

They putt-putt across the George Washington Bridge above the Hudson River on July 6th at 5:00 AM. Readers experience the smooth and beautiful Flint Hills with Barney and Ace head as they west from Kansas City. They cross the cornfields that bloom to the horizon as they head west from Wichita. Finally, at their destination, the fine thick dust greets Barney and Ace as they approach the San Ildefonso Pueblo.



Social Sensitivity

Fly Like an Eagle focuses on the contemporary issues of adoption and cultural diversity. As Barney admits to his adoption and decides to find out about his past, the author shows how family and friends deal with the knowledge. From Ace's immediate acceptance and curiosity, to Flo's attempts to distract him, to Nora's outrage, Murphy realistically depicts the complex emotions inherent in addressing this dramatic issue. Confronting this issue gives the novel a unique cultural depth and quality that separates it from the first two novels in the series.

As the author confronts the cultural diversity that springs up when Barney finds his roots, her keen sensitivity to these issues reflects in the characters' reactions and maturation. Ace, although excited about the prospect of an Indian heritage, also fears the unknown ways of the culture, especially when Barney disappears to meet his father for the first time. Ace shows frequent awkwardness and shares his internal fears. As Barney's family integrates into the new culture, the characters' growth and maturity bring a pleasing resolution. Barney finds his bliss, and a "new" family heads home for New York City.

Literary Qualities

Murphy uses a number of literary techniques, including the use of first person point of view, flashbacks, imagery, interior monologue laced with verbal irony, humor, and regionalism.

The author tells the story in the first person point of view, consistent with the other books in the series. As Ace tells the story using the pronouns "I" and "we," readers experience his adventures. Flashbacks appropriately provide needed information. For example, Ace frequently refers to his movie *Bound and Gagged* from the novel *Ace Hits the Big Time* and he mentions characters and events from *Ace Hits Rock Bottom*. Murphy does an excellent job of revealing enough past information to inform readers.

Murphy uses imagery to evoke a sensation of the Hobart's trip west. From the showbiz atmosphere of New York City, to the suburban sprawl of Kansas City, to the sunny soft New Mexico afternoons with grass rustling in the sweet-smelling air, Murphy pulls readers vividly into the scenes.

She also uses a narrative technique of interior monologue that records Ace's feelings, thoughts, and memories. Readers hear Ace think something that differs from what he says. This verbal irony reveals Ace's depth of character. For example, Ace struggles with the vulnerability inherent in telling the truth to anyone, especially Amy. He wants to be truthful, yet finds himself deceiving her. Somehow, as Ace spends time with Amy, to his surprise he finds the courage to test honesty with her and catches himself telling her the truth.

The use of comedy and humor gives the novel a lighthearted and easy-to-read tone.

For example, as Ace immerses himself awkwardly into the corn dance at the kiva, he fails to recognize his dehydration. When dizziness causes him to fall face-first into the dust, he hears someone saying "What a great-looking kid." Upon recovering, he realizes that a production agent wants him to star in a movie as "Billy the Kid." It could only happen to Ace!

The descriptions of the journey to New Mexico place readers directly in the region.

If readers refer to Ace's map at the novel's opening, they can follow the adventures visually. For example, Ace shows the journey in the old Volkswagen, and then the two-day journey in the Lincoln.

The author uses linking verbs (i.e., was, were) that distract from the interesting language structure and mildly disrupt the story's flow. Adding action verbs could dramatize and captivate young readers' attention more fully.



Themes and Characters

The novel explores the uncertainties that teenagers face in their quest for independence. Ace wants to continue his acting career this summer and hang out with the gang, a sign of his budding independence.

Yet things do not go as planned. Barney persuades Ace to come with him. Ace realizes how important Barney's journey is, and reluctantly agrees to forego his independence for a while. The Falcons express anger at his betrayal, yet they understand his decision.

Ace's growth in the earlier novels has matured him to a new level of understanding and self-acceptance. He seems less concerned with being accepted. He takes the Falcons' anger in stride and promises to write about his journey.

Ace's round, dynamic character contains many dimensions, which makes it easy to identify with him. Earlier in the series, Ace gained self-acceptance and became an integral part of the gang. It is no surprise that the author shifts the focus in this story from acceptance to empathy. True to form, Ace reveals his private thoughts, feelings, and reactions as he did in the novels before, with humor and lighthearted analogies. This literary quality enables readers to understand Ace's decision to support his father. It helps readers to join Ace in learning to respect and empathize with his dad in new ways. Ace admires Barney and believes him to be weird. He likes his newly found Indian heritage, yet finds the customs strange and awkward. His relationship with his Indian stepbrother Patrick magnifies these conflicting qualities and helps to develop Ace's maturity.

Therefore, maturation is a central theme in *Fly Like an Eagle*. Readers also experience the poignant themes of adoption, cultural diversity, and love. Through each of Murphy's characters, readers see how the new knowledge of Barney's adoption influences the family. Each member learns to accept and incorporate the changes into their worlds. For example, Nora, Ace's sister, shows this dimension by first greeting the new information with denial and anger, then maturing over the summer to be excited about meeting her extended family.

Barney experiences the biggest shift of character. As he reunites with his grandmother Gloria Paulette, he learns first-hand about his mother's short life and early death, the reason for his adoption, and about his biological father, Jimmy Martinez. Barney absorbs this information easily and develops self-confidence and peace. The trip to San Ildefonso Pueblo brings Barney into his "bliss" as he reunites with Jimmy Martinez.

Calm and accepting, Jimmy conveys to Barney his Indian heritage. Jimmy embraces Ace easily, and welcomes Flo and Nora as his extended family.

Nora and the Falcon gang play a smaller role in this novel. Although readers do not experience it first hand, these instrumental characters mature. The Falcons accept Nora into the gang. When Ace discovers this, he expresses outrage and disbelief that upsets



Jimmy Martinez, who chants a Tewa prayer for a peaceful resolution. It works. The upset ends in a group hug. The resolution shows the level of maturation the characters embrace.

The author tempers difficult issues with humor, using offbeat characters to relay poignant information. For example, when Gloria Paulette divulges Barney's past, we discover her spunky side. As a former trapeze artist, Gloria Paulette and sister Dorothy Priscilla add a unique pizzazz as they rev up for aerobics class after an evening of sharing memories. The characters' surprises provide a welcome comical dynamic, as they become instrumental in Barney's complex evolution.

As Gloria Paulette and Dorothy Priscilla divulge the past, readers begin to see Barney and Ace embrace their newfound Indian heritage. Ace watches his father mature. He senses a new peace in Barney. Ace matures as he integrates into the new culture by the story's resolution. Ace feels as if he is a part of the "Nation of the Heart," and he connects with his Indian spirit as he dances and chants to the drums at the traditional corn dance.

The common theme of love weaves into the character's lives. For example, Flo's mature love allows her to support Barney in his quest for "bliss." After failing to talk him out of his journey, she realizes its importance. She helps him to buy the car and she loads it with canned food. She provides constant support and encouragement during Barney's calls with his latest news.

Moreover, she unexpectedly arrives in New Mexico at the novel's resolution to meet her husband's father and the extended family.

Ace continues to learn about love. His inexperienced teenage heart lurches when he sees his "Kansas City Girl" Amy Schwarzenegger, who teaches aerobics to Gloria Paulette and Dorothy Priscilla. Amy and Ace spend a brief yet intense time together that changes Ace's view of love and girls. More enjoyable than the playful and innocent kisses, Ace learns that others can care about how he feels and take an interest in his dreams. He learns that he can be who he is in her company and it can be immensely enjoyable. He sees that his beliefs about girls may not be true, and how Amy's loss of her brother helped her realize that sometimes parents need to be cared for like children. Her character helps Ace develop a more mature love for girls and his parents.



Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss Ace's relationship with Amy.

How does Amy support Ace? What made her character important in the story?

2. Ace meets his half-brother Patrick when he gets to San Ildefonso. Discuss Ace's relationship with Patrick. How did Patrick's character help to develop Ace's character?

3. Read Ace Hits the Big Time and Ace Hits Rock Bottom. What qualities do you see in Barney in Fly Like an Eagle that did not emerge earlier? Are they believable?

4. Describe in detail how the author uses the techniques of flashbacks, humor, and imagery.

5. Characterize Gloria Paulette. How does she help Barney in his search to find his roots? To mature?

6. Humor plays a mitigating role in dealing with dramatic issues. What issues does the author address and how does humor temper them?

7. Characterize Jimmy Martinez. What Indian traditions does Jimmy represent?

Does he seem like the perfect father to Barney? Why or why not?

8. Barney finds a sense of purpose in connecting with his roots and Indian heritage. How does Barney's quest affect Ace? What does Ace learn about his father that he likes? Does not like? How do you think Ace's new level of maturity will change his upcoming senior year of high school?

9. Nora remained in New York during Ace and Barney's trip west. Are there indications that Nora changed during the story? If so, how? How will her involvement in the Falcon gang affect her relationship with Ace?

10. How will Ace's adventure, which influenced his life significantly, change his relationship with girlfriend Raven?

With the Falcons? With Nora?

11. How will Barney's changes affect his marriage to Flo? How will it affect his life in New York? His career? His adopted family?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research life in San Ildefonso Pueblo, New Mexico and its Indian heritage.

Describe the typical language and traditions that characterize the San Udefonso people. Does Murphy portray the culture and region accurately in the story?

2. List the major issues that adopted people face, both as children and later as adults. Show how Murphy's story depicts these issues and how she uses the characters to develop them.

3. The author uses several types of automobiles, such as a Volkswagen, a Lincoln Town Car, and an orange pickup, as transportation. Describe the five most popular vehicles of 1994. Does Murphy use the popular models? Does she describe the vehicles accurately?

4. In the story, Barney's mother Diana falls in love with Jimmy Martinez and bears his child. How do Diana's choices affect her father? Her mother? Do you think the issues presented by Murphy seem realistic? Why or why not?

5. Describe the skills that you would need if you wanted to be a trapeze artist in a circus. How would you prepare for this career? What would your life be like if you took the job?

6. Research an orphanage. Describe its tangible and nontangible characteristics. Speculate about what it would be like to grow up in an orphanage. What issues would an adopted person grapple with?

7. Describe Kansas City. What types of restaurants and motels do they have?

Does the author accurately depict Ace and Barney's journey through Kansas City?

For Further Reference

"Murphy, Barbara Beasley." In Contemporary Authors New Revision Series, Volume 20. Detroit: Gale, 1984. Detailed biographical essay with commentary on some of the author's works.

Related Titles

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.

In addition, according to Murphy, the Author's Guild offers an online service Backinprint.com; authors sell private book supplies and quality paperback editions.

Readers can buy No Place to Run now called Tripping the Runner, Fly Like an Eagle, Annie and the Animals, and Annie at the Ranch.

Murphy, along with coauthor Judie Wolkoff, set the first novel in the series, Ace Hits the Big Time in 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 second novel of the series by Murphy and Wolkoff, Ace Hits Rock Bottom, Ace and the gang are back on the streets of New York City—in debt. Their movie careers fizzle quickly, and they need jobs to pay for all the goodies and gadgets they bought in advance of their earnings. They are 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 theatre at all, but a rest home for aging actors. The gang's new jobs happen to be in a rival gang's territory, 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 delight and entertain readers.

Readers who enjoyed the Indian features of Murphy's novel may enjoy Trouble's Daughter: The Story of Susanna Hutchinson, Indian Captive by Katherine Kirkpatrick. This compelling story takes place in 1663. Susanna Hutchinson, daughter of religious troublemaker Anne Hutchinson, moves to the wilds of Long Island with her family so that her mother will not be persecuted for her beliefs and public statements. Shortly after, Lenape warriors massacre the family and take Susanna hostage. The author details Susanna's incredible evolution from hostile frightened prisoner to a member of the tribe.

Readers who enjoyed the issue of adoption may enjoy Gib Whittaker in the books Gib Rides Home and Gib and the Gray Ghost by Zilpha Keatley Snyder, a three-time Newbery Honor Book author. In Gib Rides Home, the author takes a vivid look at the life of an orphan, Gib Whitaker, in prairie country almost a century ago. Gib dreams of leaving the Lovell House Orphanage to live with a real family. Nevertheless, when that opportunity arises, Gib learns of barely concealed tensions and secrets kept from him.

In the second book, *Gib and the Gray Ghost*, Gib leaves the Lovell House Orphanage to live with the Thornton family, who take him in again after Mr. Thornton's death.

Gib, now in school, must do all the barnyard chores. He is not exactly farmed-out labor anymore, but will he be adopted for real this time? One day a terrified, dapplegray horse appears. Severely whipped and starved, Gib knows he must find some way to save this magnificent horse. In the process, he finds one place where he will always belong.

Related Web Sites

University of Southern Mississippi De Grummond Collection—Barbara Beasley Murphy Papers <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~degrum/>.

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