

A Reading Group Guide to

Blue Skies

By Anne Bustard

About the Book

The war ended three years ago, but Glory Bea's father never returned home from France. Glory Bea understands what Mama, Grams, and Grandpa say—that Daddy died a hero on Omaha Beach—yet, deep down in her heart, she believes that Daddy is still out there. When she hears that one of the boxcars from the Merci (or “thank you”) Train—a train filled with gifts of gratitude from the people of France—will be stopping in her town of Gladiola, Texas, she just knows that her daddy will be its surprise cargo.

Discussion Questions

1. *Blue Skies* is historical fiction. Have you read any other novels in this genre? How do you feel about stories that are based on real events? Does that change your reading experience, or how you view the characters? Please explain your answers.
2. Describe the book's time period. How can you tell that it's set during a specific time? Please explain your answer using examples from the text. How does it affect the novel's events? Have you read other historical fiction or nonfiction books about WWII? What elements would you like to know more about?
3. If you were to write a historical fiction story, what time period would you set it in? What periods in history are the most interesting to you? Please explain your answer. What books or articles have you read about these time periods? Where would you go to find more information?
4. Who is your favorite character in the book? Who most reminds you of someone in your own life? Discuss some of the character descriptions. Do you think people have similar character traits across time periods?
5. If you lived in Glory Bea's town during this time, what would you miss most about your current life? What would you be most excited to experience?
6. Talk about how Ben's loss differs from Glory Bea's. Which do you think would be harder—to never see your father again, or to have him return as a different man? Why do you think war might cause someone to change? What do you think might have happened to Mr. Truman?

7. Gladiola, Texas has a population of 3,421. Do you know the population of your town? How far are you from the nearest city? Talk about some of the ways that big cities and small towns are different. Do you prefer one over the other? Please explain your answers. Do you think the plot of *Blue Skies* would have changed if Glory Bea had lived in a larger town?

8. On New Year's Eve, Glory Bea's family spends the evening at home, waiting for midnight. What do they do for entertainment? What does this tell you about their relationships or their lifestyle? How does this differ from how some families celebrate today? Does your family have a New Year's Eve tradition?

9. For most of the book, Glory Bea is certain that her father will return home. It was not unusual for WWII orphans to sustain this fantasy. How did you feel about her beliefs? Were you hopeful, or were you afraid she would be disappointed? If you were Glory Bea's friend, what would you have said to her? Please explain your answers.

10. Ruby Jane refers to Glory Bea's father, asking, "What if he's gone for good?" Do you think Ruby Jane is right to be honest? Do you think Ruby Jane is trying to be a good friend? How does Glory Bea react? What would you have done if you were in Ruby Jane's shoes?

11. Grams says that her matchmaking is "a calling." What does she mean by that? Do you agree with her analysis? Please explain your answer. What do you think are the differences between a calling and a hobby? Give examples from your own experiences, or from those of family and friends.

12. Did you suspect the reason for Glory Bea's rocky attempt at matchmaking? Would you ever try to play matchmaker for one of your friends? How might that turn out? Have you learned any tips or pitfalls from Glory Bea's experiences?

13. Discuss how the author introduces us to Daddy without ever allowing us to meet him. What do we learn about him from Glory Bea, Grams, and Randall Horton? Do you feel like you have a full picture of what he was like? Please explain your answer.

14. Why does Glory Bea dislike Randall Horton? Do you agree with Grams when she says, "No matter how much you don't like someone, you can always discover one thing about them to appreciate?" What might you tell Glory Bea to appreciate about Randall Horton? What might he appreciate about Glory Bea?

15. How does patriotism play a part in this story? Give examples from the text. What does patriotism mean to Glory Bea? What does it mean to you? Compare patriotism in Gladiola with contemporary America. How does each place demonstrate patriotism?

16. Can you name some of the French words used in the book? How did you use context to determine their meanings? Had you heard any of them before? What other French words or phrases do you know, or would like to learn?

17. Glory Bea is thrilled when she thinks she spots her daddy in the newsreel about the Merci Train. Do you know what a newsreel is? Discuss how different it would be to get most of your news from the radio or newsreels. How do you and your family get news of world events?

18. At the beginning of the book, readers learn one of Grams's expressions: "Have audacious expectations." What does audacious mean? How might you have audacious expectations? Talk about the benefits and dangers of expecting things will turn out for the best. If Glory Bea hadn't been expecting her daddy to arrive on the Merci Train, do you think she could have avoided disappointment? Or was it important for her to have that hope?

Extension Activities

1. Write an essay about how the author exhibits the theme of "blue skies" throughout the book. Give examples from the text to support your conclusions.
2. The book's bibliography includes many articles and books about the real Merci Train. Choose a state other than Texas; then research and write a report about the Merci Train's visit and the gifts distributed there. How are other experiences similar to or different from Glory Bea's?
3. Reread chapters forty and forty-one and then write an essay about how the author uses the parade setting to reflect some of the book's themes.
4. Pretend you are a reporter for the *Gladiola Gazette* and write an article about the Merci Train's visit. Which facts would you include? Who in the town would you interview? What kind of emotions are you hoping to evoke?
5. Research and write a report about the WWII battle at Omaha Beach, where Glory Bea's father died. What information are you most surprised about? Which information was hardest to read?
6. Make a poster advertising the arrival of the Merci Train in Gladiola. Bonus for using the French flag, the Texas flag, and some French words! Hang the posters in your classroom, and discuss the various interpretations.
7. Pretend you are Glory Bea and write an entry in your diary about Randall Horton on the day that he uses the special family wave.

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