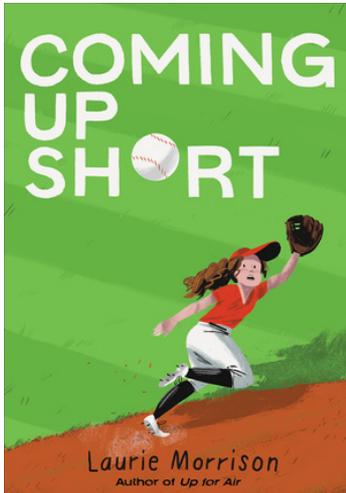


COMING UP SHORT

Discussion and Activity Guide

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE



ISBN: 9781419755583 Ages 10-14

Coming Up Short is a heartfelt novel about a softball-loving girl coming to terms with her parents' humanity after a scandal sends shock waves through her town. The book explores timely themes including perfectionism, anxiety and pressure in sports, the weight of feeling responsible for another person's happiness, and what it really means to be strong and brave. It also includes relatable middle school friendship and crush dynamics as well as a fun summer adventure.

Coming Up Short is a great choice for middle school literature circles, book clubs, and summer reading lists. The discussion questions below are rooted in the Common Core standards for language arts, and the writing prompts and activities offer opportunities for students to add new strategies to their writing toolboxes, deepen their understanding of the novel, research cross-disciplinary topics, and have some fun!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1.) Bea's name, Beatrix, means "she who brings joy," and her parents are very clear about how much joy she brings them and how wonderful they think she is. What are some of the compliments Bea's parents often give her? How do her parents' compliments and attention impact Bea in positive ways? How do these things impact her in negative ways?

2.) People find out about Bea's dad's mistake because of a comment on Instagram. How does social media impact the way news and gossip spread, in this book and in general? What does it mean to "control a message," as Bea's mom wants to do, and how does social media make it more or less difficult to control what people are saying about a topic or person?

3.) Early in the book, Bea explains why she won't apologize if she doesn't think she's done anything wrong: "Mom says apologies should be reserved for 'expressing remorse when you've done something you regret,' but girls are conditioned to apologize whenever anyone else is the least bit unhappy and it strips away our power, apologizing so much" (page 5-6). Do you

agree with Bea's mom's thoughts on apologies? What other pieces of feminist advice has Bea's mom given her, and how does this advice help Bea? How does some of it hold her back even though it's meant to be empowering?

4.) A *symbol* is a significant physical object that takes on layers of meaning in a story. One important symbol in *Coming Up Short* is the photo of Bea's dad's first wife, Allison. How is that photo important to Bea and her emotional journey? Can you find any other symbols in the book?

5.) Jessi tries to be there for Bea after everyone finds out about Bea's dad's mistake, but she isn't sure how. What does Jessi do that makes Bea feel worse, and what, if anything, could she have done to help Bea feel better? Have you ever been in a situation in which you didn't know how to be there for a friend, or have you ever been in a situation in which you were struggling and no one knew what to say? Can you think of any advice that might help someone who wants to support a friend through something difficult?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

[continued]

6.) Aunt Mary tells Bea that when things are mentionable, they become more manageable. How does that lesson help Bea? Can you pinpoint a scene in which Bea is able to talk about something that used to feel too hard to say out loud? Is there anything in your life that began to feel more manageable after you found a way to discuss it?

7.) Bea tries many techniques to manage the yips and get her confidence back on the softball field, but she resists other strategies. Which strategies work best—or could work best if she gave them a chance—and which ones don't work as well? Have you ever gotten stuck in your head like Bea does, whether on a sports field or in another context? How did it feel, and what did you do?

8.) After Coach Rose notices Bea cutting corners on sprints, she says, "I know you're a competitive player, and that competitiveness serves you well. But it can hold you back, too" (page 135). Later, when Bea insists she's serious about camp, Rose replies, "I know you're serious, Bea. Just don't forget about having fun, okay?" (page 159). Have you ever found it difficult to manage your competitiveness or to remember to have fun when you're serious about something? What helps you maintain a balance of commitment and enjoyment?

9.) A *simile* is a comparison between two unlike things that are similar in some important and revealing way, and similes always use the words "like" or "as." A *metaphor* is a comparison between unlike things that does not use "like" or "as." Throughout *Coming Up Short*, Bea uses a lot of softball-related similes and metaphors to explain how she feels. What examples of softball-related figurative language can you find in the book? How do these similes and metaphors bring Bea's character and emotions to life?

10.) Aunt Mary says that Bea's mom put up "baby gates" around Gray Island to close herself off to pain (page 126). Bea starts to resent her

mom's tendency to do this but eventually realizes she's been doing the same thing. Which characters does Bea gate herself off from? What does she do to take down those gates and make amends with those characters?

11.) Hannah accuses Bea and her parents of being selfish. Do you think Bea is selfish, and do you think her parents are selfish? Why or why not? Is selfishness always a negative trait, or are there times when people are right to look out for themselves first?

12.) Bea's parents have kept secrets from her, and many of those secrets surface throughout the novel. What new information does Bea discover about each of her parents, and why have her parents kept these things from her? How will her relationship with her parents change now that these secrets are out in the open? Is it ever wise to keep secrets?

13.) Hannah tells Bea that codependence means "a parent has an unhealthy attachment to their kid and makes the kid feel responsible for their emotions" (page 209). Later, after Aunt Mary tells Bea that she can't be responsible for her parents' happiness, Bea thinks back on the word codependent but decides it "doesn't fit" her relationship with her parents (page 240). Do you think that word fits Bea's relationship with her parents throughout the book? Why or why not?

14.) Another parent refers to Bea's dad as a "privileged white m[a]n" in an Instagram comment (page 25). What does it mean to "have privilege" or to "act privileged"? What kind of privileges does Bea's dad have, and in what ways has he acted privileged? Why is it important for Bea to realize the ways she is privileged?

15.) What is the significance of the book's title, *Coming Up Short*? In what ways do Bea and other characters come up short? Do you agree with Aunt Mary that we all come up short sometimes, even when we're doing our best? What does Bea learn about how she wants to deal with her shortcomings and mistakes in the future?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

CREATIVE WRITING PROMPTS

- *Coming Up Short* includes many softball scenes. Choose one softball scene that you found compelling, and examine the balance of sensory details (which draw upon the five senses), internal narration (what Bea is thinking or feeling), dialogue, and action. Write your own sports action scene that includes all these storytelling elements.
- This book has two very different settings: the suburban New Jersey town of Butler and the island setting. Because Bea is new to Gray Island, she's very aware of all the smells, sounds, and sights there. Find a scene in which the beach setting feels especially vivid, and notice all the details that help you imagine where Bea is. Write about a time when you were somewhere beautiful, using vivid sensory details to bring the setting to life.
- An *epilogue* is a closing section that comes after the last chapter of a story; it usually takes place later than the rest of the story and offers some kind of closure. Look for examples of epilogues in novels you've enjoyed, and then write your own epilogue for *Coming Up Short*. Perhaps it would take place when Bea returns to New Jersey at the end of the summer, or even later, at some point during Bea's eighth grade year?
- *Coming Up Short* is written in Bea's first-person point of view, so readers only get Bea's perspective on the story's events. Choose a scene to write from the perspective of any character other than Bea, considering how that character might experience the same events very differently than Bea does. You could re-write a scene that appears in the novel from someone else's point of view (such as Xander's perspective of the scene outside the Creamery) or you could write about something that doesn't appear in the book, such as a scene that happens in New Jersey while Bea is away.

MINDFULNESS

- Try a guided meditation for kids and teens like the one Coach Rose leads for Bea and her camp teammates. There are several apps that offer meditations like these. When you finish, talk to someone about what the experience was like or spend a few minutes writing down your thoughts about the experience and when meditation and deep breathing might be helpful to you.

ART

- Aunt Mary encourages Bea to do a few directed drawing art projects, and Bea surprises herself by enjoying the experience. Find a directed drawing video on YouTube or find drawing instructions on an illustrator's website, and have fun making some art.
- Bea values having a photograph of her dad's first wife Allison from when Allison was in eighth grade, and by the end of the book she's happy to have a photograph of her mom from eighth grade, too. Find photographs of adults who are important to you from when they were around your age, and talk to those adults about what they were like at your age and what strikes them as they look at the old photos. Make a collage with copies of these old photos as well as a current photo of yourself and any related words and images you find in magazines.
- Read *A Place to Hang the Moon* by Kate Albus and consider the very different ways that the phrase "hang the moon" figures in that novel versus *Coming Up Short*. Then create an art project or write a poem or story that explores or incorporates that phrase "hang the moon."

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

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SPORTS

- When Bea gets stuck in her head and can no longer throw the ball to first base, she is struggling with something that's sometimes called the yips. Do some research about the yips—or “the twisties,” as a similar experience is called in gymnastics and diving—to find out how the yips and twisties are defined, how they impact athletes, and what professionals know and don't know about why they happen and how to manage them.
- Read another novel about a character who is serious about a sport, and compare and contrast the ways in which competition, pressure, performance anxiety, and team dynamics are portrayed in that book and in *Coming Up Short*. Some great sporty novels include Ernesto Cisneros's *Falling Short*, Alyson Gerber's *Taking Up Space*, Lindsey Stoddard's *Bea Is for Blended*, A.J. Sass's *Ana on the Edge*, E. L. Shen's *The Comeback*, Paula Chase's *Dough Boys*, Laura Shovan's *Takedown*, Rajani LaRocca's *Much Ado About Baseball*, Jenn Bishop's *The Distance to Home*, Barbara Carroll Roberts's *Nikki on the Line*, Jason Reynolds's Track series, and Laurie Morrison's previous novel *Up for Air*.

COOKING

- Make a New Jersey style Sloppy Joe like the ones Bea and her parents eat on her last day of seventh grade: <https://food52.com/recipes/75766-turkey-swiss-sloppy-joe>
- Bea's favorite kind of ice cream is black cherry. Make your own black cherry ice cream, which you can enjoy in a store-bought waffle cone. If you have an immersion blender, try this recipe: <https://ramshacklepantry.com/no-churn-black-cherry-ice-cream/#tasty-recipes-10584-jump-target>
- If you have an ice cream maker, try this recipe: <https://homebodyeats.com/black-cherry-ice-cream/>

SCIENCE

- Bea can't retrieve a photo that flies into dune grass because she sees a sign telling people to stay off the dunes. Do some research about the role of dunes. How are they formed and why are they important? What kinds of things can individuals do to help preserve them?
- Hannah hopes to get an internship at a science institute where researchers are studying the coral in the ocean near Gray Island. This particular science institute is fictional, but there are many researchers studying coral reefs and the effects of global warming on coral. Do some online research about “reef resilience,” why it matters if coral reefs can't survive disturbances, and what can be done to help preserve them.

COMING UP SHORT

By Laurie Morrison

About the Author:

Laurie Morrison taught middle school for ten years and now writes middle grade novels. Laurie is the coauthor of *Every Shiny Thing* and the author of *Up for Air*, *Saint Ivy*, and *Coming Up Short*. Her books have been chosen as Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selections and finalists for state award lists, and *Up for Air* received two starred reviews and was a Publishers Weekly Best Summer Read. Laurie holds an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts, and she lives with her family in Philadelphia.

Praise for *Coming Up Short*:

A Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection

“A pitch-perfect middle school sports story that captures all the joy, love, and messiness of growing up, *Coming Up Short* hits an absolute home run.” –Kate Messner, author of *Breakout* and *Chirp*

“For every strong, brave kid who has ever felt like they’re coming up short, this is a book about showing up for your team, but showing up for yourself first.” –Lindsey Stoddard, Author of *Just Like Jackie*

“Laurie Morrison hits a home run with this heart-warming story about a star softball player who must deal with family disappointment and learn how to trust her friends and teammates, her family, and most of all, herself. *Coming Up Short* has the perfect lineup of friendships, first crushes, and family drama for a page-turning book. I loved everything about it!”

–Debbi Michiko Florence, Author of *Keep It Together*, *Keiko Carter* and *Just Be Cool*, Jenna Sakai

“*Coming Up Short* is a gripping and relatable story with a big heart that will have readers thinking deeply about team, family, and responsibility—especially when it comes to the people we love.”

–Alyson Gerber, Author of *Taking Up Space*

“There are lots of sports scenes for softball fans, but this is also a novel that realistically explores deeper psychological truths around friendship and family relationships. There’s even a bit of sweet budding romance...A tween girl explores changing relationships in this sincere, character-driven story.” –*Kirkus Reviews*

“Morrison’s tale hits the ground running, and Bea’s emotional journey is as deftly chronicled as her time at a softball camp, which backgrounds the summer of her recovery. There are no villains here, just people of all ages who’ve made decisions they regret but are learning to dust themselves off and do better.” –*Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*



Amulet Books

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