

# Learning to Skate

W.M. Akers

"I don't want to go out there."

"Come on."

"Schmabsolutely not."

"Schmabsolutely? What does that mean?"

"It's what you say when *absolutely, positively* isn't strong enough. I schmabsolutely, schmositively will not go out on that ice."

Linda's father crossed his arms and looked at his skates. Linda returned the gesture, staring back at him with frosty determination, far colder than the skating rink behind her. She and her father were at the climax of a very literal cold war.

It had started months earlier, when the weather started to turn.

"Oh, look at that," Linda's mother said one night over dinner. "It's supposed to be under thirty this week. Winter's really coming."

"Woo-hoo," said Linda. She was a summer girl, through and through. While other kids talked about ski trips and snowball fights, Linda closed her eyes and transported herself to the beach. While her family sang "Winter Wonderland," Linda hummed "Surfin' USA" and "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." And when her little brother threw himself into the snow to make snow angels, Linda imagined she was in the park, lying on her back in a field of thick green grass, the sun baking her skin like she was a calzone in a pizza oven. But there was one winter activity she dreaded most of all.

"I have an idea!" said her mother. "When the weather gets a little colder, why don't we all go ice skating?"

"That sounds awesome," yelled Linda's little brother.

"No thanks," said Linda.

"Why not?" asked Mom.

"She doesn't want to go because she doesn't know how to skate," said her brother. "She's scaaaaaared."

"Oh, baby! You don't have anything to be scared of. Ice skating is so much fun. When I was a kid, in the winter time, we went at least twice a week. I'd still go all the time, if I didn't have to work, and if your father ever wanted to go."

"That is not right," said Linda. "Not right at all. I'm not scared. I just never wanted to learn."

"Well, this winter that's going to change."

Every week, her mother tried to make her threat come true. She would needle Linda, talking about how thick the ice on the rink at the park was getting, and how beautiful the weather was for going outside. Linda did not want to go outside until April. She wanted to sit in the chair by the window, and look at the blue sky, and think of heat. Every weekend, by feigning illness or homework, or simply hiding, she managed to avoid her mother. And then, the last week of February, her mother trapped her at last.

Linda was reading when her mother walked up and dropped a pair of skates onto Linda's lap.

"This is the last weekend the rink is open," her mother said. "I'm going out of town for work. And you're going skating with your father."

"But—"

"Ah! Don't even try. I've heard all your excuses. Your brother was right. You're just afraid. It's time to get past it."

Mom left, and Linda stared at the skates. The only thing she wanted to get past was winter.

"Come on, sweetheart. Just one time around the rink and we can go home."

Linda and her father had been standing by the rink for 15 minutes, arguing with their eyes. Children, adults, and old people shuffled around them to get to the ice. Linda felt embarrassed. She felt in the way. But mostly she felt bad for her dad. He loved summer as much as she did, and she could tell he was ready for winter to be behind them.

"Please, sweetie. It's not so bad, you know. Just a few minutes out there, and you'll be figure skating like you're in the Olympics."

"The summer Olympics?"

"The winter Olympics."

"Those are the *worst* Olympics." Linda watched her father. He was out of arguments. If she pushed him, she knew, they could leave right now. But she didn't want to win that badly. She gripped the wooden wall of the rink and clomped toward the entrance. She was going skating.

It was much harder than she'd imagined. She clung to the wall, slipping forward one step at a time, her father gripping her hand to keep her from falling. All around her, kids from school were skating like professionals, doing spins and skating backward and laughing like they were having the most fun in the world. Linda's heart pounded, her palms sweated, and the entrance to the rink seemed to get farther and farther away.

"Doing great, sweetheart. We're almost there."

Linda turned to her father, planning to deliver some snarky remark, when she felt the world tip out from under her. She fell on her stomach, knocking the wind out of her chest. From down there, the whole world looked like ice. A skater sped toward her, big as a giant, and apparently unaware of Linda's existence. His skate was headed right toward Linda's index finger—her favorite finger!—and Linda felt like she was moving in slow motion as she yanked it out of the way. As she pulled her hand to safety, she felt ice shavings on her palm from the passing skater, who had no idea he had just missed slicing off a little girl's finger.

Linda waited for her father to yell at the skating giant, but there was no sound but the slicing of metal on ice, and the laughing of happy, winter-loving children. Linda propped herself up on her elbows. Her father seemed to be miles away. The swirling mass of skaters had carried him away from her. She was on her own.

"Okay, that's it. I am through with this stupid sport!"

She climbed to her feet, falling three times. Her knees felt bruised, her elbows were aching, and she was pretty sure she had frostbite. Linda didn't care. She was getting out of there. She hugged the wall and caught her breath. She had two options: continue with the mass of skaters, moving counter-clockwise around the rink, until she got back to safety. Or she could go back the way she came, a salmon battling upstream past 200 happy people wearing razors on their feet.

She turned around and stared over the wood wall into the park. In the distance she could see her favorite bench, where she liked to spend summer afternoons reading beneath a tree, watching squirrels play, and marveling at the massive height of the oak trees around her. She knew what she would have to do.

Using the last of her strength, Linda hauled herself over the rink wall. With an awkward front flip, she landed on her back in the grass, winded again, but safe. She yanked off her skates, resisting the urge to pelt them into the woods, and looked back at the rink. She waved to get her father's attention, but he was busy on the other side of the ice, slipping and falling on his way back to the changing rooms.

He couldn't skate either! As Linda realized this, she laughed so hard she forgot how scared she had been on the ice.

"Next winter, ice skating lessons," said her father, as they sipped hot chocolate and compared bruises. "For both of us."

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Whom does Linda argue with at the skating rink?

- A her mother
- B her father
- C her brother
- D someone who almost skates over one of her fingers

2. What is the main setting of this story?

- A a skateboard park
- B a ski slope
- C a rollerskating rink
- D an ice skating rink

3. Read the following sentences from the story:

“‘Oh, look at that,’ Linda’s mother said one night over dinner. ‘It’s supposed to be under thirty this week. Winter’s really coming.’

‘Woo-hoo,’ said Linda. She was a summer girl, through and through. While other kids talked about ski trips and snowball fights, Linda closed her eyes and transported herself to the beach.”

What can be concluded from these sentences?

- A Linda likes winter more than summer.
- B Linda likes summer more than winter.
- C Linda’s mother likes summer more than winter.
- D Linda’s mother likes winter more than summer.

4. Why might Linda have stopped arguing with her father at the rink?

- A She felt bad for him.
- B She got her way.
- C She decided that she was more angry with her mother.
- D She decided that she was more angry with her brother.

5. What is the theme of this story?

- A People are sometimes better at activities they do not enjoy than they are at activities they enjoy.
- B Girls are similar to their mothers, and boys are similar to their fathers.
- C Sharing a bad experience can bring two people closer together.
- D The best way to learn something new is to try it on your own.

6. Read the following sentences from the story: "Linda's father crossed his arms and looked at his skates. Linda returned the gesture, staring back at him with **frosty** determination, far colder than the skating rink behind her."

Why does the author use the word "**frosty**" above?

- A to explain why Linda does not want to go ice skating
- B to suggest that Linda enjoys spending time with her father
- C to make a connection between Linda and the skating rink
- D to hint that Linda secretly wants to go ice skating

7. Select the word that best completes the sentence.

Linda's mother and brother enjoy ice skating; \_\_\_\_\_, Linda and her father cannot skate.

- A on the other hand
- B as a result
- C as an illustration
- D in particular

8. What almost happens to Linda as she is lying on the ice?

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9. Describe the actions of Linda's father on the ice.

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10. Why does Linda laugh so hard when she sees her father on the ice? Support your answer with evidence from the story.

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## Teacher Guide &amp; Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 770

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- D in particular

8. What almost happens to Linda as she is lying on the ice?

**Suggested answer (responses may vary but should resemble the following):** A skater passes so close to Linda that he nearly slices off her index finger.

9. Describe the actions of Linda's father on the ice.

**Suggested answer (responses may vary but should resemble the following):** Linda's father keeps slipping and falling on the ice while trying to make his way back to the changing rooms.

10. Why does Linda laugh so hard when she sees her father on the ice? Support your answer with evidence from the story.

**Suggested answer:** Responses may vary, as long as they are supported by the story. Students may simply respond that Linda is laughing at the discovery of her father's inability to ice skate. Students may also go further and infer a sense of camaraderie or schadenfreude in Linda's laughter. Seeing her father struggle with skating helps her forget her own negative feelings about it.