

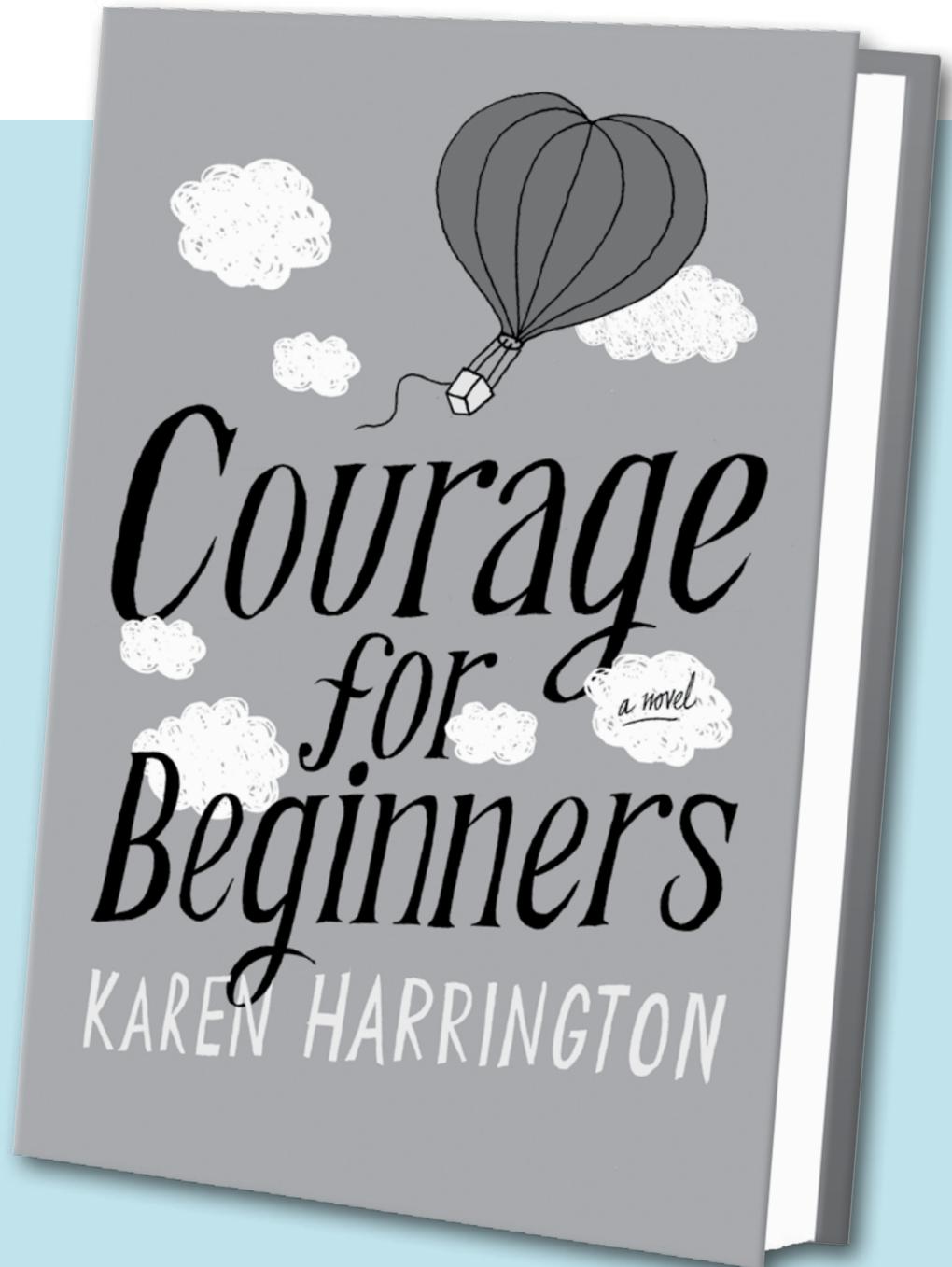
# *Courage for Beginners*

## Curriculum connections

- ❖ Family Life
- ❖ Friendship
- ❖ Personal Development
- ❖ Mental Health

Ages 8 – 12

By  
**Karen  
Harrington**



# Courage for Beginners

## BEFORE READING:

### Courage Board

Before reading, ask students to think about the word “courage.” What does it mean to be courageous? Using words and pictures have students create a bulletin board that shows their understanding. They might bring in pictures of courageous people, events that required courage, definitions, or quotations about courage. After reading, ask students to find text-based details to match the examples on the bulletin board. These could be descriptions or quotations from the book.

### Read Aloud Inferences

Read aloud the first chapter of *Courage for Beginners*. Ask students to listen for evidence or clues about the main characters or setting. Have students make a T-chart with one column for the setting and one column for the main character. Have them jot down any clues they hear in the appropriate column. After reading the first chapter aloud, have students compare evidence or clues with a partner. Then, ask them to draw a conclusion about the main character and about the setting. Ask students to make a prediction about the problem or problems the main character may face.

## SUMMARIZING:

### Identifying Theme

There are many themes that can be found throughout *Courage for Beginners*. Begin by reviewing the concept of themes. What are they? Why do authors use them? How do they help drive the story forward? Next, have students identify some of the themes in *Courage for Beginners* and choose one to explore in a small group. Ask each group to creatively represent the theme they chose and give examples from the story to show how it was used throughout the book. Students can use any medium to share their theme: visual arts, music, writing, multi-media, etc.

### Judging a Book by Its Cover

Book covers are designed to draw the readers’ eyes or pique their curiosity. What role did the hot-air balloon play in Mysti’s character development? Ask students to use evidence and details from the story to explain their answer in writing.

## COMPREHENSION CONNECTION:

### Personal Museum

Mysti Murphy often refers to moments or events in her life by imagined titles, almost like paintings in a museum. Ask students to bring in photographs or draw pictures of several key moments in their own lives. Then, have them creatively name them (like exhibits in a museum) to give viewers added insight into why the events are important. Using their pictures and creative titles, ask students to orally summarize their personal timelines.

### What Is a Friend?

What are some qualities that make someone a good friend? As a class, brainstorm attributes of good friends. Then, ask students to think about Mysti’s friendship with Anibal and her friendship with Rama. Which friend meets the criteria established by the class? Was Anibal ever a good friend? What about Rama? Referring to the attributes established by the class, ask students to use evidence from the story to support their thinking.

## VOCABULARY:

### Faux and Nefarious

Although there are many rich vocabulary words peppered throughout *Courage for Beginners*, the words “nefarious” and “faux” are brought up over and over. Begin by discussing the definition of the words. Then, ask students to keep track of the use of “nefarious” and “faux” throughout the book. They should note the page number and record the way the word is used and how it is applied in each situation. After reading, ask students to consider if Mysti’s use of the words changed as the story progressed. Students may write a written reflection (using evidence from the book) or engage in a discussion with peers.

## WRITING:

### 9 Ways to Be a Hipster Article

What is a hipster? Anibal Gomez tries to become a hipster. According to Mysti, he read an article that suggests 9 ways to become a hipster. After discussing the meaning of the word “hipster,” ask students in small groups to pretend they are the authors of the article Anibal read. Have students write the article “9 Ways to Become a Hipster.” They should be sure to include the ideas Anibal used, but they can also include their own ideas. Their article should be written in a voice that would appeal to the wannabe hipster. After all articles are completed, ask students to share their articles with the class. Did they have ideas in common?

### Is It Bullying?

Begin by asking students to identify situations within *Courage for Beginners* that show harassing or bullying behavior. Ask students to work together to provide examples from the text of incidents that show one person mistreating another. Next, provide students with the district or school code of conduct. Does the code of conduct have language about bullying? How does the code of conduct define bullying behavior? Who is protected? What types of actions are considered bullying or harassment? Does the code of conduct have language that addresses the use of technology to mistreat others? After students have a deep understanding of the criteria set forth in the code of conduct, ask students to consider events from *Courage for Beginners*. Would any of the incidents violate the school code of conduct? Ask students to justify their thinking by referring to the code of conduct and to each specific example. As a class, discuss the code of conduct. Do students think it is specific enough? Do they think it is effective as a way of shaping behavior? Does it go too far? Not far enough? What changes would they make, if any?

## AGORAPHOBIA:

There are many types of phobias, fears that are so intense they have an impact on someone’s ability to function. Agoraphobia, the fear of leaving one’s home, greatly affected Mysti’s mother and the rest of the family. Have students research other phobias and create a brochure like the one Mysti found in her mother’s drawer. They should include a description, symptoms, possible causes, and recommended treatment options. Encourage students to use reputable

sources for this information. A brief lesson on how to find reliable sources is recommended before asking students to complete this assignment.

## REMEMBER THE ALAMO:

Texas history and the Battle of the Alamo are woven into Mysti’s story. Ask students to complete a short research project on the Alamo in order to give them a deeper understanding of the history Mysti learned about. For a very brief overview, give each student in the class a question word: who, what, where, when, why. Their task is to apply their word to the Battle of the Alamo. They should each come up with a question about the Alamo and then research the answer to that question. Students can then come together as a class and share the results of their research.

## CHARACTER EDUCATION:

### Even a Little Can Make a Difference

The brain injury suffered by Mysti’s father throws his family into an even more desperate situation. Although the agoraphobia experienced by Mysti’s mother creates a bigger obstacle, it would be difficult for any family to face these difficulties. Help students understand the importance of helping others in a time of need through a class service project. Begin by asking students to consider small things neighbors or friends might have done to make Mysti’s life easier. What if someone provided a few meals? What if someone offered transportation to the store or hospital? What else might have helped Mysti and her family? After students think about things that might have helped Mysti, ask them to think of someone they know who might be facing family illness or injury. As a class, discuss service activities that might be appreciated by this family. Depending on the situation, the class could help arrange meals, rides, or assist with lawn mowing, shoveling, leaf raking, gardening, etc. Give students ownership of the experience by allowing them to apply what they learned through their reading of Mysti’s fictional experience in order to make a difference for others in the real world.

## QUESTION GUIDE:

### Chapters 1, 2, and 3

1. Mysti is scolded and punished by her parents for violating the rights of Woman Who Goes Somewhere. Why are Mysti's parents upset? What is Mysti's argument? Do you agree with Mysti or her parents? Explain.
2. Mysti says she lets her narration solve her problems. What does she mean by this? Why do you think she does this? Use details from the text to explain your answer.
3. Mysti says that things in her house are never really "fixed-fixed." What are some examples of things in her life that are not really fixed?
4. Mysti's dad says, "Change is good." How does Mysti feel about this? Do you think change is good? Explain your answer by using an example from your own life or from the real world.

### Chapters 4, 5, and 6

1. How does Mysti describe her friendship with Anibal Gomez? What social experiment does Anibal propose? Do you think his idea will work?
2. Mysti's parents seem to have very different approaches to life. How does Mysti describe her mother's approach to life? How does she describe her father's approach to life? Is Mysti more like her father or her mother? Use details from the story to explain your answer.
3. Mysti says, "But you know what they say about the calm. It always comes before the storm." Why does she say this? What kind of storm is coming?

### Chapters 7, 8, and 9

1. How does Mysti's mother respond to the tragedy in their life? What effect do you think this will have on Mysti and her sister?
2. What is Mysti's initial reaction to seeing Anibal in his hat? Why does she approach him? How does he respond to her?
3. What kind of personality does Girl with Scarf seem to have? Use details from the text to illustrate your answer.
4. What trick does Mysti play on her sister? Why do you think she picks on her sister?

### Chapters 10, 11, and 12

1. When Anibal calls Mysti, he says, 'All experiments have their variables and controls, Mysti. You are the variable. You'll see that I'm right and will win.' What does Anibal mean by this?
2. How does the social experiment become a different kind of challenge? Given what you know right now, do you think Mysti or Anibal will win the competition?
3. Mysti compares herself to the Russian turtles that orbited the moon. Explain this analogy in your own words. Do you think this is a good analogy for her situation? Why or why not?
4. Mysti is surprised that her cartoon in her notebook is considered bullying. What is Ms. Peet's opinion? Do you agree? Do you think Mysti was treated fairly?

### Chapters 13, 14, and 15

1. How do you think Anibal views his friendship with Mysti? Does his text message to her seem like he is a supportive friend? What about his interactions with her in person?
2. What is the relationship like between Mr. and Mrs. Jennings? In what ways is it different from the memories Mysti has of her mom and dad?

### Chapters 16, 17, and 18

1. What main difficulty is Mysti (and her family) facing? In what ways have her worries changed from the beginning of the story to now? Use details from the book to support your answer.
2. Why is Mysti's mother counting down to Halloween? Do you think everything will change on that date? Why or why not?
3. How does Mysti use the discussion about Steve Jobs to try to convince herself that Anibal's experiment is going to be fine? Do you think this reasoning makes sense? Why or why not?

### Chapters 19, 20, and 21

1. In history class, Mysti and her classmates discuss the definition of a hero in relation to the Alamo. What qualities make someone a hero? Do you agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson's definition? Explain.

# Courage for Beginners

## Chapters 22, 23, and 24

1. Why does Mysti hesitate to walk home? What makes her change her mind?
2. Why does Rama stay outside her house with Mysti? What does her mother fear? In what ways are Mysti's mother and Rama's mother alike? Support your answer with details from the story.

## Chapters 25, 26, and 27

1. Mysti compares Anibal and Rama, saying they are both "running toward change." Do you agree that Anibal and Rama are similar? Explain your reasoning.
2. Mysti has the feeling of having "a foot on two boats." What does she mean by this? What change do you think she will make?
3. In what way are the floating balloons a sign for Mysti? How might this be a turning point in the story?

## Chapters 28, 29, and 30

1. How does Mysti's mother react to Mysti's plan to go to the grocery store? Is this the reaction you expected? Explain.
2. What is unique about Mysti's history project? What does it symbolize? Use details from the story to support your answer.

## Chapters 31, 32, 33, and 34

1. How does Mysti use humor as a "superhero deflector shield" when she is in an uncomfortable position? What specific examples from the story illustrate this?
2. Mysti compares Anibal to an iceberg. Do you agree with her interpretation? Do you think Mysti believes what she is saying? Why or why not?

## Chapters 35, 36, 37, and 38

1. What does it mean to Mysti to see the word "loser" on the text message she is sent? Why does she consider this proof that people change?
2. Why does the free turkey make Mysti feel hopeful? What narration did she create in her mind? How is she brought back to reality?

## Chapters 39, 40, and 41

1. How does Mysti react to the painting her mother shows her? Why do you think this is her reaction?

2. What happens when Mysti finally discovers the destination of Woman Who Goes Somewhere? How does Mysti react? How does Rama react?
3. What is the topic that is never spoken of in Mysti's home? What does she discover from Mama?

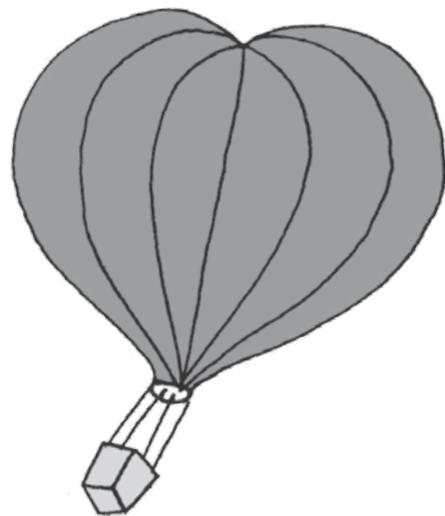
## Chapters 42, 43, and 44

1. Why does Mysti decide to enter the talent show? What is significant about what she chooses to share?
2. How does the final story Mysti tells Laura show how Mysti has changed since the beginning of the book? Discuss how Mysti's narration shows how she has grown as a character, using details from the text to support your answer.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS:

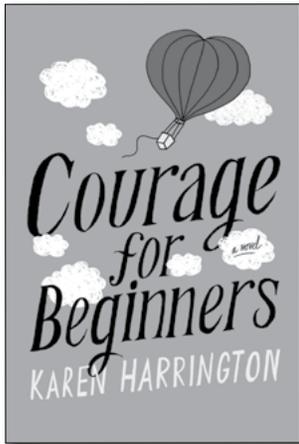
Names, labels, and words can be powerful. Mysti uses narration and names for people throughout the story. She carefully labels the colors around her as well. Anibal and his friends create names for others too, such as Missed-Teeth or Sand Girl. Mysti's names are not intended to hurt others, but Anibal's are. Using specific examples from the text, discuss how words were used by characters in this book as a way to claim a sense of power or control.

Choose one character and, using details from the text, show how the character has changed. Discuss why that change has occurred. Which character do you think changed the most?



# Courage for Beginners

## about the book



Twelve-year-old Mysti Murphy wishes she were a character in a book. If her life were fictional, she'd magically know how to deal with the fact that her best friend, Anibal Gomez, has abandoned her in favor of being a "hipster." She'd be able to take care of everyone when her dad has to spend time in the hospital. And she'd certainly be able to change her family's secret.

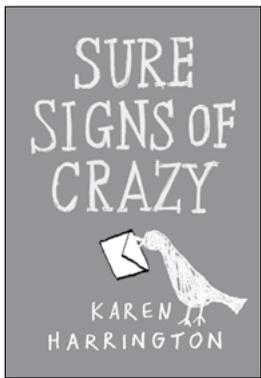
Seventh grade is not turning out the way Mysti had planned. With the help of a hot-air balloon, her new friend Rama Khan, and a bright orange coat, can she find the courage to change?

**Courage for Beginners**  
by Karen Harrington

978-0-316-21048-5

Also available as an e-book &  
in a downloadable  
audio format

## also by Karen Harrington



★ "Harrington has created a protagonist who is, in her own way, as clear-eyed, tough-minded, and inspiring as any dystopian hero."

— *Booklist* (starred review)

★ "Readers...will sympathize with the plucky protagonist and rejoice in the way her summer works out."

— *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

★ "[A] beautifully written story...This is the kind of book that stays with you."

— *Library Media Connection* (starred review)

★ "Sarah is an introspective protagonist whose narrative, interspersed with letters and word definitions, keeps readers absorbed."

— *School Library Journal* (starred review)

## about the author



Karen Harrington was born and raised in Texas, where she still lives with her husband and children. She is the author of the acclaimed middle grade debut *Sure Signs of Crazy*. You can visit her online at [karenharringtonbooks.com](http://karenharringtonbooks.com).



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY  
BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

LittleBrownLibrary.com

Educator's guide prepared by Jennifer McMahon.