

# The First Skateboard in the History of the World

Memoir by Betsy Byars

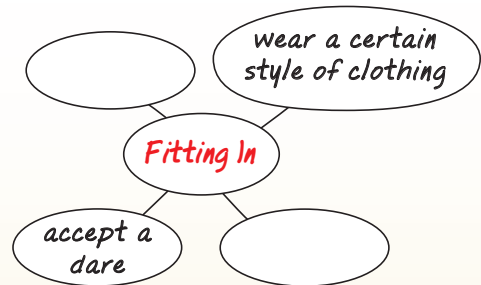
## How strong is PEER PRESSURE?



**READING 7** Identify the literary language and devices used in memoirs.

Friends and classmates can have a strong influence on you. They may encourage you to make decisions—good or bad. The pressure you feel to please or fit in with people your age is called peer pressure. Standing up to peer pressure can be difficult, but giving in to it can cause trouble. In “The First Skateboard in the History of the World,” Betsy Byars recalls her bumps and bruises from a time when peer pressure was too hard to resist.

**WEB IT** Think about the different ways peer pressure affects us. What things might a person do in order to fit in? Create a word web to gather your ideas.



SECTION C

THE STAR JOURNAL

C4



## LITERARY ANALYSIS: STYLE IN NONFICTION

A writer's **style** is the distinctive way he or she uses language. When you read a nonfiction work such as a memoir, you will recognize some of the literary language and devices you find in fiction.

In her memoir, Byars creates a casual, friendly style through

- **word choice**, the distinctive way she uses language to express her ideas
- **sentence structure**, including short, direct sentences and fragments, or parts of sentences
- realistic **dialogue**, or conversations

As you read, notice how Byars uses these elements to create a specific style.

## READING STRATEGY: ANALYZE AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

An author may have many purposes for writing. An author typically writes a **memoir**, or true account of personal experiences, for one or more of these reasons:

- to inform the reader about his or her life
- to share his or her own thoughts and feelings
- to entertain readers with a good story

Use a chart like the one shown to analyze the author's purposes for writing this excerpt from her memoir. Record details from the text that support each purpose.

Inform	Share Thoughts or Feelings	Entertain

## VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Betsy Byars uses the boldfaced words to help tell a story about risk taking. To see how many you know, substitute a different word or phrase for each one.

1. Riding a skateboard requires **agility** as well as bravery.
2. The neighborhood kids never **protest** anything Bee says.
3. Betsy didn't get any **acclaim** for her tremendous efforts.
4. No one offered to **administer** first aid to the injured rider.

## Betsy Byars

born 1928

### Reader on Wheels

Betsy Byars learned to roller-skate about the same time she started to read. She often roller-skated to the local library. She says she was a "good reader but a poor skater," so she unfortunately spent much of her childhood with bandages on her knees.

### Adventurous Life

Adventure has always played a huge role in the way Byars lives her life. She and her husband are pilots and live on an airstrip in South Carolina. The bottom floor of their house is an airplane hangar where they park their own airplane. From their front yard, they can taxi down the runway and take flight.

## BACKGROUND TO THE MEMOIR

### Sidewalk Surfing

The first skateboards were made with boards and roller-skate wheels. Skateboarding became a craze in California in the 1950s. On days when the water or weather wasn't good for surfing, people would "sidewalk surf" using homemade skateboards.



Author  
Online



Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com).  
KEYWORD: HML6-509



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.



## Betsy Byars

**S**ince none of my friends knew I was scared of anything, I was thought to be a tough little kid.

My bravery (and the rest of me) was about seven years old when I was selected by the neighborhood to test ride The First Skateboard in the History of the World. **A**

I didn't even know what a skateboard was. This was the summer of 1935. Skateboards hadn't been invented back then. But that did not stop our neighborhood from making one.

Here's what went into The First Skateboard in the History of the World:

10 One board.

Forty-two assorted nails.

One roller skate.

Back then, roller skates were made out of metal and could be adjusted to stretch waaaay out for long feet, which a lot of us had. We stretched this skate out so far that it came apart. This suited us just fine. We nailed the front half of the skate to the front of the board and the back half to the back.

### **A** AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

Reread lines 1–5. What purpose or purposes has the writer revealed so far? Record details in the appropriate column of your chart.

### Analyze Visuals ▶

Describe as many **details** in this illustration as you can.



Bee  
→



915 Magnolia Ave.



Red Hill



Betsy  
Alice  
Cromer  
←



monkey  
bars



Then we turned the board over and hammered the tips of the nails (which had come through the board) down—hard. We had a deep respect  
20 for nails. We had all stepped on nails at one time or another, and even though we **protested** all the way to the doctor’s office, “It wasn’t rusty! I swear it wasn’t rusty! If you don’t believe me ask Skrunky! He’ll tell you it wasn’t rusty!” we still got a shot. We also had a deep respect for shots. **B**

**protest** (prə-tĕst’) v. to argue about or object to something

**B STYLE IN NONFICTION**

Reread lines 18–23. Which words or phrases in this paragraph contribute to the casual style of the piece?

The whole construction took less than five minutes, and the skateboard was ready to go. By this time we knew it was a skateboard because the leader of the neighborhood—a sixth grade girl named Bee—said, “Who wants to go first on the skateboard?”

There was a silence.

Then Bee answered her own question. “Betsy will.”

30 There was a sort of echo from the rest, “Betsy will-ill-ill-ill-ill.”

And that was how I—seven-year-old Betsy Alice Cromer—got the honor of testing The First Skateboard in the History of the World.

At the time it didn’t seem like an honor, more like a military duty.



However, we always did what Bee told us to do. The explanation “Bee told me to” often made my mother explode with, “And if Bee told you to stick your head in a lion’s mouth, would you?” “If Bee told you to jump off the Empire State Building,<sup>1</sup> would you?” Well . . . I was glad it never came to those things. **C**

40 **W**e took the skateboard to the top of Magnolia Avenue, which was the street I lived on. Magnolia Avenue was not a steep hill, but the sidewalk had been buckled by the roots of old trees, and it was considered challenging for a skater.

We put the skateboard down on the sidewalk.

Bee said, “Go ahead, Betsy.”

I said, “I will.”

Fortunately we were unfamiliar with skateboards, and we didn’t know you were supposed to stand up on them, so I sat down. Otherwise I wouldn’t be alive today.

I sat, put my feet up on the skateboard, and held on to the sides with 50 both hands.

Somebody gave me a push.

I rolled a few inches but came to a stop at the first wide crack in the sidewalk.

They pushed again—harder.

Same disappointing ride. **D**

“This hill isn’t steep enough,” Bee complained, “I vote we take it to Red Hill.”

“Red Hill-ill-ill-ill,” came the echo.

The echo had a scary ring to it this time because Red Hill was the Alps, 60 the Himalayas, and Mount Everest<sup>2</sup> all rolled into one.

We weren’t allowed to roller-skate down Red Hill. We weren’t even allowed to ride our bikes down it. But nobody had told us we couldn’t *skateboard* down it.

We set off in a silence, tense with excitement. My throat was dry. I had recently recovered from a broken arm—the result of a daring feat on the monkey bars in Dilworth Park.

See, we had been having a contest to see who could hang on to the bars by one hand the longest, and I held on so long that my body began to angle out to the side, as if I were doing a gymnastic display of **agility**,

### **C** AUTHOR’S PURPOSE

Why might Byars have chosen to include her mother’s comments? Record this information in your chart.

### **D** STYLE IN NONFICTION

Reread lines 51–55. How do the short sentences and sentence fragment help Byars create a casual style?

**agility** (ə-jīl’ī-tē) *n.*  
quickness or ease of movement

1. **Empire State Building:** a skyscraper in New York City, once the world’s tallest building.

2. **the Alps, the Himalayas, and Mount Everest:** The Alps and the Himalayas are mountain ranges located in Europe and Asia, respectively. Mount Everest, located on the border between Nepal and Tibet, is the highest mountain in the world.

70 which I wasn't. When I finally let go, I was horizontal to the ground and landed on my left elbow, which showed its displeasure by snapping in two. (I did win the contest, but neither of my parents congratulated me on the win.) **E**

**B**y the time we reached the top of Red Hill, my left arm was throbbing a warning like jungle drums.

And we reached the top of Red Hill very quickly.

"Sit down," Bee said.

I didn't want to, but I had to. Bee had told me to. I sat down on the skateboard. I said, "Now don't push me till I'm ready and I'm not ready  
80 yet so don't push me till I say I'm ready, till I say 'Go.' Then when I say 'Go,' I only want Wilma to push me"—Wilma was the weak link in the gang—"and until I say 'Go,' everybody stay back and leave me—"

The neighborhood gang heard only the "Go" and they pushed. And I went.

The first thing that happened was that all the skin was scraped off my knuckles. (I was holding onto the sides of the board and my weight in the center of the board brought it closer to the road than anticipated.)

The next thing that happened was a three-part miracle.

90 The skate broke off the back of the board, the back of the board acted as a brake, and The First Skateboard in the History of the World ground to a halt twenty feet down Red Hill.

There were cries of disappointment and of determination to renail the skate and start all over again, but these cries were drowned out by my own.

"I knew it wasn't going to work! Look what it did to my fingers! If you don't know how to make skateboards, don't make skateboards! Anyway, there is no such thing as a skateboard and there never will be!"

I stormed down the hill. My shouts of outrage turned to whimpers of pain as I got out of the gang's earshot and saw the damage to my knuckles.  
100 I grew silent as I got within earshot of 915 Magnolia Avenue, my home. I liked to **administer** my own first-aid treatments because I was the only one who would stop administering if it hurt.

"What have you done now?" my mother asked, seeing me at the bloodied basin.

I gave my usual answer. "Nothing."

"What—have—you—done—now?" My mother always added the word *now* to give the impression that I did a lot of things.

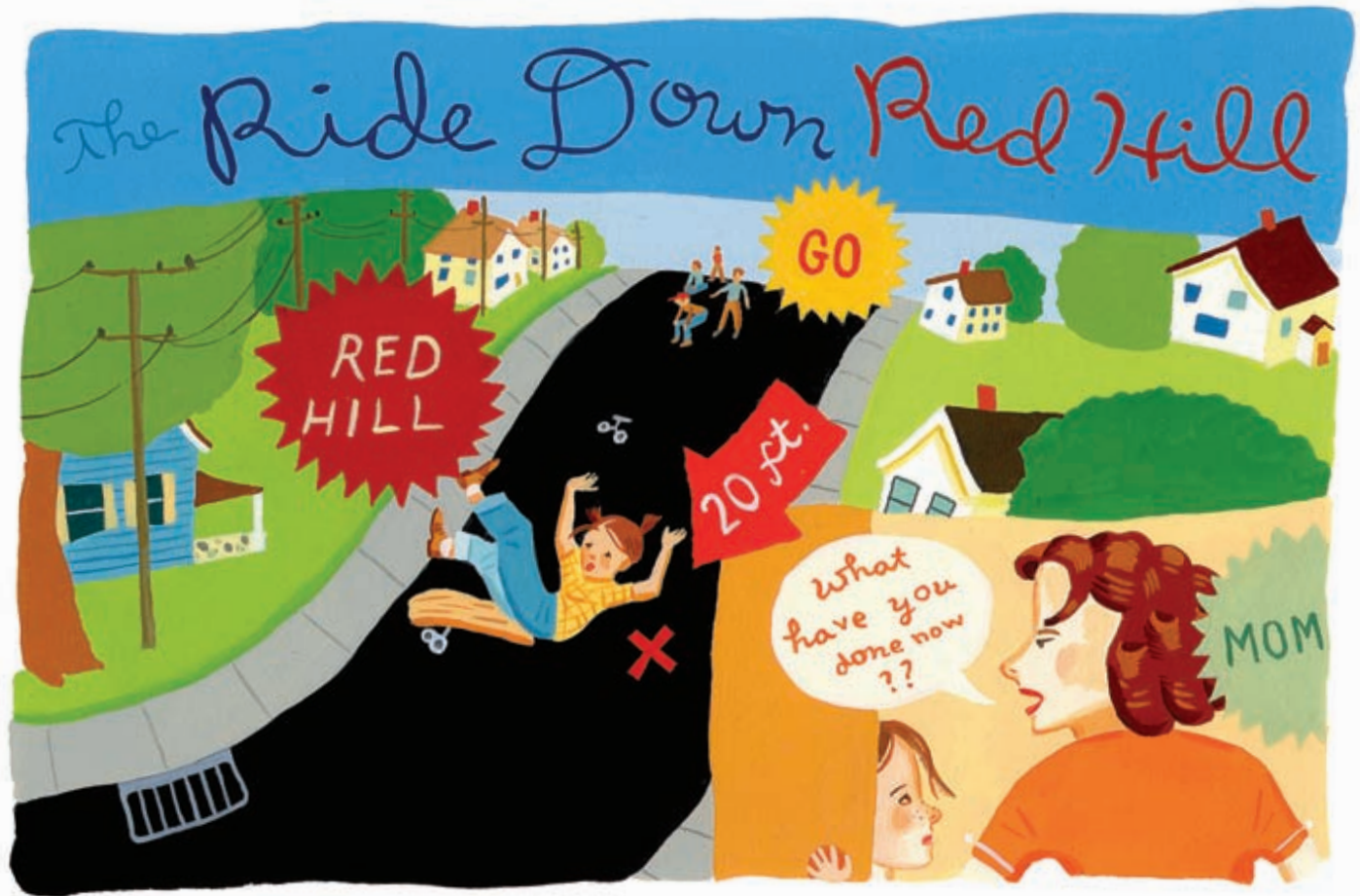
### **E** STYLE IN NONFICTION

Reread lines 68–73. What words and phrases in these lines add humor to the episode?

### Language Coach

**Idioms** An idiom is an expression specific to a language that means something beyond its literal meaning. In line 81, the writer calls Wilma the "weak link" of her group. What is the meaning of this idiom?

**administer**  
(ăd-mĭn'ĭ-stər) v. to give or apply



“I went down Red Hill on a skateboard.”

“A what?”

110 “A board with a skate on the bottom.”

“I suppose Bee told you to.”

Silence.

“And if Bee told you to catch a train to Timbuktu,<sup>3</sup> would you?”

Probably. **F**

**S**o the test ride of the skateboard came and went without notice, without **acclaim**. I never got on another one. I never will.

But when I see kids on skateboards doing 180 ollies, ollie impossibles, lipslides, and G-turns,<sup>4</sup> I think to myself, You guys would never believe it to look at me now, but I actually test rode The First Skateboard in the

120 History of the World. **G**

**F STYLE IN NONFICTION**

Reread lines 103–114. How does Byars’s use of realistic dialogue reveal that her mother is upset?

**acclaim** (ə-klām’) *n.*  
enthusiastic praise

**G AUTHOR’S PURPOSE**

Read lines 115–120. What does Byars want her readers to know about her?

3. **Timbuktu** (tīm’būk-tōō’): a city located in central Mali, in West Africa.

4. **180 ollies . . . G-turns**: a series of complicated and even dangerous tricks and jumps done by experienced skateboarders.



## Comprehension

- 1. Recall** Who is the leader of the neighborhood?
- 2. Recall** Why did the group decide to take the skateboard to Red Hill?
- 3. Clarify** Do the other kids know Betsy is afraid to ride the skateboard?



**READING 7** Identify the literary language and devices used in memoirs.

## Literary Analysis

- 4. Make Inferences** Reread lines 24–38. What is Betsy’s reason for riding the skateboard? What words and phrases reveal that bravery is not her only reason for being daring?
- 5. Examine Style** Reread lines 39–73. Find examples of Byars’s casual, friendly style by looking at her use of short sentences, fragments, realistic dialogue, and word choice. What effect do these elements have on you as the reader? Record your answers in a chart like the one shown.

	<i>Example</i>	<i>Effect on Reader</i>
<i>Short Sentences or Fragments</i>		
<i>Realistic Dialogue</i>		
<i>Word Choice</i>	<i>Lines 72–73: “... neither of my parents congratulated me on the win.”</i>	<i>Helps me laugh as Byars looks back on the foolish things she did as a child.</i>

- 6. Analyze Memoir** Authors write memoirs to share important personal experiences. Why is this episode significant to the writer? Support your response with details from the text.
- 7. Analyze Author’s Purpose** Review the chart you completed as you read. What do you think was the author’s main purpose for writing her memoir? Support your answer with details from the text.

## Extension and Challenge

- 8. Inquiry and Research** Research the history of skateboarding. Create a timeline that traces trends in skateboarding, changes in the design of skateboards, and the development of skateboarding tricks.

### How strong is PEER PRESSURE?

Review the word web you created before your read. How has reading this memoir changed your ideas about wanting to fit in?

## Vocabulary in Context

### ▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose the vocabulary word that best completes each sentence.

1. The diver proved his \_\_\_\_\_ by doing a backflip.
2. I continually \_\_\_\_\_ against my early bedtime.
3. Our Neighborhood Watch program received \_\_\_\_\_ for its success.
4. It is a superhero's job to \_\_\_\_\_ justice.



### ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• aspect • distinctive • interpret • perceive • sensory

How do you **perceive** Betsy's decision to ride the skateboard? Which **aspects** of her behavior seem brave and which seem reckless? Use at least two Academic Vocabulary words in your response.

### VOCABULARY STRATEGY: USE A DICTIONARY TO DETERMINE PART OF SPEECH

Many English words have more than one meaning. You can begin to determine what a word means in a sentence by identifying its part of speech. A **part of speech** describes how a word is used. In a dictionary entry, a word's part of speech appears after its pronunciation. In line 52, Byars writes that she stopped at a "crack in the sidewalk." The word *crack* has more than one meaning. If you were to look up *crack* in a dictionary, you might find these two entries:

**crack** [krak] **n.**: a split or opening made by breaking without separating into parts.

**crack** [krak] **v.**: to break without separating into parts.

The first entry is a **noun**, which names a person, place, or thing. The second entry is a **verb**, which shows action. Byars is using the word *crack* as a noun. She is writing about something she encountered, not an action she performed.

**PRACTICE** Read each sentence below. Determine whether the boldfaced word is used as a noun or a verb. Then, define the word in your *Reader/Writer Notebook*. Use a dictionary if you need help.

1. The kids would **protest** when they were sent to the doctor.
2. Hammering the **skate** into the board was not easy.
3. Betsy won the **contest**, but her parents were not impressed.
4. Betsy's mother was not satisfied with Betsy's **answer**.



**READING 2E** Use a dictionary to determine the meanings and the parts of speech of words.

Interactive Vocabulary **THINK** central  
Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com).  
KEYWORD: HML6-517