Before Reading

The First Skateboard in the History of the World
Memoir by Betsy Byars

How strong is PEER PRESSURE?

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.
**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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inform</th>
<th>Share Thoughts or Feelings</th>
<th>Entertain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**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.

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

---

**Meet the Author**

**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.
Since 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. 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:

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.
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 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.

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.”

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,¹ would you?” Well . . . I was glad it never came to those things.

We 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 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.

“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, the Himalayas, and Mount Everest² 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.

---

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.
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.)

By 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 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. 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. 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.
“I went down Red Hill on a skateboard.”
“A what?”
“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, would you?”
Probably.

So 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, 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 History of the World.
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?

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.

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

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**.