



Teacher's Guide for *Highland Fling*

A Young Adult Fiction Book

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Published by Cricket Books 2006



A year ago, Tanya Zeshonski was living in Wisconsin, interning at the public television station, and eating Polish food on holidays. Then her mother divorced her father, reclaimed her maiden name of MacDonald, and moved to North Carolina to submerge them all in Scottish heritage.

So now, at 15, Tanya is the oldest beginning student at the Flora MacDonald School of Highland Dance. Instead of pursuing her dream of being a filmmaker, she's learning the Highland Fling, one of the national dances of Scotland. Learning it means a lot to her mother, though, so Tanya resigns herself to practicing for the biggest event of the summer, the Cross Creek Highland Games.

At the games, Tanya must face not only the intricacies of the dance, but also the complications brought on by a handsome bagpiper named Miguel, a ghostly ancestor, and the arrival of her father. Tanya's sharp, funny voice rings true as she describes the delicate steps of the dance and the beginning of her new life.

Activity Suggestions

1. In *Highland Fling*, one of Tanya's complaints is that many of the aspects of Scottish Heritage she observes being celebrated are based more on myth and nostalgia than historic fact. Lead a discussion: What do students think is more important – people gathering to celebrate their cultural heritage however they choose, or people working hard to ensure that their traditions are based on historical fact?

What ethnic groups are prominent in your area? Guide students through an exploration of local cultural celebrations, and ask them to trace the



origins of various traditions. How have they evolved over time?

2. In "Ballad of Glen Coe" (pp. 165-166), composer Jim McLean wrote lyrics about an historical event. Conduct an online search to find the full lyrics, or ask students to find other lyrics or poetry based on historical events. Ask students to write song lyrics or a poem about their ancestors, the idea of genetic memory, or an historical event that interests them.
3. Review the passages on pp. 10-11 (Tanya humiliated on stage) and pp. 19-20 (Tanya reflecting on her love of videography). Ask students to compare and contrast the writing style in each. What choices did the author make in each to help convey Tanya's feelings? What can readers learn about Tanya in each passage? (In the first example, responses might include the recitation of bare facts, the repetition of the phrase "I hated" for emphasis, strong word choices such as "blaring, unendurable, wicked," descriptions of sensations such as "sweat dribbling" and "icy shivers." In the second example, responses might include the use of specific examples such as "getting decent backlight on a cloudy day" and "interview a soft-spoken child" to make Tanya's experience clear, the inclusion of both technical skills and emotional involvement to illustrate her complex attachment to this process, and demonstration of her willingness to do grunt work in order to have total control of her projects.)

Follow by asking students to write a paragraph describing an activity or experience they dislike, and another paragraph describing an activity or experience they love. What choices can they make to help convey their emotions to readers?

4. Ask students to reflect on the importance of place/setting in *Highland Fling*. How did Tanya feel about her old home in Green Bay, Wisconsin and her new home near Laurinburg, North Carolina? Why did she have those feelings? Then ask students to write a paragraph or poem about two different places, each revealing their own feelings about that place.
5. Cultural identity is an important theme in *Highland Fling*. How did different characters choose to connect with their Scottish heritage? (Responses might include: Miguel chooses to embrace his Scottish heritage even though it is a small part of his genetic makeup; Mom chooses to embrace her Scottish heritage after a personal crisis;



for most of the book, Tanya chooses not to identify with her Scottish heritage because it feels forced, unlike her feelings about growing up with Polish-American grandparents.)

Guide a discussion about cultural identity and personal choice. How many students take part in ethnic dancing, sometimes eat ethnic food, or participate in other aspects of cultural celebration? Do some students enjoy certain foods or activities that do not originate from a group they personally identify with? You may wish to remind students that “cultural” refers to more than race or ethnicity, and that everyone is part of many cultural groups. When it comes to personal choices about cultural identity, there are no right or wrong answers.

6. Throughout much of the novel, Tanya struggles to reconcile her experiences with the concept of genetic memory, or ancestral memory. Guide a discussion: Do students think her reactions to people and events were the result of genetic memory, jealousy, or something else? A mix of both? You may wish to involve the students’ science teacher in the discussion.
7. (North Carolina) Because many of the early Scottish immigrants to arrive in North Carolina were illiterate, historians struggle to gain insights into their lives. Ask students to brainstorm methods historians might use to learn about people who left no letters, diaries, or journals, such as the women Tanya was trying to learn about. (Responses might include archaeological evidence, architectural remains, artifacts, or artwork.) You may wish to build on this activity, and connect with Social Studies curriculum, by asking students to develop their own project about the history of Scottish settlement in North Carolina, past to present. What can students discover about Scottish immigrants throughout the state’s history? What do historians know for sure; what is conjecture; what is pure celebration? How do their personal experiences and opinions compare to Tanya’s as she tried to determine fact from legend? Allow students to develop presentations to share their feelings.

For Further Exploration

'We're Indians Sure Enough': The Legacy of Scottish Highlanders in the United

Kathleen Ernst
WRITING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE PAST



States, by Michael Newton (2001)

Songs of the Scottish Highlanders in the United States, (CD), by Michael Newton (2001)

Damn' Rebel Bitches: The Women of the '45, by Maggie Craig (Mainstream Publishing: Edinburg and London, 1997)

"Ballad of Glen Coe," by Jim McLean (London: Duart Music, 1963)

Reviews of *Highland Fling*

"There are a lot of strands here and Ernst balances them nicely... divorce, recovery and anger; what it takes to make a documentary, do a Scots dance or play the pipes; the haunting nature of history, culture and racial memory."

— **Kirkus Reviews**

"This YA is about coping, adapting, and coming out from one's shell to see life from more than one's own point of view. This award-winning author, who has written for the American Girls historical mystery series, portrays a girl with a lot of angst who still manages to get outside herself, finding an important new friend in the process. We rated this book five hearts."

— **Bob Spears, Heartland Reviews**

Highland Fling is available as a hardcover book from independent bookstores as well as from Amazon, Barnes & Nobles and other major book vendors. Signed and personalized first edition copies of the book can be acquired directly from the author, Kathleen Ernst. For more information, click on http://www.kathleenernst.com/book_highland_fling.php

Author Presentations

Author Kathleen Ernst offers a number of programs and presentations for students. Information can be found at <http://www.kathleenernst.com/programs.php>.