

BY DANDI DALEY MACKALL

*“THOROUGHLY ENJOYABLE  
AND UNEXPECTEDLY WRY, ... AS  
INTELLIGENT AS IT IS SUCCINCT.”*

—SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL

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*This isn't about me. This story, I mean. So already you got a reason to hang it up. At least that's what Mrs. Smith, our English teacher, says.*

But the story is about ten-year-old Laney Grafton and the new girl in her class—Lara Phelps, whom everyone bullies from the minute she shows up. Laney is just relieved to have someone else as a target of bullying. But instead of acting the way a bullied kid normally acts, this new girl returns kindness for a meanness that intensifies . . . until nobody remains unchanged, not even the reader.

In a unique and multi-layered story, with equal parts humor and angst, Laney communicates the art of storytelling as it happens, with chapter headings, such as: Character, Setting, Conflict, Rising Action, Climax. And she weaves an unforgettable tale of a new girl who transforms an entire class and, in the process, reveals the best and worst in all of us.

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When I write most books, I plan, pray, and plot. I take notes, brainstorm, and get to know my character before I commit a word to paper. But Laney Grafton, the narrator of *Larger-Than-Life Lara*, had other plans. This tough little character with a big attitude woke me up at three in the morning to announce, “This isn’t about me. This story, I mean. So already you got a reason to hang it up.” I got out of bed, walked across the hall to my office, and wrote down Laney’s words. In the morning, I typed those words into my computer. Then Laney continued to boss me through the entire book, day after day.


Fortunately, Laney tells her story much like I tell mine, much like most fiction writers tell theirs: a character has a problem that gets bigger and bigger, making the character a better and better person, until there’s a climax, and then the character solves the problem. People have asked me if I had mean brothers like Laney did. No, I didn’t. I have one sister, who is rather nice and always supportive. Other readers have asked if I used to be fat like Lara. No again. I’ve never been skinny, mind you, but I wasn’t fat either. But I have known Laney’s and Laras. We all have. I don’t think I was ever the bully tormentor, like Joey—but I’m afraid I rarely stood up against the meanness like I should have.

I suppose my heart goes out to people who are a bit different. My own special-needs daughter has put up with more than her share of teasing, and even full-on bullying. She’s taught our whole family a lot about keeping a joyful spirit in spite of the cruel words and actions of others. It hasn’t always been easy. I remember once when she was in elementary school, a kid named Michael made fun of the way Katy talks. Katy came home and cried into her pillow as I struggled to come up with words I could say to encourage her.

“Katy,” I tried, “the next time Michael does that, you tune him out and think about what Dad and I say about how terrific you are and what God says about you—his beautiful, unique creation.” Katy answered, “I tried. But you and God were whispering in the bottom backside of my head, and Michael was screaming in the front, so I couldn’t hardly hear you guys.”

An author has to feel emotion for her characters, and I had no trouble feeling for the people in this book. I love Laney for her honesty and matter-of-fact truth telling. She discovers the good and bad about herself. She has a dream and makes it happen. I love Lara for the way she faithfully returns good for evil, offering smiling couplets instead of matching insult for insult. She makes me think of the Lone Ranger, who rides into town and changes everyone there, then rides off into the sunset. I even like Joey and Eric and Wayne and Sara—all fictional characters, of course, but not unlike kids I grew up going to school with at Hamilton Elementary in Hamilton, Missouri.

Laney narrates a story within a story, giving readers and writers the fundamentals they need to tell a good story and to write a great story. Then, if that story does what it should do, a light will go on, and change will be just around the bend.



—DANDI DALEY MACKALL

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details RL.5.2- 8.3; Craft and Structure RL.5.6-8.6.

1. *Larger-Than-Life Lara* begins with Laney saying, “This isn’t about me. This story, I mean.” Do you agree with her? Whose story is this? Who’s the star of the story? Who changes? Laney also claims: “Only it’s not me what’s got the problem. And I’m not a better person than I was three months ago when all this stuff happened.” Do you agree or disagree with her? Prove your case. You may even want to hold a debate.
2. Why do many authors start with “character” in crafting a story? What makes a strong character? What do you mean when you say, “He or she is such a character!” Which characters stand out to you in the story and why? Laney writes: “Lara is the kind of person you never forget.” What does she mean? Have you met any unforgettable characters or people?
3. Discuss the meaning of the nickname “Larger-Than-Life.” Why do you think Joey starts calling Lara that name? By the end of the story, does “Larger-Than-Life” have a different meaning? What does Laney mean at the end when she says, “Only I figured she had her places to go. There had to be a lot of elementaries what needed a Larger-Than-Life Lara in them”?
4. Laney doesn’t talk directly about her home life or herself. Discuss what’s revealed about Laney’s home life and her relationship with her dad and brothers. How does the reader gather this information and these impressions? What do you think Luke did to get in trouble, and why did he quit talking?
5. What do you think about Mrs. Smith, Laney and Lara’s teacher? Discuss her strengths and weaknesses. Do you think she handled auditions and the play as well as she could?

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6. Peer-group dynamics play a big role in *Larger-Than-Life Lara*. Discuss Sara's behavior when she's with her friend Maddie. Discuss Joey and the boys. Laney says, "I knew that people like Maddie Simpson had to be careful who they sit themselves next to. Their reputations are at stake. . . . What I hadn't figured on before right then was that a person like me had to think about the same thing." Is she right?

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  7. Where do you think Lara got the strength to return insults with a smile and a rhyming couplet? What kinds of reactions did she get for her unexpected responses?

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  8. After the play, Mrs. Smith asks her class, "Do you children understand what you did to Lara?" and "Do you understand what Lara did for you? Lara Phelps took all the blame for you." Explain what she means. Why did Lara do what she did? Discuss sacrifice and blame.

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  9. In the end, when the students make nice signs for Lara, Laney comments: "And it felt real good to see this part of all of us, the good-sign-making part. And I wondered if Lara had seen it first, this good-sign-making part, under all the bad-sign-making part. And it felt like maybe the air in our classroom was changing back again." Discuss what Laney means about the two parts of her classmates and herself. Name some actions that may have come from each part. Do you think Lara saw the good? How?
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## LESSON PLANS: CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

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### ■ LANGUAGE ARTS

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Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types and Purposes W.5.2-8.3; Production and Distribution of Writing W.5.4-8.6; Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details RL.5.1 - 8.3; Craft and Structure RL.5.6 - 8.6; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RL.5.7 - 8.9; Language: Knowledge of Language L.5.3.

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Discuss Laney's definition of story in chapter 1 and apply it to other novels you've read. Apply this "skeleton outline" to Laney in *Larger-Than-Life Lara*. What does Laney want? What is she willing to do to get what she wants? What's her opposition? Where is the climax to Laney's story, and how does she resolve her problem?

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Do the character exercises at the end of chapter 1, using yourself as the subject: "I am the kind of person who \_\_\_\_\_." Try the same exercise with other "characters," such as your teacher, your principal, your brother or sister, a friend, or a character in a story you might write.

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Write three dynamite first sentences for a story you'll never have to write. Try to capture the reader's attention and make that reader want to keep reading. Make a list of great first sentences from books you've read and enjoyed. Share them with the class.

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Write a personal "frozen moment." Recall a big moment in your life, then detail everything you can remember. Run through the senses. What did you hear? Smell? See?

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Laney tells the reader that a person's room should reveal something about the person, although she doesn't think her room says anything about her. Describe Laney's room. What does it tell you about her? Now describe your room, picking out the setting details that will show who you are.

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Pair off with another student and have a pretend argument, perhaps trying to decide what to do after school. Then have each person write up the argument in dialogue form. Compare the two versions and discuss the differences. More advanced writers should hone point of view, adding their thoughts to the dialogue.

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List all of the opposition to Lara Phelps from day one at Paris Elementary. How does she choose to handle conflict and opposition? Be specific.

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Create your own definition for *suspense*, and give examples of suspenseful situations in this novel and in other novels. Select half a dozen novels and compile a list of cliffhangers from the ends of chapters.

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Do the “Detail” exercises in chapter 13. List one day’s activities using only verbs. List the next day’s activities limiting your details to nouns. Discuss Laney’s lists and determine what really happened to her.

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Find the climax in *Larger-Than-Life Lara*. Then locate the climax in five other books you’ve read this year.

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Writers and critics talk about a character’s epiphany. Look up the definition of the word and decide what it means in literature. Do you see an *epiphany* for Laney? Lara? Joey? Others?

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Part of the magic of writing is having the power to change the ending of a story. Pretend you wrote *Larger-Than-Life-Lara*. Take a stab at rewriting the ending.

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Create nicknames for other kids in the book. Do you have a nickname? Write about your nickname or any nickname you think would be appropriate for you and why. Laney mentions Shakespeare’s technique of writing a play within a play. Which play is she talking about? Explain the nature and purpose of the play within a play in that story. Then discuss the purpose of Laney’s “story within a story” narration.

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Lara responded to abuse with couplets. Compose rhyming couplets of your own, responding to something you consider to be abuse.

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Write a paragraph about Laney as if you were Lara. Write another paragraph about Laney as if you were Joey. Sarah. Theresa.

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Discuss Laney’s diction. What is diction? How can a writer capture a voice?

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## ■ SOCIAL STUDIES

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Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details RL.5.2- 8.3; Craft and Structure RL.5.6-8.6; Writing: Research to Build and Present Knowledge: W.5.7 - 8.9; Language: Vocabulary Acquisition and Use L.5.4 – 8.4; History/Social Studies: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RH.6-8.7.

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Ask parents and grandparents for “frozen moments” from their past. What moments in time will they never forget? Interview them for the details.

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Compile a frozen moment journal for the class, using “firsts” most students experience: a moment from the first day of kindergarten; a moment from the first time you embarrassed yourself at school; a moment of realization that you could do something well. Students might keep an ongoing frozen-moment journal, including dramatic and unforgettable moments for each school year.

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Talk about Laney’s home life and what she might have to do to get out of her situation.

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Create maps depicting the distance between Paris, Missouri and Paris, France. What do these cities have in common and what is different? Why do you think the author chose to compare these two places? Memorize the Declaration of Independence by dividing the words into rhythmic sections, the way Lara taught Laney to do.

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Laney thinks Shakespeare invented plays. Research the origin of the first documented plays we know of.

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## ■ SCIENCE

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Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types and Purposes W.5.1 - 8.3; Production and Distribution of Writing 5.4-8.6; Research to Build and Present Knowledge W.5.7-8.9.

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List possible reasons or contributing factors for obesity.

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Pigs are much maligned in our world. What are some good characteristics of pigs?

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Writers talk about the momentum of a story. Give a scientific definition of *momentum*. How does that definition relate to novels?

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## ■ MATH

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Find out the average weights for females and males your age. Find the average weights for females and males your age ten years ago and fifty years ago. Find out the recommended or ideal weights for males and females your age. Is there a difference between the average weights and the recommended weights?

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Make a chart of the average weights of teenagers in various countries.

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Convert from pounds to kilos the weights of five people you know.

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## ■ ART

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Imagine what the signs made by Laney's class might have looked like. Make secret rhyming signs of your own to encourage students to read more. Try your hand at Lara-like couplets. For example: "Maybe you should take the lead. Come on, students! Read! Read! Read!"

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Make a congratulations card for someone in your school who reached a goal.

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Draw the scenery for *Fair Day*.

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Sketch the important objects in your room at home, objects that reveal who you are.

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Create a poster advertising *Fair Day*.

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## ■ BULLYING

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Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in History/Social Studies: Key Ideas and Details RH.6-8.2; Craft and Structure RH.6-8.4; Writing: Text Types and Purposes W.5.1-8.3; Production and Distribution of Writing W.5.4-8.6; Research to Build and Present Knowledge W.5.7-8.9.

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Research bullying online. Visit these sites to get started:

<http://www.topbullying.gov>

<http://www.thebullyproject.com>

<http://www.common sense media.org>

<http://www.cyberbullying.us>

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Create a class blog where students post ideas to prevent bullying.

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Create bully-awareness posters.

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Write the histories for the bullies in *Larger-Than-Life-Lara*. Do you feel differently about the bullies knowing their histories (backstories)? Do you have empathy for the characters?

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Why do you think Joey Gilbert teases Lara so much? Some people believe that cruel or thoughtless teasing says more about the one doing the teasing than it says about the person being teased. What do you think?

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Discuss ways to handle verbal bullying when you're the one being bullied.

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Discuss ways to react when you see others being teased or bullied. Is all teasing cruel?

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How do we know the difference between funny and cruel teasing?

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## ABOUT DANDI

Dandi won her first writing contest when she was a ten-year-old tomboy. Her fifty words on “*Why I Want to Be Batboy for the Kansas City A’s*” won first place, but the team still wouldn’t let a girl be a batboy. It was her first taste of rejection.

Today she is the bestselling author of more than 450 books for children and adults. She’s a frequent guest on radio talk shows and has made dozens of appearances on TV networks, including ABC, NBC, and CBS. She does countless school visits, conducts writing assemblies and workshops, and keynotes at conferences and young-author events.

Dandi lives in Ohio with her husband, Joe, surrounded by their children, Katy, Jen and Dave, Dan and Bri; their grandchildren, Ellie, Cassie, and Maddie; and a menagerie of horses, dogs, and cats.

## FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Visit Dandi at [dandibooks.com](http://dandibooks.com). A complete guide is available.

Classes can email Dandi about the book at [dandi@dandibooks.com](mailto:dandi@dandibooks.com).

Email her to arrange school visits.

