



Small Steps

Louis Sachar

Teacher's Guide

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LOUIS SACHAR



CLASSROOM FAVORITES

A Perma-Bound Production

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Synopsis

Chapter 1

Two years after being released from Camp Green Lake, African-American teenager Theodore Johnson, nicknamed "Armpit," is now digging holes as an employee of a landscaping company. Armpit's boss, Jack Dunlevy, introduces Cherry Lane, Austin's mayor, who sincerely admires him for enduring his ordeal at Camp Green Lake and for trying to rebuild his life. Armpit knows that the people around him expect him to fail, but he is determined to recover his dignity and his grip on life, and he is willing to put in the small steps necessary to succeed. He lists these steps. As he works, Armpit listens to a song by African-American teenage star Kaira DeLeon.

Chapter 2

Armpit's friend X-Ray (Rex Alvin Washburn) drives up to convince Armpit to join his scheme to scalp tickets to Kaira's concert. Against his better judgment, Armpit agrees and gives X-Ray nearly all the money he has saved so carefully. X-Ray and Armpit had become friends while serving time together at Camp Green Lake. Meanwhile, Kaira is thinking about her punishing concert schedule, arranged by her manager, her step-father, Jerome Paisley. She calls him "El Genius" because he is not intelligent, although he has managed her career well. Kaira speaks with her bodyguard Fred about disturbing letters from a fan named Billy Boy, who has threatened her life.

Chapter 3

Armpit is close friends with Ginny McDonald, a 10-year-old girl with cerebral palsy whose family lives on the other side of his family's East Austin duplex. They are comfortable with each other, Armpit serving as a big

brother. Armpit's parents do not trust him and force him to submit to random drug tests, even though he has never used drugs. In part, they fear he will become a drug user like his older brother.

Chapter 4

Armpit likes his classmate Tatiana, and they talk a bit in speech class. Armpit enjoys his economics class, taught by Mr. Warren, even though he does not understand much of the material.

Chapter 5

X-Ray and Armpit drive to the Lonestar Arena to buy the tickets. Although they have arrived very early, the line is already long, thanks to people hired by the professional scalpers Moss and Felix to buy the legal limit of six tickets each. The scalpers want to buy the tickets that X-Ray and Armpit purchase, but X-Ray is holding out for a bigger pay-off, much to Armpit's consternation.

Chapter 6

Armpit scores a ninety on his economics text, thanks to the lessons he learned from the scalpers about supply and demand. Armpit

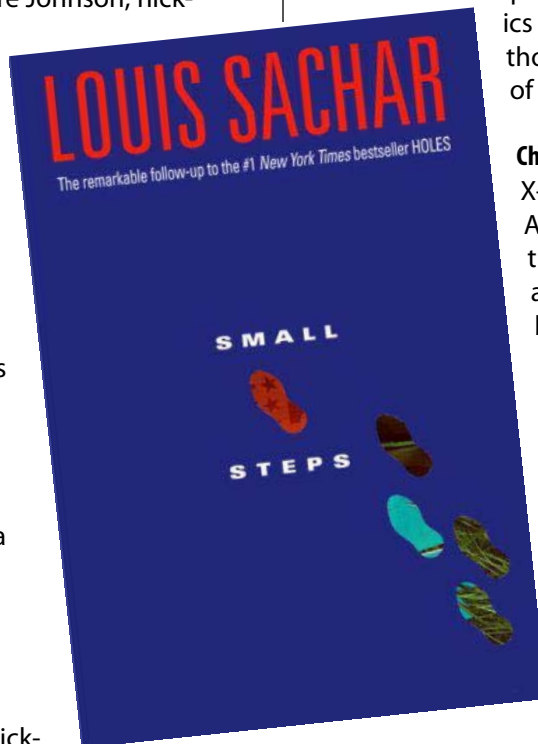
borrowed a stuffed animal named "Coo" from Ginny to use in speech class. Ginny imagines that all her toy animals have diseases; she imagines that Coo has leukemia.

Chapter 7

Armpit is furious when he reads the deceptive ad for the tickets that X-Ray has placed in the newspaper. Later, Armpit enjoys his grueling yard work because it is honest, unlike scalping.

Chapter 8

X-Ray has sold some of the tickets and made an enormous profit, which Armpit discusses with Ginny. X-Ray has a lead on another prospective buyer and wants Armpit to come along to protect him and scare the buyer, as Armpit is large and heavily muscled. The deal



does not go through, as the buyer fails to show up.

Chapter 9

On the way to summer school the next day, Armpit is accosted by some teenage drug dealers who want to give him a ride. He refuses. Armpit gives his speech on Coo, and Tatiana congratulates him for doing well. X-Ray sells more tickets, again for a huge profit.

Chapter 10

Kaira plays cards with her musicians as she travels to the next concert venue, temporarily relieving her loneliness. One of the musicians hints that Kaira's step-father is having an affair with Aileen, the person in charge of coordinating all the travel arrangements. The band tells her about Janis Joplin's music.

Chapter 11

X-Ray and Armpit sell two tickets to a man named Murdock who runs Smokestack Lightnin', a barbecue restaurant.

Chapter 12

By now, Armpit has made \$300 on his original investment and only two tickets remain unsold, which Armpit plans to use to bring Tatiana to the concert. She has agreed to go with him.

Chapter 13

Tatiana's girlfriends tell her that Armpit is dangerous and smelly. Ginny is a wreck because she believes that her father left the family as a result of her handicap. Armpit comforts her. When Tatiana calls Armpit to cancel their date; Armpit invites Ginny to come with him, to

Chapter 14

Armpit is annoyed that it takes X-Ray so long to give him the tickets. Armpit cannot understand why X-Ray is so late.

Chapter 15

Armpit and Ginny settle into their seats at the concert, but a security guard removes them, claiming their tickets are counterfeit. The guard treats Armpit very roughly and Ginny has a seizure. The guards think she is having a bad reaction to street drugs. The mayor comes to their rescue, and Kaira notices the disturbance. She kindly invites Armpit and Ginny to watch the concert from backstage.

Chapter 16

Armpit and Ginny have a wonderful time watching the

concert. Armpit thinks he hears Kaira sing his name in her song "A Damsel in Distress." To their great surprise, Kaira invites Armpit and Ginny to come on stage. On impulse, Kaira closes the show with a song from Janis Joplin.

Chapter 17

After the show, Armpit and Ginny join Kaira for ice cream in her dressing room. Armpit briefly tells Kaira about his time at Green Lake. Cotton, the drummer, tells Kaira that El Genius has fired him for allowing Kaira to sing the Joplin song on stage, as she was unprepared.

Chapter 18

After the concert, Armpit confronts X-Ray about the counterfeit tickets. X-Ray had photocopied the real tickets, sold them, and given Armpit the copies, the reason he was late. Kaira calls Armpit to join her at her hotel for breakfast and he eagerly agrees.

Chapter 19

They begin to eat breakfast, but Kaira eludes her bodyguard and she and Armpit run into the woods. Armpit tells her his nickname. Just then, the bodyguard finds them and their moment of intimacy is over. Nonetheless, it is clear that they are falling for each other.

Chapter 20

Detective Debbie Newberg questions Armpit about his role in the counterfeiting scheme. Armpit lies and says that he bought the tickets from a man named "Habib."

Chapter 21

A few days later, Detective Newberg calls again, and it is clear that she has figured out that Armpit was involved in the scam.

Chapter 22

Kaira writes Armpit a love letter, explaining that she wanted him to kiss her, though they had not.

Chapter 23

Detective Newberg has Armpit watch through a two-way mirror as she interviews X-Ray, who also lies about his role in the scam.

Chapter 24

Kaira invites Armpit to meet her in San Francisco. He agrees.

Chapter 25

Aileen, Kaira's manager and Jerome's lover, has embez-

zled three million dollars from Kaira’s trust fund account; even Jerome doesn’t know the extent of her theft. She plans to abscond with the money, fleeing to Costa Rica under the false name “Denise Linaria.”

Chapter 26

Felix and Moses threaten Armpit. They want the letter that Kaira sent Armpit, because they can sell it for a large profit. Jack Dunlevy hires X-Ray to work with Armpit in the landscaping business.

Chapter 27

Armpit is torn between his responsibilities at school and home and his desire to go to San Francisco to see Kaira.

Chapter 28

Felix and Moses come to get the letter but Armpit puts them off. He sets off in the limo to the airport.

Chapter 29

Armpit flies first class and settles into the luxury hotel. Jerome comes to see him, inexplicably wielding a baseball bat signed by Barry Bonds. Jerome makes Armpit heft the bat.

Chapter 30

Kaira tries to get Armpit to buy a jacket for sale at the hotel shop, but its \$995 price tag puts him off. The kids tour San Francisco. At a souvenir shop, he buys a sweat-shirt for \$19.95 and a scarf for Ginny.

Chapter 31

Armpit and Kaira argue when he asks her to write him a new letter to give to Moses and Felix so they will leave him alone. Kaira storms off.

Chapter 32

Fred searches for Kaira while Armpit wanders around San Francisco.

Chapter 33

Kaira returns to her hotel suite, where Jerome viciously attacks her with the baseball bat, planning to frame Armpit for the deed. Fred comes to her rescue, but he is injured as well, stabbed in the stomach. As she is losing consciousness, Kaira manages to pull down the telephone. Armpit enters, and Jerome smashes him in the leg with the baseball bat, breaking his leg. Armpit beats him.

Chapter 34

Fred can speak enough to confirm Armpit’s innocence. Back at home, Detective Newberg lets Armpit off the

hook for the ticket scalping.

Chapter 35

Two months pass. Jerome has confessed to his crime. Kaira is broke, her money embezzled and spent. Worst of all, the doctors do not think that she will ever be able to sing again, her voice destroyed in the attack.

Chapter 36

Kaira is able to sing again, and she sings about taking small steps. Armpit realizes that he cannot let his life revolve around his feelings for Kaira and so plans his own small steps.

Timeline of American Educational Reform

- 1635** The first Latin grammar school (Boston Grammar School) is established. As with all Latin Schools, it is designed for only sons of the upper classes who are destined for leadership positions in church, state, or the courts.
- 1636** The first “free school” in Virginia opens. Harvard College, the first higher education institution in the colonies, is established in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 1642** The Massachusetts Bay School Law is passed. It requires that parents make sure their children know the principles of religion and the major laws of the commonwealth.
- 1647** The first statewide system of public schools is born after Massachusetts passes a law requiring all towns with at least fifty families to establish a school.
- 1690** The first New England Primer is published.
- 1779** Thomas Jefferson proposes a two-track educational system, with different tracks for “the laboring and the learned.”
- 1783-85** Noah Webster publishes A Grammatical Institute of the English Language—a spelling book, grammar book, and reader in one
- 1791** Education becomes a function of the state rather than the federal government.
- 1817** The Connecticut Asylum at Hartford for the Instruction of Deaf and Dumb

1821 Persons opens. It is the first permanent school for the deaf in the U.S.

1827 The first public high school opens.

1827 Massachusetts law requires towns of more than 500 families to have a public high school open to all students.

1829 The New England Asylum for the Blind, now the Perkins School for the Blind, opens in Massachusetts, becoming the first school in the U.S. for children with visual disabilities.

1837 Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, the first U.S. women's college, is opened.

1839 The first state-funded school specifically for teacher education is founded in Lexington, Massachusetts.

1841 Educator Dorothea Dix begins investigations into the treatment of the mentally ill, sparking reforms and the establishment of a number of humane state hospitals, schools, and asylums for the mentally ill and disabled.

1848 The Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Youth, the first school of its kind in the U.S., is opened.

1851 The New York State Asylum for Idiots opens.

1862 The First Morrill Act, also known as the "Land Grant Act," donates federal lands to the northern states to fund colleges and universities teaching agriculture, engineering, military tactics, and home economics, as well as classical studies, with the aim of opening higher education to the working classes. Many prominent state colleges and universities, including the Big Ten, can trace their roots to this forward-thinking law.

1875 The Civil Rights Act, banning segregation in all public accommodations, is passed, but is ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1883.

1881 Booker T. Washington becomes the first principal of the newly opened normal school (or teacher's college) at Tuskegee, Alabama, now Tuskegee University.

1916 Louis M. Terman and his team of Stanford University graduate students develop what becomes known as the Stanford-Binet Test, giving birth to the concept of intelligence quotient, or IQ.

1922 The International Council for

1926 Exceptional Children is founded at Columbia University Teachers College. The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), based on tests developed by the U.S. Army is first administered.

1963 Samuel A. Kirk introduces the term "learning disability" at a Chicago conference on children with perceptual disorders. The term sticks, and in 1964, the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, now the Learning Disabilities Association of America, is formed. Today, more than one-half of all students in the U.S. who receive special education have been diagnosed as having learning disabilities.

1964 The Civil Rights Act becomes law. It prohibits discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, or national origin.

1971 Federal court rules that students with mental retardation are entitled to a free public education.

1972 Mills v. the Board of Education of Washington, D.C., extends the educational entitlement to other students with disabilities, and requires the provision of "adequate alternative educational services suited to the child's needs, which may include special education." Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination based on sex in all aspects of education.

1975 The Education of All Handicapped Children Act becomes federal law. It requires that a free, appropriate public education, suited to the student's individual needs, and offered in the least restrictive setting, be provided for all handicapped children.

1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), renames and amends the 1975 law. The new law mandates transition services, and adds autism and traumatic brain injury to the eligibility list; its new name eliminates the term "handicapped" and its negative connotations.

2001 No Child Left Behind becomes law.

2004 The Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act reauthorizes and modifies IDEA.

Author Sketch

Louis Sachar (pronounced Sack-er) was born in 1954 in East Meadow, New York. The family moved to Southern California when Louis was nine years old. Sachar enjoyed school and was a good student. He especially enjoyed playing Little League baseball.



Sachar had begun college at Antioch College in Ohio when he received word of his father's sudden death. He took a semester off and returned to California to be near his mother. After a short career selling Fuller Brushes door-to-door, Sachar returned to school in Berkeley, California, majoring in economics. During his last year of college, Sachar worked part-time in a school. He received college credit for being a teacher's aide, and was paid two dollars an hour to watch over the kids on the playground. His official title was Noontime Supervisor, but the kids called him "Louis the yard teacher." Sachar has called this job a "life-changing experience," and he used his experience there as the basis for his first published children's book, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*.

Sachar earned his B.A. in economics from Berkeley in 1976. After college, he worked briefly in a sweater warehouse in Norwalk, Connecticut, and wrote at night. He returned to college and earned his law degree in 1980. In his spare time, Sachar continued writing for children. *Sideways Stories* was accepted for publication during his first week of law school. After graduation, Sachar passed the bar exam and worked as a lawyer from 1981 to 1989, before becoming a full-time children's writer.

Sachar met his future wife, Carla, a counselor, when he was a visiting author at the school where she worked in Texas. They were married in 1985 and have a daughter, Sherre, born in 1987. Sachar is secretive about his projects while he's working on them—he says he never talks about his books until after they're written—and his wife and daughter are always his first readers. He writes every morning, "usually for no more than two hours a day," and in his spare time enjoys playing bridge and attending bridge tournaments. Sachar lives with his family in Austin, Texas.

Critic's Corner

Louis Sachar is one of the most celebrated young adult novelists writing today. *Holes*, the prequel to *Small*

Steps, won the prestigious National Book Award, the Newbery Medal, sold 6 million copies, and was successfully translated to film. *Small Steps* was awarded the Schneider Family Book Award by the American Library Association in 2007. The reviews were largely positive. Barbara Wysocki, writing in *School Library Journal*, wrote, "Beneath the story's humorous dialogue and some beyond-your-wildest-dreams scenarios, *Small Steps* acknowledges the realities of ex-inmate life and the value of doing the right thing."

Booklist gave the novel a starred review, saying: "Holes fans will be thrilled by the tightening of the plot elements to a single, suspenseful point, and they will eagerly follow the sometimes stumbling, sometimes sprinting progress of Sachar's fallible yet heroic protagonist." Armpit "is a genuinely sympathetic character, as is the teen singing phenom Kaira," observed *Kirkus Reviews* critic, Connie Tyrrell Burns, calling *Small Steps* a "story of redemption, of the triumph of the human spirit, of self-sacrifice, and of doing the right thing," and praising Sachar as a "master storyteller who creates memorable characters." And *USA Today* observed that "Louis Sachar is magic to the toughest circle of critics: librarians, children's booksellers, teachers—and, most of all, kids."

Selected Other Works by Louis Sachar

Sideways Stories from Wayside School (1978)
Johnny's in the Basement (1981)
Someday Angeline (1983)
There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom (1987)
Sixth Grade Secrets (1987)
Wayside School Is Falling Down (1989)
Sideways Arithmetic from Wayside School (1989)
The Boy Who Lost His Face (1989)
Dogs Don't Tell Jokes (1991)
Monkey Soup (1992)
Wayside School Gets a Little Stranger (1995)
Holes (1998)
Stanley Yelnats' Survival Guide to Camp Green Lake (2003)

MARVIN REDPOST SERIES

Marvin Redpost: Kidnapped at Birth? (1992)
Marvin Redpost: Why Pick on Me? (1993)
Marvin Redpost: Is He a Girl? (1993)
Marvin Redpost: Alone in His Teacher's House (1994)
Marvin Redpost: A Flying Birthday Cake? (1999)
Marvin Redpost: Class President (1999)

Marvin Redpost: A Magic Crystal? (2000)
Marvin Redpost: Super Fast, Out of Control! (2000).
With Brent Hanley, *Holes* screenplay; based on Sachar's novel of same title), Disney, 2003.
Audiocassette adaptations for *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, *Wayside School Is Falling Down*, *Holes*, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, and *Wayside School Gets a Little Stranger*
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General Objectives

1. To recognize that that the novel is a sequel to Holes
2. To comprehend the author's message about racism in American society
3. To probe the stress of consumerism that many teenagers face
4. To explore the effects of peer pressure
5. To trace the developing friendship between Armpit and Kaira
6. To identify how Armpit changes during the novel
7. To grasp the novel's primary themes
8. To analyze the novel's main symbols
9. To describe the novel's plot
10. To evaluate the novel's ending.

Specific Objectives

1. To understand why Armpit was sent to the juvenile correction center in Holes
2. To appreciate the difficulty he faces in getting on with his life
3. To admire his determination to set and achieve goals
5. To evaluate the role that Kaira DeLeon plays in the novel
6. To understand why X-Ray scalps tickets and why Armpit decides to go along with his friend's plan
7. To analyze the relationship between Armpit and Ginny and what it says about Armpit's character
8. To explore the symbolism of names, clothing, and stuffed animals in the novel
9. To discuss the author's message about identity.
10. To decide whether or not the novel's ending is logical, based on the plot

Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Louis Sachar's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

Foreshadowing: clues that hint at what will happen later on in the story. Writers use foreshadowing to create suspense and link related details. Sachar foreshadows the important effect that Kaira DeLeon will have on Armpit's life in Chapter 1, when Armpit quotes the lyrics from one of her most popular songs: "I'm gonna take you someplace/you never been before,/And you'll never be the same again!"

Suspense: the feeling or tension or anticipation an author creates in a work. Authors create suspense by unexpected plot twists, keeping readers interested in

the story and making them want to read on to find out what will happen. For example, Sachar creates suspense in Chapter 4 when he has El Genius say that he planted the rumors that tickets to Kaira's concert in Philadelphia went for \$750 each; El Genius claims that the concert didn't even sell out. This detail makes readers worry that Armpit and X-Ray won't make back the money they have invested in their scalping scheme. In the same way, Sachar creates tremendous suspense at the end of Chapter 21 when Detective Newberg brings Armpit's name in the conversation as a suspect in the counterfeiting ticket investigation. This detail makes readers wonder if Armpit will be arrested and sent back to jail.

Symbolism: occurs when an image stands for something other than what was expected. The ocean, for example, may be said to symbolize "eternity" and the phrase "river to the sea" could stand for "life flowing into afterlife." In most instances the symbol does not directly reveal what it stands for; rather, the meaning must be discovered through a close reading of the literary work and an understanding of conventional literary and cultural symbols. For example, we realize that the "stars and stripes" stands for the American flag. We know this because we are told it is so, for the flag itself in no way looks like the United States. Without cultural agreement, many of the symbols we commonly accept would be meaningless. In *Small Steps*, the \$995 jacket for sale in the hotel shop symbolizes the chasm between the rich and the poor. The \$19.95 sweatshirt that Armpit purchases stands for the reality of life for the poor. Similarly, landscaping symbolizes the value in honest labor.

The Importance of Setting

Small Steps takes place in Austin, Texas, Sachar's adopted home town. The setting is not especially critical to the novel. Indeed, the novel could be set in moderate-sized city in which there is a wide disparity between the rich and the poor. The capital of Texas, Austin is the sixteenth largest American city and one of the fastest-growing in the nation. So many high-tech companies are located in Austin that the city has acquired the nickname "Silicon Hills." In addition, many musicians live in the city, and it is home to the main campus of the University of Texas.

The city's humid subtropical climate, marked by hot summers and mild winters, is a factor in the novel's action, since Armpit works in a sweat-inducing outdoor job as a laborer in a landscape business. His nickname is obviously related to this fact.

Cross-Curricular Sources

Fiction

Bryce Courtenay, *The Power of One*
Christopher Curtis, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*
Chris Crutcher, *Whale Talk*
Karen Hesse, *Witness*
Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*
Lois Lowry, *Number the Stars*
Walter Dean Myers, *Monster*
Mildred Taylor, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*
Mildred Taylor, *The Gold Cadillac*
Mildred Taylor, *The Land*
Theodore Taylor, *The Cay*
Linda Sue Park, *Project Mulberry*
Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Audio

Small Steps

DVDs and Videos

Cider-House Rules
Crash
Rabbit-Proof Fence
Snow Falling on Cedars
To Kill a Mockingbird
To Sir, with Love

Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Louis Sachar's *Small Steps* should include these aspects:

Themes

- being different from other people
- not being trusted by your parents
- setting small life goals
- working hard
- earning the trust of others
- overcoming prejudice
- betraying trust
- being feared by others
- understanding the contrast between the rich and the poor
- coping with peer pressure

Motifs

- forging your identity
- learning difficult subjects
- dealing with racism
- rebuilding your life after being in a juvenile detention center

- having fun with a friend
- learning to believe in yourself
- enjoying music and live performances
- falling in love
- breaking the law
- coping with a severe handicap

Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each. Page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. Once again Armpit was holding a shovel, only now he was getting paid for it, seven dollars and sixty-five cents an hour. (p. 1)
(From the first words in the novel, readers know that Small Steps is a continuation of Holes. It's not surprising that Sachar would revisit Holes, not only because it is his most successful and celebrated novel to date but also because Sachar tends to write about underdogs. "I found that Armpit was more interesting to me at this point than, say, Stanley or Zero, whose stories have already been resolved," Sachar said in an interview of his decision to add another chapter to Armpit's life. "I was intrigued by what it would be like for a young guy with a criminal record to have to come home from Camp Green Lake and try to put things back together.")
2. She had been born with cerebral palsy.(p. 20)
(Ginny has cerebral palsy. She is a very appealing character because she is upbeat and deals with her handicap bravely. She is Armpit's closest friend, and because he is feared, he also serves as her protector. Sachar based the fictional Ginny on a real girl named Laura. He interviewed Laura and her mother Nancy for the novel and subsequently dedicated the book to Laura and her mother in appreciation for their help in educating him about the condition.)
3. These shoes, these jewels, this dress,/ A perfect picture of success,/Oh, you would never guess, Armpit,/A damsel in distress. (p. 35)
(Armpit thinks that he hears Kaira singing his name in one of her hit songs, asking him to rescue her. She does indeed need rescue from her dishonest stepfather, alcoholic mother, and embezzling manager, but Armpit does not hear the lyrics correctly. This misunderstanding foreshadows how Armpit really does rescue Kaira from her step-father's attack,

which helps free her from her isolated, lonely life as a teenage superstar.)

4. "He's got something wrong with his soul." (p. 91)
(Based on something her mother said, Ginny is convinced that her father left because of her cerebral palsy. Armpit explains that Ginny's father is disabled far worse than Ginny is because while Ginny just had a little bleeding in her brain, her father has something wrong with his soul, shown by the fact that he deserted his family. Armpit's words of comfort to Ginny show his compassion and kindness. He is a truly nice human being.)
5. "Would you like to come backstage and watch the concert from there?" (p. 110)
(When Armpit and Ginny are removed from their seats at the concert because their tickets are counterfeit – unknown to either of them—Kaira invites them to watch the concert from backstage. This reveals Kaira's kindness and compassion. Naturally, Armpit and Ginny are delighted at this preferential treatment. This incident also marks the first meeting between Armpit and Kaira and sets the stage for their getting to know and like each other very much.)
6. "I don't have big dreams," Armpit said. "I just take small steps." (p. 150)
(This dialogue directly refers to the novel's title and shows the importance of setting realistic goals and then working steadily to achieve them. This philosophy is especially important for Armpit, who has lost a chunk of his youth in the detention center. His counselor had told him that if he takes too big a step, the current will knock him off his feet and carry him away. Readers wonder if falling in love with a famous teen rock star will indeed prove to be too big a step for Armpit. This situation is another way that Sachar creates suspense in the novel, propelling readers forward.)
7. For the first time in a long while, his mother looked at him and saw someone who maybe wasn't all bad. (p. 168)
(Armpit's parents do not think well of him, blaming him for the incident that landed him in the juvenile detention center and believing, without any evidence at all, that he is a drug abuser. This is the first time that his mother sees him for what he is: a decent young man who is a victim of his innocence, immaturity, and society's racism.)

8. "I'm but a damsel in distress." (p. 190)
(In this scene, Armpit tells Kaira that he thinks she is singing "Save me, Armpit!" She mocks him gently and corrects his mistake. Ironically, Armpit does save her in two critical ways. First, he breaks in while she is being attacked by her stepfather, taking the blows from the baseball bat himself and no doubt saving her life. Second, as a result of these actions, Kaira is freed from her stepfather's control, her manager's embezzlement, and even her mother's passive acquiescence. From now on, Kaira can hire honest people to work with her. She will be free to direct her own destiny.)
9. He had tried to take too big a step, and the current had knocked him off his feet and was washing him away. (p. 234)
(Just as he had feared, Armpit has extended himself too far. He now feels that all his efforts at school and at work were for nothing. He fears that both he and X-Ray will most likely be incarcerated again. Fortunately, Armpit is wrong. While he has over-extended himself, his effort will turn out well in the end. Thus, Sachar shows the importance of taking risks as well as playing it safe.)
10. Armpit looked at Ginny's stuffed animals. (p. 253)
(Each of Ginny's toys has some imaginary handicap: Hooter the owl is blind, Daisy the dog is deaf, and Coo has leukemia. In this scene, the toys represent Kaira, who has lost her voice in the attack. It appears that she will be a singer who cannot sing. Fortunately, the condition reverses herself and Kaira's voice returns.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Questions 15 (Literal Level)

1. How did Armpit and X-Ray meet and become friends?
(They were both incarcerated at Camp Green Lake, a juvenile detection center.)
2. What scheme does X-Ray dream up for himself and Armpit?
(X-Ray wants them to scalp tickets to Kaira DeLeon's upcoming concert in their hometown, Austin.)
3. Why won't Tatiana go to the concert with Armpit?

(She initially agrees, but then bows to peer pressure: her friends think Armpit is smelly and dangerous.)

4. Why do the police remove Armpit and Ginny from their seats at the concert?
(Their tickets are counterfeit, so they do not have the right to be in their seats.)
5. Who attacks Kaira? Whom does the attacker plan to take the blame for the attack?
(Kaira's stepfather Jerome Paisley attacks Kaira but attempts to frame Armpit for the attack.)

Questions 68 (Interpretative Level)

6. What are the author's primary themes or messages in the novel?
(Possible themes include the importance of setting goals and working steadily toward them, of not judging people by their appearance but rather by their actions, and of giving people the benefit of the doubt, especially when they have made mistakes or taken missteps.)
7. Is Armpit feared or respected? Explain.
(The novel explores racism in America. White people tend to fear Armpit because he is large and black so they assume that he is likely to attack them; some blacks admire him for his strength and even use it to their advantage, while others—such as Tatiana and her friends—fear him.)
8. What is ironic about Kaira's life?
(The media tends to portray the world of teenage entertainers as filled with wild sex, drinking, and other excessive behavior. However, Kaira's life is just the opposite: she is a virgin, teetotaler, and shy. She has little or no social contact with anyone her own age, trapped instead in a world of immature and dishonest adults, unscrupulous hanger-ons, and cheating, alcoholic parents.)

Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. Do you agree that people should take small steps, as Armpit believes, or try for giant strides, as X-Ray attempts with his scalping scheme? Explain.
(Students who favor slow and steady progress are likely to embrace Armpit's approach to rebuilding his life, while those who favor more dramatic progress are more likely to support X-Ray, citing the significant amount of money he made and the fact that he did avoid prosecution.)
10. Did you find the love affair between Armpit and Kaira believable? Why or why not?
(Most readers will find the relationship sweetly appealing, but others will recognize that it is highly unlikely. No pop singers' managers would ever allow

their charge to get that close to an outsider, especially when it comes to someone as sheltered and successful as Kaira.)

Questions 11-2 (Creative Level)

11. Design a garden that Jack Dunlevy and his workers might create.
12. Choose a famous pop star whom you would like to meet. Explain why you want to meet him or her and what you would say to your idol.

Across the Curriculum

Art/Music

1. Perform one of Kaira's songs for the class.
2. Draw the Texas state flag and explain its symbolism.
3. With some classmates, form a pick-up band to play some music by Janis Joplin or any other classic rock singer.
4. Write a new song for Kaira to sing, based on the plot of *Small Steps*.
5. Create a new stuffed animal for Ginny. You can draw the animal or remake one from an existing toy.

Language Arts

1. *Small Steps* is a sequel to *Holes*. Read *Holes* and explain how it relates to *Small Steps*.
2. In an interview with *Austin Chronicle* writer Barbara Strickland, Sachar said: "I just try to write books that are fun to read. That's my first goal with all my books, to make reading fun." In a persuasive essay, argue that *Small Steps* is or is not fun to read. Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why or why not?
3. Which characters in the novel have nicknames, false names, or new names? Explain the function of names in this novel, especially as they relate to identity.
4. In an essay, analyze the interplay of appearance and reality in the novel. How do people misjudge Armpit, Ginny, and Kaira, for instance?
5. Writing as Armpit, draft a journal describing your life ten years in the future.
6. Armpit makes many important discoveries about himself. Write a poem in which you describe one important discovery that you made about yourself.

History/Social Studies

1. Louis Sachar went to law school, passed the bar exam, and practiced law for several years before becoming a writer. Find out how to become a

lawyer.

2. How does this novel make reference to the current situation in Iraq and America's anti-Muslim feelings? Consider especially how Armpit and X-Ray try to direct attention away from themselves and onto a non-existent character named Habib, whom they claim is the ticket scalper.
3. Report on landscaping businesses in your region.
4. Armpit and X-Ray scalp tickets, selling them illegally for more than face value. Find out about the ticket resale laws in your state.
5. Report on this history of the FBI.

Speech/Drama

1. With some classmates, debate Sachar's view of America's racial policies as shown in this novel. Is Armpit a victim of racism? Explain with specific examples from the novel.
2. Kaira invites Armpit and Ginny to watch the concert from backstage; she appears to fall in love with Armpit after meeting him only briefly. Is her behavior realistic? In a roundtable discussion, explore whether or not the events in this novel are believable.
3. With a small group of classmates, discuss how X-Ray and other characters like him are driven to make poor choices by a desire for material possessions. Is this the fault of young people or are they unduly influenced by a consumer culture, a culture that places too much emphasis on possessions?
4. Explain why Tatiana decides at the last minute not to go to the concert with Armpit. In a speech, explain why you do or do not agree with her decision.
5. With a partner, act out a scene between Armpit and Kaira in which they discuss their mutual feelings.

Science/Math

1. Explain the economic theories that baffle Armpit. Teach these lessons to a small group of students, using real-life examples to help them understand the abstract concepts.
2. Make a chart showing the prices for at least six different attractions in your area, including amusement parks, live shows, movies, skating, concerts, indoor arcades, and sporting events. Compare the prices to those listed in the novel for Kaira's concert.
3. Report on scorpions, explaining where they can be found, why they are dangerous, and how to deal with them.
4. Ginny pretends that one of her stuffed animals has leukemia. Make a poster or web page explaining this blood cancer, its causes, effects, and treat-

ment.

5. Ginny has cerebral palsy. Contact your local cerebral palsy non-profit organization to find out how your class can help raise awareness for this medical condition.

Alternate Assessment

1. In Chapter 1, Armpit lists the small steps he must take to succeed. List at least five small steps that you can take to set yourself on the road to success.
2. Play a game of hearts with some classmates, as Kaira does with members of her band.
3. There are many people in Kaira's life, but she feels that she has no one to whom she can turn when she needs comfort or guidance. In a diary or journal entry, describe the people you turn to and how they comfort you. Also include a description of the people to whom you offer comfort.
4. Armpit and Ginny are friends, even though the relationship seems unusual. List ten qualities that you look for in a good friend.
5. With some classmates, debate whether or not people should be allowed to scalp tickets.

Vocabulary Test

Complete the following chart by writing a synonym (word that means the same) and an antonym (word that means the opposite) for each of these words from Small Steps. See how many more synonyms and antonyms you can find. Add them to the chart as well.

	Synonym	Antonym
1.confidential	_____	_____
2. abducted	_____	_____
3. monotonous	_____	_____
4. frenzy	_____	_____
5. spontaneous	_____	_____
6. shoddy	_____	_____
7. audibly	_____	_____
8. serenity	_____	_____
9. gaudy	_____	_____
10. gullible	_____	_____

3. "He's got something wrong with his soul."

4. "I don't have big dreams," Armpit said. "I just take small steps."

5. "I'm but a damsel in distress."

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. What is the novel's primary theme or message about life?
1. A *Children's Literature Reviewer* noted: "Sachar's popularity as an author of young adult and children's literature stems, in part, from his choice of characters. The protagonists of his books are often outcasts who learn about themselves and gain social acceptance through their relationships with other children and adults." Prove how this is true of Armpit in *Small Steps*.
2. Explain the meaning of the novel's title, applying it to at least two of the characters.
4. Trace how Armpit changes as the novel progresses. Describe what he is like in the beginning of the novel and what he comes to realize by the end.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Sentence Completion (20 points)

Give a reason to complete each sentence.

1. Cherry Lane, Austin's mayor, sincerely admires Armpit for two reasons:

2. Kaira is afraid of Billy Boy because

3. X-Ray comes up with a scheme to scalp tickets because

4. Armpit's parents force him to submit to random drug testing because

5. Tatiana decides not to go to the concert with Armpit because

6. Armpit is furious when he reads the ad that X-Ray has placed in the newspaper because

7. Ginny starts to cry hysterically after a talk with her mother because

8. Armpit and Ginny settle into their seats at the concert, but a security guard removes them because

9. Felix and Moses threaten Armpit while he is working because

10. Detective Newberg lets Armpit off the hook for the ticket scalping because

Part II: Matching (30 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blanks provided.

_____ 1. Denise Linaria

A. a teenage drug dealer

_____ 2. Armpit

B. the girl with cerebral palsy

_____ 3. Mr. Warren

C. the novel's main character

_____ 4. Donnell

D. the African-American teenage singing sensation

_____ 5. Kaira DeLeon.

E. Aileen's fake name

_____ 6. Ginny McDonald

F. the school's economics teacher

_____ 7. Jerome Paisley

G. El Genius

_____ 8. Cherry Lane

H. Rex Alvin Washburn

_____ 9. X-Ray

I. Austin's mayor

_____ 10. the detective

J. Debbie Newberg

Part III: Identification (20 points)

Explain why each is important in the novel.

1. concert tickets

2. the jacket and the sweatshirt

3. the baseball bat

4. the scarf

5. Coo

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. What makes Armpit such a realistic character? Isolate and analyze at least three of his traits.
2. The *BookPage* critic wrote: "Part of what makes *Small Steps* so believable and appealing is that its characters do have insecurities, and they aren't ashamed to let them show." Prove this critic is correct, citing any two characters in the novel.
3. Explain how Armpit embodies the saying, "You can't judge a book by its cover."
4. What role does the novel's setting play in the story? Is the setting important in this novel? Why or why not?

Answer Key

VOCABULARY TEST

Possible answers:

	Synonym	Antonym
1.confidential	secret, hidden	open
2. abducted	stolen	returned, restored
3. monotonous	boring	exciting
4. frenzy	flurry, turmoil	calm, relaxed
5. spontaneous	impulsive, unprompted	cautious, careful
6.shoddy	careless, slapdash	meticulous
7. audibly	clearly, perceptibly	inaudibly
8. serenity	calmness, stillness	bustle
9. gaudy	garish, ornate	tasteful
10. gullible	naïve, trusting	smart, savvy

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. D | 6. B |
| 2. G | 7. E |
| 3. J | 8. A |
| 4. H | 9. I |
| 5. F | 10. C |

Part II: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. T |
| 2. F | 7. T |
| 3. T | 8. F |
| 4. F | 9. F |
| 5. F | 10. T |

Part III: Quote Identification (30 points)

- The novel's opening words show that *Small Steps* is a continuation of *Holes*.
- Armpit thinks that he hears Kaira singing his name in one of her hits songs, asking him to rescue him. She does indeed need rescue from her dishonest stepfather, alcoholic mother, and embezzling manager, but Armpit does not hear the lyrics correctly. This misunderstanding foreshadows how Armpit really does rescue Kaira from her step-father's attack, which helps free her from her isolated, lonely life as a teenage superstar.
- Based on something her mother said, Ginny is convinced that her father left because of her cerebral palsy. Armpit explains that Ginny's father is disabled far worse than Ginny is because while Ginny just had a little bleeding in her brain, her father has something wrong with his soul, shown by the fact that he deserted his family. Armpit's words here reveal his compassion and kindness.
- This dialogue directly refers to the novel's title and shows the importance of setting realistic goals and then working steadily to achieve them.
- In this scene, Armpit tells Kaira that he thinks she is singing "Save me, Armpit!" She mocks him gently and corrects his mistake. Ironically, Armpit does save her in two critical ways. First, he breaks in while she is being attacked by her stepfather, taking the blows from the baseball bat himself and no doubt saving her life. Second, as a result of these actions, Kaira is freed from her stepfather's control, her manager's embezzlement, and even her mother's passive acquiescence.

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Sentence Completion (20 points)

1. he endured his ordeal at Camp Green Lake and he is trying to rebuild his life
2. he writes her fan letters in which he threatens her life
3. he wants to make a lot of money fast
4. they do not trust him, even though he has never used drugs
5. her friends talk her out of it because they think he is smelly and dangerous
6. the advertisement is deceptive, claiming the tickets are for better seats
7. she thinks that her father left the family because of her handicap
8. their tickets are counterfeit
9. they want the letter that Kaira sent Armpit, which they can sell for a large profit
10. she wants to give him a break because she recognizes that he is a good kid

Part II: Matching (30 points)

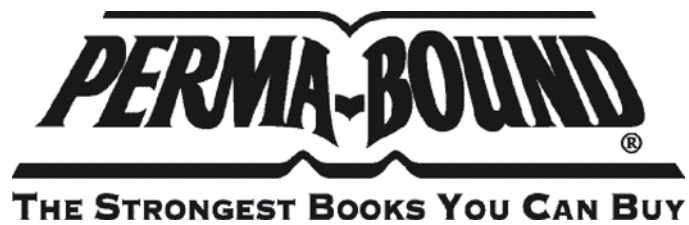
- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. E | 6. B |
| 2. C | 7. G |
| 3. F | 8. I |
| 4. A | 9. H |
| 5. D | 10. J |

Part III: Identification (20 points)

1. Concert tickets are important because they set the plot in motion. X-Ray comes up with a plot to scalp them; later, he gives counterfeit tickets to Armpit. Ironically, Armpit meets Kaira through X-Ray's scam.
2. The jacket and the sweatshirt are a lesson in economics and reveal the gulf between the rich and the poor.
3. Jerome uses the baseball bat to attack Kaira, Fred, and Armpit and plans to use it to frame Armpit for the attack.
4. The scarf is the gift that Armpit buys for Ginny. It shows his brotherly affection for her.
5. Coo is Ginny's favorite stuffed toy. Armpit uses it as a prop in a speech. It underscores her Ginny's frailty and Armpit's compassion.

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.



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