

Moment in the Headlights

by Ryan Conroy (p. 97)



Plot Summary

Mona, the youngest of seven sisters, often gets overlooked by adults because she is **the youngest and small in size**. She enjoys working with her dad on the farm where they live and going to school. Riding to school each day on a drafty old bus, especially during the wintertime, Mona snuggles down between two of her sisters to keep warm. When the bus gets stuck, which is often, it always falls to one of the older boys or girls to take the driver's seat while Bill, the bus driver, gets out to push with the older children. **Mona dreams of steering that bus**, but never thinks that chance would come so quickly. When it does, Mona not only has her dream come true but also knows that day will always be remembered by her entire family—because her new baby brother is born on the same afternoon she has her “moment in the headlights.”

Interpreting the Story

The following questions may help students understand **the value and importance of description and dialogue** in making a story and its characters come to life.

1. In the opening paragraphs of the story, can you, the reader, feel the chill of the winter morning as Mona rides the bus to school? Later, do your senses relate to the smell of bread baking in her mom's farmhouse kitchen and to the warmth created by the sounds of a crackling fire? How does the young writer of this story get you to connect with these sights and sounds?
2. Why is Mona so interested in being remembered or doing something memorable? (Students may note that Mona wants a little more attention or just wants people to know she can do something important.) Is being the smallest in a crowd or the youngest sibling in a family such a “big deal”? Why, or why not? (Students may think that being the smallest or the youngest means being left out of a lot of exciting, fun, “grown-up” things.)

Responding Creatively to the Story



Ask students to **write the next chapter** of Mona's story. Have them focus on the day after Mona's fantastic experience. How does she feel when she wakes up the next morning? How do her parents and sisters treat her? What does Mona think of her new baby brother? Encourage students to include in their stories description and dialogue similar to what they have just read.

Connecting with Cultural Values and Students' Lives

These questions may guide your students to a deeper understanding of how the story relates to their own lives. The discussion may also be used to foster the positive values of determination and teamwork.

1. In an emergency, do size and age matter? Why, or why not? What is the most important ability or characteristic to have in order to deal with an emergency?
2. Sometimes people, young and old, daydream. Daydreaming about being somebody important or doing something really fabulous is fun to do every now and then. Ask students to share with the class some of their daydreams or hopes, and focus on how daydreaming can help us work harder at being a better person, a more productive worker, a more serious student, etc.

Name _____ Date _____

Before You Read

To get ready to read "Moment in the Headlights," think about one of the topics listed here. Then **write at least three independent sentences** that describe the topic you choose. The sentences don't have to be in the form of a paragraph; start each sentence on a new line provided below.

Topics: Famous celebrity or sports star; My mom or dad; Just being myself; A daydream; When I grow up

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Connecting with Other Stories

In "Moment in the Headlights," Mona dreams of doing something memorable like her older sister Jenny does in being asked to steer the school bus when it gets stuck (which happens often). Other stories in *Juniors* also tell about characters who want to do something memorable. Jikas in "Ghostwriter" wants people to remember him as a famous science-fiction author, but his computer has a different idea. The two boys in "Beyond the Orange Line" defy orders not to go beyond the spraypainted orange line at the edge of an unsafe patch of woods. How do Mona's "moment" and her reason for wanting to be remembered **compare or contrast** with the actions of the characters in these other two stories?

Brainteasers for Critical Thinking

1. How old does the narrator of this story seem to be? Does the author accurately convey a child's point of view?
2. The narrator never tells us when her "moment in the headlights" occurred, but the story's details suggest some decade before our own. When do you think the story takes place? Name some of the background details the author uses to convey the feeling of an earlier era without actually listing a date.
3. "Moment in the Headlights" uses a dialect or vernacular form of first-person narration, rather than using standard English. Does this style, like the details mentioned in the previous question, give the story a distinctive period flavor? Do you enjoy this narrative voice, or do you find it overly stylized?
4. Is Mona's "heroic venture," driving the bus, heroic by most people's standards? Can you remember doing something as a child which seemed like a great accomplishment to you then, but which seems commonplace now?

Name _____ Date _____

Vocabulary from “Moment in the Headlights”

Directions: Based on the way each word in bold below is used in the sentence, **write** what you think the word means. Then **look up** the same word in your dictionary and copy the definition that comes closest to the way the word is used in the sentence. Finally, **write a sentence** of your own using the word. Make sure the sentence shows what the word means. Use a separate sheet of paper.

Example: Leftover snow, muddied with gravel and silt, made a slick spot big enough for the thin tires of the bus to catch on. We went **careening** into a ditch. (p. 98)

Definition based on context: *skidding; crashing*

Dictionary definition: *lurching; swaying from side to side; losing control*

Original Sentence: *The jetliner made an emergency landing but careened off the runway into a nearby field.*

1. I wanted to drive, though, and couldn't wait for the day when Jenny or Lizzie wouldn't be on the bus with me when it **floundered**. (p. 98)
2. All four walls were covered with **slate**, and Bill cleaned them to a deep emerald color every morning. (p. 99)
3. Jenny straightened it out and the bus **lurched** back onto the road, kicking and spitting muddy sand back on the once-clean boys. (p. 99)
4. To top off the sweetness of sour gum and blackstrap, this time she added strawberry flavoring, making this one of the best **batches** I'd ever tried. (p. 100)
5. Lizzie came to help, 'cause a person small as me in a **privy** as big as that—well, someone had to be the lifeguard in case I started to fall in. (p. 100)
6. He was afraid he might **jinx** it. (p. 101)
7. I went to school by myself and dreaded the cold, drafty bus ride without any sister **insulation**. (p. 101)
8. Nervous **twinges** ran through my body. (p. 102)
9. I wobbled down the road for a tiny part of a mile, then let it **idle** to a stop so that everyone could catch up. (p. 102)

Name _____ Date _____

Reading Check for “Moment in the Headlights”

Circle the letters of all the correct answers. Some questions have more than one correct answer.

- Mona has seven sisters. She is the
 - smartest
 - prettiest
 - youngest
 - oldest
 - none of the above
- Mona and her family live
 - in town, as do all her friends
 - in a suburban village
 - on a farm started by her grandparents
 - near the railroad tracks
 - none of the above
- The biggest adventure in the main character's life is
 - riding in her dad's Model-T
 - helping her mom in the kitchen
 - going to town on a shopping trip
 - driving the school bus
 - none of the above
- Mona's "moment in the headlights" gives her dad a good reason to
 - take the day off from work
 - pile everyone into the truck for an excursion
 - name the newest member of the family
 - excuse Mona from all her chores
 - none of the above
- As the story ends, Mona knows that her good deed will always be remembered
 - by her teacher
 - in her brother's name
 - in the country where she lived
 - only by her baby brother
 - none of the above

Language Skills: Description Through Adjectives



An adjective modifies or describes a noun or pronoun. One or more adjectives can be used to describe a single noun or pronoun. As a result, anybody who writes a letter, a paragraph, an essay, a story, etc. can use adjectives as tools to create wonderful verbal pictures—almost like an artist uses paints to express himself/herself on canvas.

In the space below **write two or three descriptive words or phrases** for each of the following nouns. Be imaginative, and also try to be **accurate**. That is, before you write, spend some time reviewing—**re-viewing**—the object you are describing. For example, what are the specific sights, sounds, and textures of your town? (see #1)

- City or town where you live

- Best friend in the world

- Favorite character in a book you read recently
