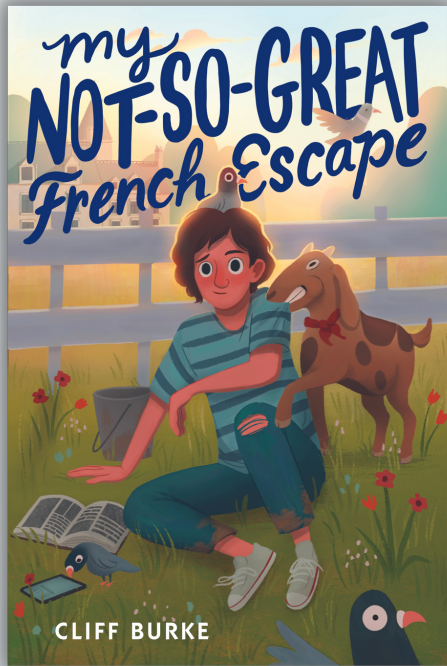


Educators' Guide



About the Book



Rylan O'Hare has been drifting apart from his best friend, Wilder, for months. Wilder's family became mega-rich when his mom invented an app that reminds people to drink water, and now he barely has time for Rylan. So when Wilder invites Rylan to join him at a summer farming program in France (all expenses paid), Rylan sees it as a chance to repair their friendship.

But before they take off, Rylan's mom drops a bomb: His dad (whom he hasn't spoken to since he was three) lives in France, too, and he wants to meet.

Between being swarmed by bees, attacked by pigeons, and sprayed with goat milk, Rylan's great French escape isn't quite what he thought it would be.

About the Author

Cliff Burke grew up in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio. He worked as a house painter, a parking lot attendant, and a sign-twirling dancing banana before graduating from the College of William & Mary. Since then, he has taught reading and writing in China, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom and the United States. His first novel, *An Occasionally Happy Family*, was a 2022 Spirit of Texas Book and selected for several state reading lists. His second novel, *My Not-So-Great French Escape*, was released in March 2023.



Before Reading

"There is nothing better than the encouragement of a good friend."

The book begins with a line from Swiss writer and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Have students discuss the meaning of this quotation. What makes a *good friend*? In what ways can a friend encourage you? Based on the description of the book above, how do you think the idea of good friends will factor into the story?

Discussion Questions

Chapters 1 - 2

1. How would you describe the relationship between Rylan and his mom?
2. What are your first impressions of Wilder? Do you think Rylan's reflections on Wilder are entirely true, or could they be influenced by their recent problems?
3. Similarly, what are your initial impressions of Rylan? Can you relate to his experience with bullying at his new school?

Chapters 3 - 4

4. Rylan's mom repeatedly tells him that his dad leaving had "nothing to do" with him. Do you think Rylan believes her? Use evidence from his reaction in these chapters to explain your thinking.
5. Put yourself in Rylan's shoes. Would you write to your long-absent father? Would you want to meet him? Explain why or why not.
6. Rylan imagines two different ways his father might respond to his message. Which seems more realistic?

Chapters 5 - 7

7. What are your first impressions of Pierre de Beaulieu and the Château de Beaulieu?
8. How does his encounter with the bees increase Rylan's confidence? Do you think this will be a turning point for him?

9. Describe the first interaction between Rylan and Martin. Do you think Rylan likes Martin? Do you think they could become friends? Why or why not?

Chapters 8 - 11

10. Pierre decides who sleeps where with help from "the fates." Do you believe in the concept of fate - that things happen at a particular time for a particular reason?
11. In the tarot reading scene, Pierre says to Rylan, "You need to change. Get a new...foundation." What do you think this means for Rylan? How might he need to change his life or thoughts?
12. Do you think Rylan would have sent the email to his father without the accidental push from Martin? How do you think Rylan's father will respond?

Chapters 12 - 16

13. What are your initial impressions of Annie and Lia? Do you think Annie, Martin, Lia, and Rylan will be successful in cultivating their *schrebergarten*?
14. How does the author develop a sense of camaraderie among Rylan's new "family"? Look for actions, conversations, or events that bring them closer together.
15. Despite this growing camaraderie, why do you think Rylan still feels "outside of the inner circle"?

Chapters 17 - 20

16. How would you describe the tone of Rylan's father's email? Do you agree with Rylan's initial reading of the email as a rejection?

17. Have you gone through a friendship ending similar to those described by Rylan and Martin? How did you deal with it and what did you learn?

18. Rylan feels left out by Wilder and the French students but finds a different kind of friendship with Martin and Annie (and even Bijou). How are these friendships different? How do they help Rylan learn more about what friendship means and how to value himself?

Chapters 21 - 24

19. Why do you think Rylan moves from feeling apprehensive about meeting his father to determined and enthusiastic?

20. What unique talent does each member of Rylan's team bring to the contest? Without reading ahead, do you think they will win? Why or why not?

21. How is Martin's relationship with his dad different from Rylan's relationships with his parents? Do you think this difference is more cultural or related to personality?

Chapters 25 - 28

22. Despite remaining outside of the contest, how has Pierre supported Rylan during his time on the farm? Do you think Pierre has offered the same level of help to the others?

23. Have you been to a summer festival or market? How does it compare to the *Festival D'été de Dreux* as described in the book?

24. Rylan describes facing several challenges during the festival while suggesting that everything seems to go smoothly for *les jardiniers suprêmes*. Do you think *les jardiniers suprêmes'* experience is as effortless as Rylan perceives it to be?

Chapters 29 - 32

25. Martin offers to 'rehearse' the meeting with Rylan's father. Do you think it is helpful to rehearse before major events?

26. How does this rehearsal allow Rylan to express his true feelings? Do you think Rylan still feels the same about his father by the end of Bastille Day?

27. Describe Pierre's story about the Buddha in your own words. How does Rylan understand this story?

28. How does Rylan's experience with his father affect his view of his mom? In what ways do you think their relationship could change?

After Reading

29. Do you think Rylan has truly changed by the end of the story? He says he is "charged" with experience, but will he *change* after returning to his everyday life?

30. Considering the final chapter and their interactions throughout, how do you think Rylan and Wilder's friendship will evolve after they return to the U.S.?

Extension Activities

French Things I Need to Know

Explore one of the items from Rylan's *French Things Mom Says I Need to Know* list: Bastille Day, coq au vin, the Eiffel Tower, ye-ye, French cheese, Jean-Luc Godard, or Notre Dame. Research your chosen item and create a slideshow sharing its history, importance in French culture and any other interesting facts or stories associated with it. If it's food, perhaps bring some in to share.

Character Debate

Rylan and Wilder have a complex relationship that is revealed in flashbacks and evolves throughout the story. While, on the surface, Wilder might seem like a negative influence, he has also brought a lot of good into Rylan's life. Organize the class into two sides and debate whether Wilder is a positive or negative influence on Rylan. Use examples from the book to support your argument.

SCOFF: Organic Farms

Some of the details of organic farming are described on page 78, but the rest must be inferred by the reader. Individually or with a partner, research the criteria for a farm to be certified organic in your country. Look into the benefits and challenges of organic farming, and create a report or presentation detailing your findings, including examples of local organic farms.

Illustrate a Scene

Illustrate a stand-out scene from the book, either by hand or digitally. You might choose the exploration of the bird-infested castle, the bustling Festival D'été de Dreux, or the release of lady bugs at twilight in the *schrebergarten*. Read your chosen scene carefully to find setting details and aim to convey the characters' emotions in your illustration. Share your finished artwork with a brief explanation of why you chose the scene and what you aimed to highlight in your illustration.

Annie's Art Project

Follow in Annie's artistic footsteps by creating a series of sky paintings (or drawings). Over at least three days, paint or draw the sky at different times or in varying weather conditions. You might use watercolors, colored pencils, or digital design tools. Display your finished pieces together, noting the time and day for each, and reflecting on what you learned from carefully observing the sky.

Rewrite the Ending

Write an alternate ending to the book from the point where Rylan waits at the café. Consider scenarios in which his father does show up - would this go well, poorly, somewhere in between? Alternatively, consider scenarios in which his father does not show up but Rylan, or Pierre, reacts differently. How would these changes affect the story's meaning and Rylan's growth?

Discussion Notes

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Find more information about the book at www.cliffburke.com



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