

Writing Sample: “Cannonball Lake” for the 2022 Updated Fountas & Pinnell Leveled Readers
Word Count: 775

Writer’s Message: Our perspective on another person’s experience is often skewed. Supporting and valuing them, even in the smallest of gestures, can bring the focus forward to empathy and understanding.

Cannonball Lake

by J.R. Potter

Most days I don’t mind being the only thirteen-year-old bellhop I know. My mom says bed and breakfasts don’t have bellhops, and that they probably call them “luggage escorts” nowadays anyway. All I know is that I’ve escorted everything from a tuba to a puppy who treated me like fresh newspaper. Whatever you’d call my job, it’s a responsibility that weighs on me some days, especially when I’d rather be free to hang out with friends. But I try to do my best because Mom owns Wilson’s Lakefront B&B and I’m her staff of one.

Today, I’m thinking of freedom as I step off the school bus and dash through the sweltering heat. Once inside, I check the itinerary Mom tapes to the back of the check-in desk. *NO GUESTS*. I feel like shouting for joy. I switch into my bathing suit and fly out the front door.

Everyone who lives around Lake St. Claire knows the lake’s nickname—Cannonball Lake, named for the ten-foot drop from the public dock. Whenever I take off from that dock there’s a second or two in the air where everything sort of stands still except for the diamonds of light glittering beneath me. I feel weightless, like nothing—no bad guest review, no Mom fretting over bills, no bully—nothing can bring me down.

Now I’m pounding down the dock, anticipating the cool rush of the lake. Just before I launch myself out over the shimmering water, I feel my foot kick a wiry object, sense that it’s gone skittering off the dock.

My first thought when I come back up is *Great! Some stupid tourist leaving their junk on the dock again!* But then I hear voices approaching the dock, voices I recognize.

It's Ollie and Stan Burgess.

Ollie and his older brother Stan live behind us. Mom's not a big fan of Ollie because he's always setting off fireworks or throwing trash over the fence. *No one's* a fan of Ollie. Everyone in my eighth-grade class avoids him because he's like a cannonball himself, always ready to explode. Ollie never calls me Kyle, just "motel boy." He never misses a chance to give me a shove, along with his favorite one-liner: "Go fix a toilet!"

Before Ollie and Stan can see me, I swim out of view until I'm hidden behind a boulder near the shore. I watch as the two boys slowly traverse the dock. Stan has his hand clamped around Ollie's arm and...

I can't believe it.

Ollie Burgess is crying.

"You lost them *again!*" Stan snarls.

"I took 'em off to swim!" Ollie cries. "They were right here!"

"Now we're out a couple hundred bucks! You know Dad's working three jobs! We can't afford that!"

Those were Ollie's glasses I had kicked off!

Suddenly, Stan is staring dead-eyed at me.

"Hey, who's down there? I see you, man!"

I quickly power my way underwater to the next dock, ducking under an opening in the supports. I wait, suspended, as the light shifts in and out through the cracks. I know the right thing is to speak up, to say it was my fault. But then what would Ollie do to me?

After a while it's clear the brothers have departed. I should be relieved, even glad that for once Ollie is having trouble, not making it. But as I head home, I keep thinking about Stan's words and Ollie's tears.

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Peering through a hole in the Burgess's fence later that night I could see Ollie. He was crouched down on the front stoop with his face turned away in the porch light. His voice sounded all choked up.

"They must've fallen off the dock, Stan! Can you help me go look tomorrow?"

"I ain't helping fix your mess, Ollie!"

"But I can't see anything! How am I supposed to find them?"

Stan slammed the door. Ollie covered his face in his hands. I felt this gnawing feeling in my stomach. *After the way Ollie treated me, why did I feel so bad for him?*

Tossing and turning in bed that night I remembered what Mom always says when something goes wrong—an angry customer, an unexpected leak.

You can't move mountains, Kyle! Look at what you can do with your own two hands.

There *was* something I could do to help Ollie, even if he would still hate my guts.

Snatching a pair of goggles from the Lost and Found, I make it to the dock just as the sun breaks over the mountains. Diving down, for a while I can't detect anything in the muck and tangled reeds. Then I see it: a glint of metal in the darkness.

Minutes later, I knock on Ollie's door and step back, wary of his reaction.

Ollie picks his way out of the doorway, squinting and holding onto the doorframe.

“I’m sorry,” I say, putting the glasses in his hands. “It’s not your fault. I kicked them off the dock by accident.”

Ollie puts on the glasses, eyes my wet suit and shivering shoulders.

Then the weirdest thing happens.

Ollie Burgess smiles and says, “Thanks...Kyle.”