





Author's Craft As you read, pay attention to the figurative language the author uses to help you understand Veronica.

Veronica's Pack



Veronica has always been too shy to speak up—until some surprising friends help her find her voice

By Lauren Magaziner | Art by Fionna Fernandes

Based on a character created by Kaylan Rennig

Veronica leaned against a tree, feeling more embarrassed every second. Her face was hot, and she could hear someone—probably Gabby—call her name. But Veronica stayed hidden in the shadows.

She wished that she hadn't said yes when Gabby invited her to play kickball after school. Well, she didn't say yes, exactly. She just didn't say no. When Gabby asked, **Veronica had—without a word—sheepishly followed the group to Gabby's backyard.**

"You never get to be captain, Veronica," Gabby said. "Why don't you pick a team this time?"

And Veronica froze.

She just *froze*. **Like a deer in headlights.** She couldn't move—she couldn't speak. Her face went beet red, and then she ran.

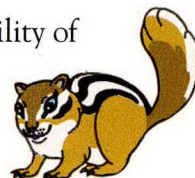
Why did she have to be so bashful? Why couldn't she be the type of person who was outgoing, who easily joined the group? She didn't want to run. But she did, and now she was alone. Just her and the forest.

The forest understood her. The woods were just as quiet as she was.

The air smelled fresh and crisp. **The trees were so tall that the leaves could paint the sky.** Veronica knew she was truly lucky to live so close to her town's woodlands and to be able to experience uninterrupted nature . . .

"Vrrrrrrroooooom!"

The noise echoed through the forest, breaking the tranquility of the woods. Heart pounding, Veronica weaved between trees to the source of the sound. There, at last, she saw it. At the edge of the woods, a few men were sawing down trees and



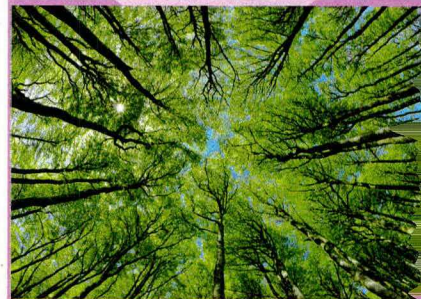
AUTHOR'S CRAFT

Why do you think the author chose the words *sheepishly* and *like a deer* to describe Veronica?



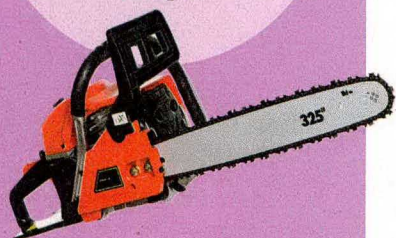
FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

This is an exaggeration called a *hyperbole*. Why do you think the author used it?



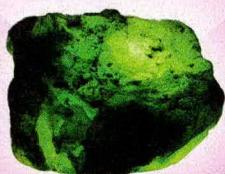
IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS

This sentence suggests the two problems Veronica is facing. What are they?



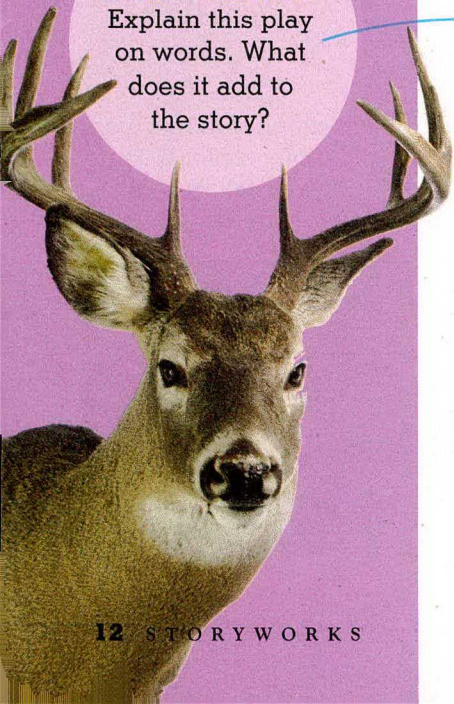
SUSPENSE

How does the author build suspense here and in the lines that follow?



PLAY ON WORDS

Explain this play on words. What does it add to the story?



placing them into trucks. A new sign read: *Coming Soon: Forest View Mall!*

They're clearing the forest, Veronica realized, feeling crushed, as though one of the trees the men were felling dropped right on top of her. They seemed to be at the beginning of their project—but how long before they chopped down the whole woods?

I should say something, she thought. Her throat was dry. "Hey! Don't! Please stop cutting down the for—"

"Vrrrrrrrrroooooom!"

The chain saw drowned out her voice. Tears in her eyes, Veronica turned away.

What should she do? What *could* she do? She was only one person. How could she, alone, stop them?

She angrily stomped toward her home. Only, the tip of her sneaker caught on a large root and she tripped. She stayed on the ground for a moment—dirt on her leggings, palms scraped, chin on the earth. In a few months, this might all be a parking lot. And there was nothing she could do.

She squinted. There was another big root up ahead, and it looked like there was something underneath it. A stone that was glowing. She reached forward to pull it out, but it was stuck tight. **But the moment her fingers touched the stone, a shock jolted through her.**

"Ouch! What was that?" she said, sitting up. She wanted to examine the stone some more, but she did not want to be electrocuted.

"I wouldn't touch random piles on the ground. That is a dangerous game," said a deep voice behind her.

She turned around, but there was no one there.

"Hello?" she whispered into the wind. The forest seemed suddenly colder, and the hair on the back of her neck stood up. "Who—who's there?"

"Can you hear me?" the voice said.

"Who's there?" Veronica repeated. She turned around quickly, trying to look in all directions at once.

"Dear me!" said the voice. A bush rustled, and a big, majestic buck jumped out from behind it. He was followed by a doe and a trembling baby fawn. It was a family of deer.

"You're . . . deer?"

"That's what I said," the buck said. "Deer? ME!"

"But . . . I must be dreaming," Veronica said, pinching herself. "Deer can't talk!"

"Of course we can. You just couldn't hear."

Veronica shook her head. She pinched herself again, but she definitely wasn't dreaming. This was unbelievable—*astounding*.

The doe whistled, and the forest began to rumble. From all around the

woods, animals were stampeding and flying their way: skunks, chipmunks, foxes, owls, wolves, a whole flock of birds, and even a bear. "She can hear us!" the doe said excitedly.

"Whoooooooooo?" said the owl.

"The human!"

They were surrounding her on all sides. They encircled her and blocked her path. "This can't be real," Veronica whispered. The animals blinked at her with big, glassy eyes.

"We have no time for pleasantries," said the fox. "Now that you can understand us, we need your help."

"My help?"

"You saw the edge of the forest, didn't you? They're destroying our home."

"It stinks," said the skunk.

"It's pawsitively unbearable," growled the bear.

A snake uncurled itself from a tree branch and swung from its tail.

"If you let them continue, our home will be hissssssstory!"

Veronica shook her head. "I'm sorry . . . I wish I could do something, but there's nothing I can do."

There was a collective, disapproving murmur. "I can't bear to listen to this," growled the bear, baring every one of its pointy teeth.

"You don't understand," Veronica said. "I'm just one person. All alone, I can't make a difference. They can't even hear me over the chain saws."

"Well, don't you have a flock, like us?" chirped the birds. "Or a herd? Or a pride? Or a colony? Or a gaggle? Or a pack?"

Veronica shuffled her feet. She thought of all the other kids in her neighborhood—the friendly, loud, laughing kids. And how she couldn't say a single word in front of them. **Finally, she whispered, "I don't know if I have one of those."**

"Well, find one. When the whole pack howls together," said the wolf, "it's hard to ignore." The wolves began to howl at the sun, since it was still daytime.

Veronica thought deeply. Being quiet and shy all her life, she had never charged into battle before. But this was important. It wasn't just about her and the woods she loved. She had to save the animals' home too.

She had to try. "I think I know what to do. Meet me here tomorrow afternoon."

She wandered out of the forest. The sound of laughing and shouting echoed from Gabby's backyard still. Veronica wiped her sweaty palms on her leggings and marched over to her neighbor's house again.

Everyone stopped playing at once and stared at her. She could feel her face getting flush again.



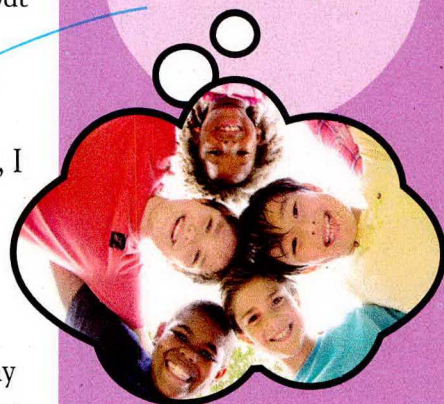
PLOT

What do the animals want Veronica to do?



CHARACTER

Why does Veronica doubt whether she has a group?



Write your own question about anything on these pages!



“Veronica!” Gabby said with a wave. “I’m so glad you came back. Want to play?”

Veronica shook her head. “I . . . we . . .” You can do it, she told herself. **She closed her eyes. “I, um, need your help.”**

She told them about the loggers in the forest, and they listened intently. They didn’t laugh; in fact, they became as angry as she felt.

When she’d finished, Gabby stood up. “We can’t let this happen!”

“No!” said a boy named John. “But we need more people.”

Gabby linked elbows with Veronica. “Then let’s find them.”

The 10 of them went together, door to door, around the neighborhood. Then, from Veronica’s house, they took turns calling friends from school, extended family, every number they knew. They gave as much information as they could, and a time and place to meet.

When Veronica walked back into the woods the next day, she had 40 people with her—family and new friends alike. She led them through the trees, to the area that was being deforested.

Her parents looked at the fallen trees in horror. “There used to be a tire swing in here,” Veronica’s dad said. “I spent every day on that swing when I was your age.”

“This is where we played capture the flag last summer,” John said to Gabby, pointing to the area that was cleared of trees.

Their cries rose together; it turned into a collective sound of determination and strength. The people in her town stood in a line, linking arms.

The men dropped their saws, unsure of what to do next.

Gabby’s mom handed Veronica a megaphone. Veronica looked at it, and her throat went dry. She was freezing up again, like a block of ice. There was no way she could speak in front of a crowd. She started to shrink into her sweatshirt.

But from the other side of the clearing, the animals nodded. *When the whole pack howls together, it’s hard to ignore.*

This was her pack. They were here. And she had to start the howl. Veronica took a deep breath. “Thank you for coming,” she said into the megaphone. “Now let’s save this forest!”

Everyone cheered.

They shouted for an hour, until the loggers retreated. It was a good first step to stopping the mall construction. Veronica knew they would be back another day, but the community would just have to battle them again.

“Let’s order some victory pizzas!” Gabby shouted. “You in, Veronica?” Veronica smiled. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

The crowd chattered excitedly together as they walked back to the neighborhood at the edge of the woods. But Veronica slipped away to find

CHARACTER
Why is this an important moment for Veronica?



AUTHOR'S CRAFT
What does the author compare Veronica to in these lines?



the animals.

"Thanksssssss for helping us," the snake said.

"That's a strong pack you have there," said a wolf.

A shock traveled down her arms, and her ears felt like they were underwater. For a moment, it sounded like the animals were howling and growling and hissing again.

"Cheep cheep!" said a few birds.

"Rawr!" roared the bear.

She was losing her power now.

No, it didn't feel like she was losing anything. **She had gained something.**

Still, she wiggled a finger in her ear and caught one last sentence from the baby deer. "I've grown quite fawned of you! I'll miss you."

"I'll still be here," Veronica said. "And we'll make sure you are too." ■

CHARACTER

What did Veronica gain?

MEET

The "Create a Character" Team!



The Author!

LAUREN MAGAZINER

has written four books, including *Case Closed: Mystery in the Mansion* and *Wizardmatch*.

How did you end up selecting this character?

Veronica's enthusiasm for protecting the environment and saving the animals' home inspired me. I also loved how Veronica needs to work together with her community to solve her problem. That is a very important theme!

What was it about Veronica that you found fascinating?

There are two things about Veronica that I find magical. First, she has literal magic in her power to converse with the animals of the forest. And then there's Veronica's other, deeper magic: her compassionate heart.



The Winner!

KAYLAN RENNIG

Cairo-Durham Middle School
Cairo, NY
Teachers: Erin Murphy and Donna Howell

What made you think of the character of Veronica?

While at my grandparents' log cabin in Pennsylvania, my family and I see animals like turkeys, deer, black bears, and snakes close-up. I wanted my character to have these experiences, because seeing wildlife is very special.

How did you think of the conflict she faces?

I wanted to incorporate a real-life problem that people care about: preserving the environment. I feel that kids my age can relate to Veronica wanting to help with this issue.

We received **2,647** entries for this year's Create a Character contest!

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