

SIR FIG NEWTON AND THE SCIENCE OF PERSISTENCE

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Grades 3-7 Lexile 800L
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“[Sonja] Thomas’ debut will pull at readers’ heartstrings. A noteworthy debut.”
- Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“Middle grade readers looking for realistic stories with engaging protagonists will enjoy meeting Mira, a girl whose passion for science gives her a sense of purpose and the tools to solve problems.”
- School Library Journal

About the Book

Twelve-year-old Mira’s summer is not off to a great start. Her best friend, Thomas, just moved a billion and one miles away. Her dad is stressed out thanks to a string of rejections in a long job search. And guess who moved into Thomas’s old house down the street? Tamika Smith, Mira’s know-it-all nemesis who’s kept Mira in second place at the school science fair four years running.

Things go from bad to worse when her beloved cat, Sir Fig Newton, is diagnosed with “the silent killer”: diabetes. When Mira’s parents tell her they may have to give Fig up to people who can afford his treatment, Mira insists she can raise the funds needed within a month. Armed with ingenuity, determination, and one surprising ally, can Mira save her best (four-legged) friend before it’s too late?

About the Author

Sonja Thomas (she/her) writes stories for kids of all ages. Raised in Central Florida and a Washington, DC transplant for 11 years, she's now “keeping it weird” in the Pacific Northwest.

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Discussion Questions

- Mira hates that her dad is miserable after losing his job. So she decides to use science to save him from his funk. Her hypothesis: “With the right music Dad’s mood could escape his black hole and shine bright again like the aurora borealis” (p. 18). Have you ever felt empathy for someone who was experiencing something difficult or painful? Why did you understand their feelings or experience?
- Mira can’t stand her know-it-all nemesis, Tamika. Why do you think Mira doesn’t like her? Why do you think Tamika keeps showing up if Mira doesn’t like her? How do you think Tamika feels when Mira isn’t nice?
- Mira’s world revolves around science and facts. When she goes to church with Gran, she struggles with the pastor saying, “Today we are going to talk about faith... in spite of the facts” (p. 96). Throughout the story, Mira tries to understand what it means to have faith. Curious, she questions what other people in her life believe in and how they find faith. What does faith mean to you? What are things you believe in for which there is no proof? Or who are the people you trust without question? Do you believe in the same things as your friends? Your family? Why or why not?
- Mira wants to be an astronomer and astronaut one day. When she learns about Dr. Beth A. Brown, the first Black woman to earn a doctorate in astronomy from the University of Michigan, she thinks to herself: “Whoa. I’d never known there were Black female astronomers!” (p. 182). How does seeing people who look like you or who have common characteristics in media and books affect the kind of goals you set for yourself? What does this say about the importance of representation and diversity?

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Discussion Questions (continued)

- After Mira's best friend, Thomas, moves a billion and one miles away from Florida to DC, she's confident that they will stay best friends forever. But after Thomas makes a new friend, Mira is hurt and jealous and starts to push him away. Eventually, Mira understands why her friendship with Thomas has changed (p. 348). How do friendships sometimes change? Have you ever felt like you and a friend were growing apart? How did you feel? How did you react?
- Once again, Tamika shows up for Mira, this time during her "Operation Save Fig bike-a-thon" (pp. 253 - 254). What makes Mira realize that Tamika is her friend? What does it mean to be a good friend? Have you ever made assumptions about someone before getting to know them? Why? Have you ever become close with someone you didn't like at first? If so, how did your friendship unfold?
- When Mira's parents tell her they may have to give Fig up to people who can afford his diabetes treatment, she insists she can raise the funds needed within a month. It's a lot harder than she thought, but she never gives up. Mira realizes that she's strong because she's "supported by family, friends, and even strangers" (p. 318). Was there a time in your life that you didn't give up because of the people in your life? Who were they and how did they help you keep going? Were you surprised by their support? Why or why not?

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Post-Reading Activities

Inspiration & Representation

Several astronauts and astronomers, including women and people of color, are mentioned throughout the book. Specifically, Mira finds inspiration from Mae Jemison, Ellen Ochoa, and Dr. Beth A. Brown. Research different scientists (or past and present professionals doing what you want to be when you grow up) and create a collage that inspires you to achieve your goals.

Top Four Qualities

In the book, Mira states that she has the same four qualities as any great scientist: patient, curious, observant, and persistent. Create a list of your top qualities. Do these qualities make you a good friend? Why or why not? Using the list, write a poem celebrating why you are great!

Over-the-Top-of-a-Mountain Exaggeration

Hyperboles are an over-the-top exaggeration to emphasize a point. Mira loves to exaggerate when it comes to saying how far away her best friend, Thomas, has moved. She starts off with the move being “precisely nine hundred and one miles away” (p. 4). Then the distance grows to “one hundred thousand (and one) miles away (p. 54) and the exaggeration continues throughout, topping off at “a light-year, or about six trillion and one miles away” (p. 208). Describe yourself, a friend, or your favorite animal using hyperboles.

Write an Honest Letter

Near the end of the story, Mira writes an honest email to her friend Thomas, specifically about how hurt and mad she was when he’d made a new friend. Think about a time when you wished you had shared your true feelings with someone. Write an honest letter to yourself, sharing your feelings then and now, why you had felt that way, and why you hadn’t shared your feelings.