

# Courtney

1986

A Teacher's Guide to

## Courtney Changes the Game

*A story about girls  
and women taking on  
new roles in the 1980s*



## About the Book

Nine-year-old Courtney Moore loves to play video games, but she's bummed that there aren't more girl characters. When a school assignment gives Courtney the chance to create her own game, she invents a female hero: Crystal Starshooter. Crystal is bold and brave and can handle any situation—qualities Courtney wishes she had herself. Courtney's parents are divorced, and when her dad moves away to start a new job, Courtney has a hard time adjusting. The new arrangement also causes a problem with her stepsister, Tina. The girls share a room, and Tina doesn't like Courtney being around on the weekends. When Courtney's mom announces she's running for mayor, their whole blended family, including Courtney's stepdad and half brother, have to take on new roles. Courtney's shocked when a reporter questions her mom's ability to be a good mayor and a good mom. *Why can't she be both?* Courtney wonders. At school, Courtney's class is preparing for the launch of the space shuttle *Challenger*. The

astronauts, and especially Christa McAuliffe, inspire Courtney's ideas for her video game. As she deals with her feelings about the *Challenger* explosion, Courtney gains a deeper understanding about the risk of doing something new and the courage it takes to be bold. (Lexile measure: 690L)

## About This Guide

This guide encourages students to be careful readers without diminishing the pleasure they gain from reading. The layered discussion questions deal with the themes of family, change, courage, empathy, teamwork, and changing women's roles. While the decade of the 1980s isn't usually taught as part of the elementary school curriculum, Courtney's story and this guide offer natural connections to the language arts, social studies, math, and science curricula. Some activities take longer to complete than others, and a teacher should feel free to use only those activities that meet the learning needs of most of the students in the class. It is recommended that students read the entire book before engaging in a detailed study of the novel.

## Pre-Reading Activity

The 1980s are often referenced in popular culture, and many students' parents grew up in the 1980s, so students may be familiar with aspects of the decade's culture or events. Ask students to share what they know about the 1980s. Then have them read "Inside Courtney's World" (p. 105-110) and lead a class discussion about the social changes of the era. Have students list the social changes they learned about in the essay. What would such changes mean for a third-grade girl like Courtney? Have students write a paragraph that predicts the conflicts in the novel: How might the era's social changes play out in Courtney's story? Allow time in class for students to read aloud what they have written. Consider all ideas and make a class prediction about *Courtney Changes the Game*.

## Thematic Connections

### Family

What impact does Courtney's dad's move have on her relationship with Tina? Contrast Courtney's relationship with her stepdad, Mike, to Tina's relationship to her stepmom, Maureen. During her TV interview, Courtney's mom says their blended family learns from and supports each other. What evidence can students find to show that her statement is true? In what ways does Courtney's family struggle to get along?

### Change

Mike tells Courtney, "You and Tina have both faced big changes in your families. You're alike in many ways." Discuss the changes each girl has faced and how she has dealt with them. What are examples of Courtney and Tina reacting similarly? In what ways do they react differently? At the salon, Courtney, Tina, and Maureen each change their appearance in some way. How do they each feel as a result of these changes?

### Teamwork

When Courtney's mom decides to run for mayor, she asks everyone to pitch in and help around the house. What are some examples of the family working well together? What are some examples of them not? As Courtney studies the space shuttle *Challenger*, she learns that the crew has to work together to accomplish their missions. How does that realization impact Courtney's video game design? How does it change her relationships with her family, particularly Tina?

### Courage

Courtney wishes she could be brave and bold like Crystal Starshooter. Which of Courtney's actions support her belief that she's not brave and bold? How does Courtney change as the book progresses? What are some examples of her being courageous? After the space shuttle explosion, Courtney's dad tells her that doing something bold carries a risk and that some risks are worth it. What does he mean?

### Empathy

Define empathy. How does Courtney express empathy toward Tina? Is Tina empathetic toward Courtney? After the space shuttle explosion, Courtney discovers that Tina is struggling with more feelings than she lets on. How does their relationship change after the tragic event? In what ways do Courtney and her classmates express empathy after the *Challenger* explosion?

### Women's Roles

If Courtney's mom wins the election, she'll be the first woman mayor of Orange Valley. What other examples are there in the story of women doing things for the first time? Why is Courtney upset when a reporter asks how her mom will manage to be a good mayor and a good mother? Why does Courtney's mom's "power suit" make her feel confident? Why does Courtney make the hero of her video game a girl? What other girls and women inspire Courtney?

## Curriculum Connections

### Social Studies

Women achieved many important firsts in the 1980s. Sandra Day O'Connor was the first female Supreme Court justice, and Geraldine Ferraro was the first woman nominated for vice president. Assign each student the name of a woman who has accomplished a first in the last thirty years. Use this list or create your own. Have students give a five-minute presentation about the woman they research. Their presentation should include who, what, why, when, where, and how.

- Madeleine Albright (Secretary of State)
- Kathryn Bigelow (Academy Award winner for Best Director)
- Hillary Clinton (candidate for president of the United States)
- Eileen Collins (space shuttle pilot)
- Cristeta Comerford (White House Executive Chef)
- Stacey Cunningham (CEO of the New York Stock Exchange)
- Aretha Franklin (elected to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame)
- Katie Higgins (Blue Angels pilot)
- Michelle Howard (four-star admiral in the U.S. Navy)
- Barbara Mikulski (wore pants on the U.S. Senate floor)
- Danica Patrick (winner of the Indianapolis 500)
- Nancy Pelosi (Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives)
- Julie Taymor (winner of a Tony Award for best director of a musical)
- Sarah Thomas (NFL official)
- Jen Welter (NFL coach)

### STEM

Visit <https://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/k-4/stories/nasa-knows/what-is-the-space-shuttle-k4.html> for an overview of the space shuttle. Split the class into three groups to research the main parts of the craft. Have each group present what they learned to the rest of the class.

Orbiter: [https://www.nasa.gov/returntoflight/system/system\\_Orbiter.html](https://www.nasa.gov/returntoflight/system/system_Orbiter.html)

External tank: [https://www.nasa.gov/returntoflight/system/system\\_ET.html](https://www.nasa.gov/returntoflight/system/system_ET.html)

Solid rocket boosters: [https://www.nasa.gov/returntoflight/system/system\\_SRB.html](https://www.nasa.gov/returntoflight/system/system_SRB.html)

### Language Arts

The 1980s saw more women joining the workforce and taking on roles that had previously been held by men. Have students interview their parents and grandparents about women's roles in their families. How have they changed from the student's great-grandparents' time to today? Have students investigate the challenges their family members encountered with their new roles. Then ask students to write a paragraph about each woman in their family.

Look at the Word List. (p. 104) Discuss the meaning of the words in the 1980s. Are the words still used today? Have the meanings changed? Tell students to imagine that they're making a time capsule for someone to open 30 years in the future. Have them create a list of slang terms that are common today. Include the definitions and examples of usage. Give students the option to make video or audio recordings of their lists.

### Vocabulary

The vocabulary in the novel isn't difficult, but students should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them using clues from the context. Such words may include *exhilarating* (p. 2), *converging* (p. 4), *medium* (p. 19), *melodramatic* (p. 27), *defiantly* (p. 35), *endorsement* (p. 59), *skeptically* (p. 62), *exasperated* (p. 65), *pummeled* (p. 74), *malfunction* (p. 85), *pizzazz* (p. 86), and *wheedled* (p. 97).

### About the Author



Kellen Hertz was raised by New Yorkers in Fresno, California, a combination that resulted in an overactive imagination and a yearning for bagels. She decided to become a writer at age 10 after reading L. Frank Baum's Wizard of Oz series (since the job of Princess of Oz was already taken). Her unfinished first novel was tragically lost in a sea of library books on the floor of her room, forcing her to seek other employment. She is the author of American Girl's Tenney series, as well as the coauthor of *Lea and Camila*. Kellen loves vintage maps, strange names, strong coffee, and words and all the flavors they come in. Most of all, she loves her family. She lives with her husband and son in Los Angeles.

### More Stories About Courtney

- *Friendship Superhero*  
Find out what happens after *Courtney Changes the Game*. (Lexile measure: 680L)

Questions or comments? Call 1-800-845-0005, visit [americangirl.com](http://americangirl.com), or write to Customer Service, American Girl, 8400 Fairway Place, Middleton, WI 53562

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## Character Is Everything

American Girl's line of historical fiction for middle-grade readers was originally conceived and developed by a former classroom teacher. The books are grounded in thorough historical research and bring history to life for children.

Each historical character's story helps readers make connections. Girls and boys can explore the past, find their place in the present, and think about the possibilities the future can bring. They will see how a young person can stand up for what he or she cares about most: helping others, protecting the earth, and overcoming injustice. Through these stories, young readers will discover how staying true to their own beliefs helps define *their* character.

