



Before You Read

In a story told in *first person*, everything you know about the story comes from the *narrator's* point of view. You don't know what the other characters in the story are thinking, saying, or doing when the narrator is not with them. You have to read between the lines to find out about the other characters, so that you can form your own interpretation of the story.

The narrator in this story faces an unfair accusation. Think about a time when you or one of your friends was unfairly accused of something. Write a short journal entry telling about the situation: what happened, who made the accusation, how you felt, and how you dealt with it.

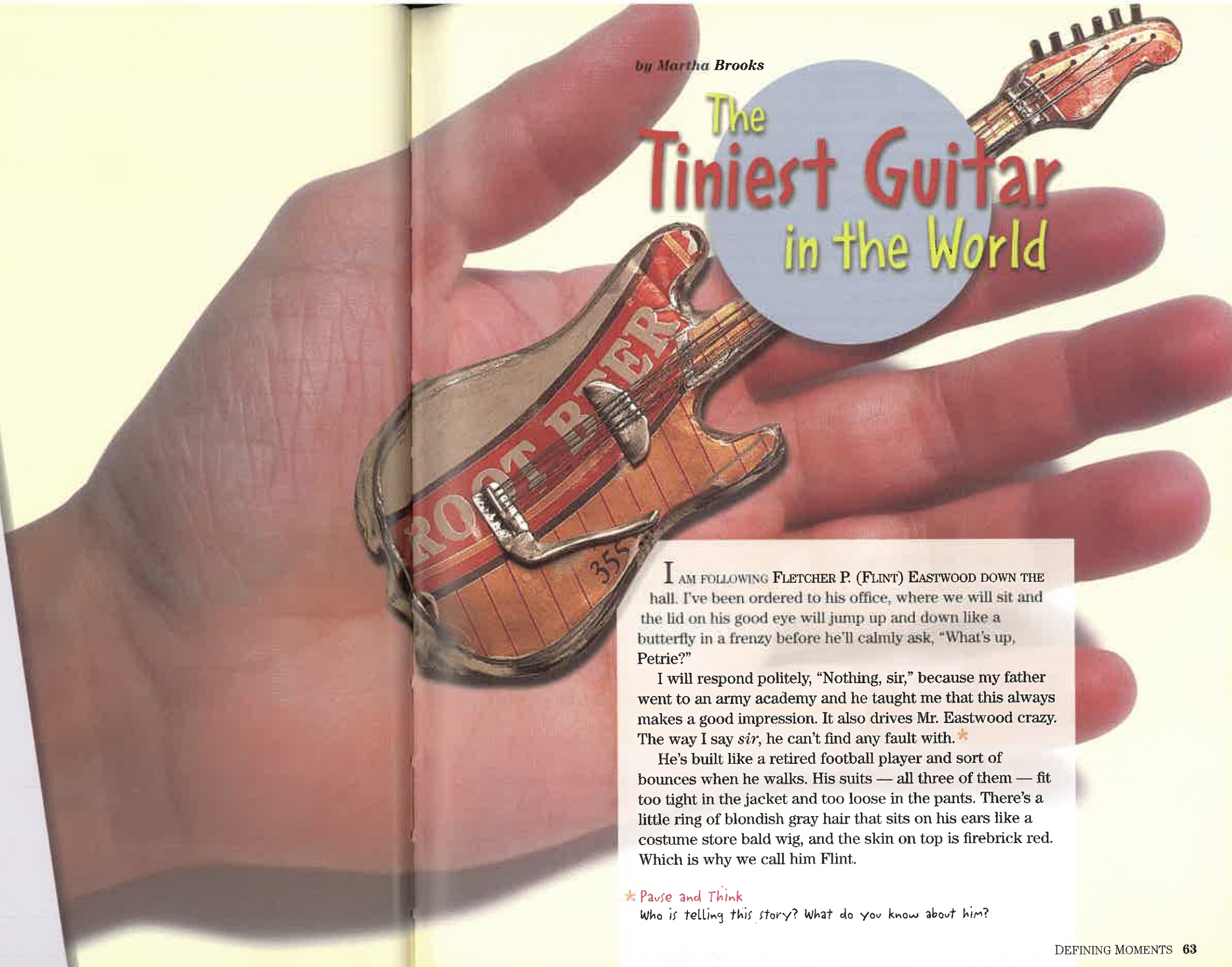
Try This

As you read, pause from time to time to think about the narrator in this story. Ask yourself questions.

- Who is Donald? What ideas and feelings lie behind his words and actions?
- How would you feel in his place? What would you do?
- What has changed for him by the end of the story?

by Martha Brooks

The Tiniest Guitar in the World



I AM FOLLOWING FLETCHER P. (FLINT) EASTWOOD DOWN THE hall. I've been ordered to his office, where we will sit and the lid on his good eye will jump up and down like a butterfly in a frenzy before he'll calmly ask, "What's up, Petrie?"

I will respond politely, "Nothing, sir," because my father went to an army academy and he taught me that this always makes a good impression. It also drives Mr. Eastwood crazy. The way I say *sir*, he can't find any fault with. *

He's built like a retired football player and sort of bounces when he walks. His suits — all three of them — fit too tight in the jacket and too loose in the pants. There's a little ring of blondish gray hair that sits on his ears like a costume store bald wig, and the skin on top is firebrick red. Which is why we call him Flint.

*** Pause and Think**

Who is telling this story? What do you know about him?



His dinky office smells of eraser crumbs and old coffee and unidentifiable aftershave. You might say it's like a second home to me.

We get inside. He closes the door. "Sit," he says to the orange chair in front of his desk.

I sit down and kick at a paper ball near my feet. Beside it is a paper clip. I pick that up so I'll have something to fiddle with.

Flint settles in behind the desk, sighs, wipes his face with a wrinkly hand. I shoot a look at him in time to catch the butterfly-in-a-frenzy eyelid maneuver. His chair makes that old familiar squeak as he leans dangerously far back. He pauses, then comes forward fast. His elbows hit the desktop with a hollow sound like distant drums.

"What's up, Petrie?"

I've twisted the paper clip so that it's like a square with half the top missing. "Nothing, *sir*."

"Darn it, Donald — don't patronize me. Mrs. Lindblad *saw* you outside at noon."

"What? Sir?"

"You and your friends. Robert Isles and that . . . Goran fellow — Chris. Loose brown cigarette papers. Does that ring a bell?"

Loose *brown* cigarette papers?

He leans in on me. "Are you boys selling drugs?"

The paper clip now resembles a mutilated snake.

"Put that thing down and answer me."

I toss the clip. It bounces off the desk leg and veers back, tangling itself into the laces of my boot. "No, sir," I mumble, pulling it off.

The worst thing about somebody making up their mind that you're a liar is that you can tell the truth until you're blue in the face, but they aren't going to believe you, anyway.*

"What's that? What did you say?" He's practically lying on his desk.

"I said, no, sir."

"Look at me when you answer."

I look. The other eye is glass. The color doesn't quite match his good eye.

"No . . . sir."

"You know, Donald, I can't think of a single other person in this school who spends more time in this office, but it never seems to faze you."

He talks to me a lot about stuff not fazing me — my poor grades, my total disregard for the school's dress code, and my being a disturbing influence.

"You were *seen*, Donald. Outside, at noon. *Rolling marijuana cigarettes and selling them to the seventh-grade boys!*"

At noon. Outside at noon. Robert Isles, Chris Goran, and I found a dead squirrel. It was flattened — fairly fresh roadkill. Its mouth was open, its teeth bared. Its right arm stretched up past its ear. The other

*Pause and Think
Has anyone ever unjustly accused you of being a liar? Do you agree with Donald's statement?

*Pause and Think
What "creative thing" do you think Donald has made?

hung down around its belly. Goran starts joking around that it's lip synching. Isles is sucking on a can of root beer. Goran holds up the squirrel. Makes its left paw twitch frantically up and down. Isles spews root beer all over the ground. And that's when I get this unusual idea.

Goran's little brother, Paul, walks by with Simon Wiebe. We make them go into their classroom and bring out a pair of scissors. And what happens next is pretty amazing. Everybody hangs around watching. It's about the most creative thing I've done since I was a little kid.*

"Donald, I've given you more warnings and second chances than just about anyone in the history of this school," Flint says, fishing around his shirt pocket under his gray pinstriped suit jacket. He pulls out a fresh pack of gum. "What is it you care about?" He picks at the outside wrapper. "I'd really like to know." He can't get the tab undone. He finally mangles it open and offers me a stick.

"No, thanks, sir. It's bad for my teeth."

Patiently smiling, he takes a piece of gum for himself. He's going to act all buddy-buddy now. This is the ace up his sleeve, as they say. Sometimes you go to see the vice-principal or a counselor or whatever because you really need help. I don't know if they think you *enjoy* asking for help, or what. But you're depressed. They offer you a piece of gum. You tell them your problems because who else have you got to turn to — your mother? Then they offer you some useless piece of advice that messes you up even more because on top of everything else, you now have to worry about this new evidence they have on you, and about how they'll use it against you whenever they're in the right mood and you're in the wrong place.

So much for the buddy system.

Flint leans his arm on the desk, his chin on the palm of his hairy hand. It's his I'm-open-to-anything-you-have-to-tell-me-because-I'm-a-reasonable-caring-human-being position.

"Have you given any further thought to what you might do after you leave school?"

He's leading up to my becoming a drug dealer. Or to washing dishes at Mr. Steak for the rest of my life.

"Well, sir, lately I've been thinking seriously about marine biology."

"I see." He chews away. Waits for me to continue. We've been over this ground before.

"I worry about oil spills. Stuff like that."

"Stuff . . . like . . . that," he repeats, drawing out my words like my life is some kind of free-for-all display. He wisely nods. Puckers his lips. Sniffs. I know what he's going to say next and that it will make him very very happy to say it.

* **Pause and Think**
Why does Donald feel
nauseated, hot, and
enraged?

"You are aware, of course, that you'll have to finish high school first. With good grades. Just when were you planning to get those?"

I feel a little nauseated. A little hot. A bit enraged. * "To get them, sir?" I say innocently.

He slams down his hand, flat, on the desktop. I must jump about ten feet.

"Don't be smart with me! I've given you *hours* of my time. I've tried to reach you. I've been lenient with you. I've done everything I could to be the best possible friend I can. And I *am* your friend, Donald. But today just takes the cake. What are we going to do about it?"

"We?"

"Don't you know I could have you arrested right now? For trafficking? Don't you know that?"

"I wasn't selling drugs. And there's no such thing as brown cigarette papers. Name one time you have *ever* seen a brown cigarette paper, sir."

"Well. She was obviously wrong about the color," he says, like he's thinking for the first time since I walked in here that he might be losing ground.

"She didn't see brown cigarette papers today," I say in a soft, respectful tone. "What she saw was a brown root beer can being cut up and rolled."

I sit back and wait to see what he'll do next. His face shows a real struggle. He's madly trying to stuff back whoever it is behind the vice-principal mask he dons every morning as he's getting that fat knot into his silk tie.

"A root beer can?"

"Would I make up such a thing?"

"Possibly. This may sound like a dumb question, Donald, but why would you be cutting up a root beer can?"

I take a deep breath. Might as well tell the truth. Who knows? He just might believe it.

"I was making an electric guitar, sir."

"Go on." He's got this steady bead on me, like if I blow this one I'm a dead man.

"A very small electric guitar. Not a real one, you understand, but something that looked like one. For a dead squirrel, sir. I made it so it would look as if he was really playing it. Sort of caught forever in the moment, if you know what I mean — kind of like a statue."

Flint crinkles up his forehead and allows this to register. He takes his pencil and sort of dances it between his hands. He then plops it into a stained white mug along with the other yellow pencils and cheap blue pens.

"Where is this squirrel?"

"He's lying on his back, sir, out in the school yard. I can show you if you like."



"And the guitar?"

"It's here in my pocket. I didn't have time to set him up yet, so to speak." The cold aluminum warms quickly in my fingers. "I actually didn't know if I felt like just leaving it out there, either. The guitar, I mean." I hold it out to Flint.

He takes it and studies it for a minute. Then he sort of sags over his desk.

"This actually resembles a guitar," he says, looking up at me with wonder on his face.

"Yes. I know it does," I say, suddenly very happy. It's only at this exact moment that I realize that it does. And that it's actually beautiful to look at. I start to laugh. My eyes smart.

"No. I mean truly it does," he says, pointing to the delicate strings. "How did you do those?"

"I cut the can up really fine there. I mean at that point of making it."

"You must have a *very* steady hand. This stuff looks almost *shaved*."

"Well, I did sort of shave it. It was a kind of experimental shear-and-shave sort of thing."

"Does it actually fit the squirrel?"

"Yes, it does. We tried it out. It looks very lifelike."

"Believe me," he says, still looking at the guitar, "I know more than you think I do about what you're going through. You have an original turn of mind, Donald. If you could only find a way of using that to your benefit, instead of always using it like a suit of armor, then you'd have a sweet life."

* Pause and Think
What do you think Flint means by "a sweet life"?

"A sweet life?"
"Yes."

I wait for him to elaborate on this. He doesn't.* He hands back my guitar. He plays with a pile of papers on his desk. "I pulled you out of your last class," he says, finally. "You might as well go on home now."

"Really? Thanks."

Flint's biggest problem is that he still likes kids, but we've finally worn him out.

I pause at the door, and on a kind of whim I say, "You really should be looking into another line of work, Mr. Eastwood. Something that makes you feel happier."

"That would be terrific, Don," he says tiredly. "If I could only find the energy."

"You'll figure something out," I say.

I close the door as soft as a feather, so as not to jar his nerves any further.

I start down the hall. This is a small private school. I've been coming here ever since three quarters of the way through first grade. The elementary school and the junior and senior high schools are separated by double glass doors. I don't often have a reason, anymore, to be in the elementary part. But as I slide between the doors, I'm glad I came. I've entered another world — it's a trip back. Colored construction paper, taped to the walls, frames decorated poems entitled "What Is Spring?" Some little kid has pasted cotton balls onto brown crayoned lines to show that SPRING IS PUSSY WILLOWS!

I'm thinking about my second-grade teacher, Miss Huska. She had black hair and green eyes and I fell in love with her on the first day back to school after Christmas vacation. My dad had left on New Year's — packed up as much as he could get into his big brown suitcase and left for good, and even though I didn't know exactly what was going on, like that I wouldn't see him from then on except sometimes in the summer, I felt sad and sick. At recess, when everyone else went outside, Miss Huska let me stay with her, indoors. That was when I decided to invite her to have lunch with me.

In the smaller grades, the teachers would sit down and have lunch with a student if they asked. First you had to write out a formal invitation (to improve your writing skills), and then they would write back. When I handed her my invitation with a picture of a lady and a boy eating lunch in their bathing suits (beside a big sand castle), she laughed and said, "Thank you, Don. This is for *me*?"

* Pause and Think
Why is Miss Huska important to Donald?



* Pause and Think
Why does Donald salute the squirrel?

She always said, "This is for *me*?" like you'd just handed her a million bucks.

After the bell rang, we all sat in our desks for art class. Miss Huska smiled when she gave me her reply, which read, "Dear Don: Yes, I will have lunch with you. Thank you for your gorgeous picture! And thank you for inviting me. Yours truly, Miss Huska."

That morning, in art class, I repeated in my mind the word *gorgeous*, like a prayer, as I made her three lime green tissue-paper roses. She put them in her pencil can, where they stayed for months and gradually got faded by sunlight until we were let out for the summer.*

Outside the second-grade room, which used to be Miss Huska's class, a boy is sitting in the hall, on a sunny spot, his legs sprawled. He's flicking his chewed-up pencil against his knee. The door is closed, but I can still hear the voice of his teacher on the other side, raving on about arithmetic.

I shove my hand into my jacket pocket. I feel the feather-light strings of the guitar. The kid looks really bored, waiting by the door until his punishment is over. I push against the toe of his shoe to get his attention. He's skinny, with a grown-out brush cut. I hand over to him my work of art.

He looks at it, turns it upright, raises his eyebrows like a TV cartoon. He smiles. He has the kind of teeth that'll need braces in a couple of years.

I'm beginning to wonder if he appreciates what I've just handed him. I remember reading somewhere that art doesn't become art until it goes out into the world.

"It's yours," I say.

Even as I say it, part of me wants to take it back. It looks better and better in his hands. I can't believe I've created something so . . . gorgeous. That I actually did that. Finally I say, "Do you want it, or don't you?"

The kid pulls it to his chest, and my heart sinks. Then he gives me the craziest wink and starts madly fingering that tiniest guitar in the world like he's some big-time rocker.

He gets so involved that he doesn't even notice me leave, my boots clacking down the hall.

Outside, the sun is bright and the air is cold. On my way through the school grounds, I pass the squirrel, on his back, forever playing the invisible guitar. I'm grateful to him. Maybe I should make more stuff out of rejected junk material — a sort of personal statement on overlooked beauty.

I lean over, touch my right hand to my forehead, and salute him. After that, I turn and head home into the strong spring wind.*

First Reaction

1. Write a note or short letter to Donald, responding to what you've learned about him and his experiences. Include any personal connections you made with his story — reminders of experiences, ideas, or feelings you have had.

Look More Closely

2. Complete the following chart in your notebook to show what you know about Donald's character. Try to identify at least three different characteristics or personality traits and provide evidence for each.

Characteristics	Evidence		
	What He Says	What He Thinks and Feels	What He Does

3. *The Tiniest Guitar in the World* is told from Donald's point of view. Use a Venn diagram to compare Donald's views of the interview in Mr. Flint's office with how Mr. Flint might have viewed the interview.



4. Why does creating "the tiniest guitar in the world" become an important event for Donald? Do you think his life will be different because of the tiny guitar? Give reasons for your answer.

Develop Your Ideas

5. Use your own life experiences and your reading experiences to create an interesting story character who is a student in a school like yours. Describe the character you create in your notebook using the following chart.

Category	Description
Name, age, and gender.	
Interests.	
Talents and abilities.	
Problems or weaknesses.	
Key personality traits.	
Important relationships.	

Choose a real or fictional incident that could have happened at your school, and use the character you have created to tell the story. Before you write, create a timeline, chart, or sketch-map to outline the event. As you write, focus on developing your character's *voice* (way of speaking and point of view) so that it is convincing.

Think About Character

6. Look back over your work with the characters in this story. How well were you able to:
 - Identify Donald's key personality traits?
 - Find details and examples that helped you understand the characters?
 - Make inferences, or read between the lines, about the characters' feelings and motivation?
 - Draw conclusions about how the events in the story will affect Donald in the future?

Tips On Reading First Person Narratives

Effective readers use some key strategies to make their reading more enjoyable and more meaningful. Most of these strategies are useful for all fiction, but some are more important when there is a narrator telling the story.

First Reading

- *Set the scene.* Look at the title and the illustrations. Read the opening paragraphs slowly and carefully. Try to visualize the scene and the characters. Pay particular attention to the narrator. Who is this person? What is his or her relationship to the story events and characters? Speculate about what's going to happen.
- *Focus on the characters and their motivation.* Who are these people? What do they want? What ideas and feelings lie behind their words and actions? How would you feel in their place? What would you do? Where does the ending leave the main characters? What has changed for them?
- *Pause and think.* As you read, pause from time to time to think back over what has happened. Try making a mental summary. Predict what will happen next.
- *Use your word skills.* When you encounter a word you don't know, you can usually make a good judgment about the meaning of the word by using context clues — thinking about the meaning of the rest of the sentence and reviewing what you already know. Ask yourself "What would make sense in this context?"

Responding to What You Read

- *Start with your own reactions.* What stands out in your mind? Sketch or jot down the part of the story that seems most vivid to you. What did you think of the story? Did you like it? How did it make you feel? What did it make you think about? Which character is most or least appealing to you? Did you identify with one character more than the others? What attracted or repelled you?
- *Build connections.* How does the story connect with other things you have read or experienced? Was there a part where you thought, "That's just like what happened to me! That's how I felt when...?" How are the characters, ideas, and events connected to things you know and care about?
- *Ask questions.* Is there anything you don't understand? Are there parts that seem confusing, that you want to think over or ask someone about?
- *Talk it over.* Talking and writing will help you to clarify and develop your ideas about the story. Listen to others and compare your views to what they have to say. Don't be afraid to disagree! Listening and discussing with others who have different views can help you to expand your own thinking.

Rereading for a Purpose

- *Summarize.* Choose an effective way to summarize the story. You might draw a story map, create a series of sketches, list the main events, make a chart, or use some other technique. Summarizing the story helps to make it clear in your mind. You'll be able to remember the stories you summarize.
- *Look for details.* When you are asked a question or given an assignment, don't try to answer without thinking it over first. Look for specific evidence or examples that the author has included in the story. For example, if you are asked to describe a character, don't just say he was "self-centred." Find the words and phrases that the author used to show that he was self-centred.

- *Make inferences.* Try to get between the lines of the story. What is really happening in the story? Why are these people behaving this way? What are they thinking? How might the story appear from someone else's point of view? When you make inferences about characters, remember to think about what the characters reveal through their *words, actions, and descriptions.*
- *Search out the author's ideas.* Authors give you a lot of clues about the ideas and themes they are trying to convey through their stories. Does the narrator seem to be putting forward the author's point of view? Which character does the author seem to be pulling for? Are there ideas, words, or phrases that are emphasized or repeated? What pictures stand out in your mind? What is the defining moment or key realization in the story? What feeling are you left with at the end of the story?