



The Art of Holding On and Letting Go
-Book Talk-

Rose Zhu
ENGL 112B
October 4, 2021
Fall 2021

Kristin Bartley Lenz



Website: <https://www.kristinbartleylenz.com/>

Kristin Bartley Lenz is an active social worker, writer and editor. She is also a rock climber. *The Art of Holding On and Letting Go* is her debut novel and is set in places that Lenz has lived and rock climbed before- such as California and Detroit. Her love of nature reflects through the many naturalists she quotes and vivid nature scenes throughout this novel.

Summary

Cara Jenkins is a fifteen-year old competitive rock climber who gets swept off her feet when her beloved uncle suddenly dies in an accident, and her parents throw her to her grandparents to live with. There are no plans of what will happen in the future; of when life will return back to normal. Forced to process her loss by herself, Cara flies like an aimless bird in her new, foreign life in the concrete jungle of Detroit.

Her journey through navigating her new surroundings is mostly internal, yet it is so emotionally gripping. Through strange notes left in her locker, words from naturalists of the past, unexpected friendships and an exploration of her family's torn past, Cara goes through the ups-and-downs of discovering what home actually means and how to find balance amidst loss.

Significant Quote 1

“[My hair] had grown longer than I’d ever let it. I couldn’t stand the thought of cutting it. I couldn’t lose anything else. My life was out of my control. At least I had control over my hair” (170).

Significant Quote 1: Analysis

Have you ever received something good after experiencing a whole lot of pain, only then to get that little shred of good taken from you again? Cara was just beginning to find a shred of solace in the local climbing gym and in her mom's old Agatha Christie novels after her life turned upside down. She's already lost her uncle, her parents' care, her voice in decisions involving her, her entire pace of life, California- and now, again, she's being ripped from the few things she found comfort in by her grandparents. At this point, Cara feels she has lost everything except her hair. Each time Cara loses something, she tries to latch on to something familiar that she can find comfort and stability in, so she despaired after her grandparents forced her to 'let go' of reading Agatha Christie novels and climbing- the two things she loved and had latched onto after losing her foothold on literally everything else in her life. Cara has fallen off the 'climbing wall' again and is at square one (again).

Significant Quote 2

“““Echo!” My voice reverberated off the stone walls... When everything falls into place, it’s like a dance, a delicate but powerful balancing act. The art of holding on letting go at the same time”
(232).

Significant Quote 2: Analysis

Whether or not Cara consciously realizes it, she has figured out how to carry on forward with her life without losing what matters most to her. She has realized that just like climbing, when she must let go of one thing she has, she must latch on to something else to not fall- not onto the ground- but into despair. This is the moment in her heart where Cara gets to reflect on what's been happening in the past few months, and life finally clicks for her. She understands what she must do to feel alive again after her trauma has made her feel directionless for so long. And it's beautiful because this is the first time she's been able to be at peace with herself and actually feel alive in all her senses when climbing.

Significant Quote 3

“The forest was dead. Tears fell until I closed my eyes, shutting out the loss. I tried to recall the memory of our healthy forest... It had been hurt, but it was growing, healing. And I realized it would take a long, long time” (276).

Significant Quote 3: Analysis

One of the things that upset Cara greatly was a fear that her cabin she grew up in would get burned down by wildfires. And sadly, her cabin was partially burned, and the surrounding woods were completely burned down. This is extremely distressing to her because she loved these woods so much it almost became like an extension of her own being. However, what's beautiful is that she is accepting that the forest was destroyed but has, throughout the course of the novel, become brave enough to peer out and see that the forest is re-growing itself, just like she is from her trauma. Another beautiful, key, metaphorical detail is that during this discovery, Cara's grandma finds morels in the ground- an expensive mushroom that only grows after forest fires. So, yes, Cara has gone through a lot of exhausting trauma, but through the struggle, Cara not only is regrowing herself but has also found in herself qualities that would not have appeared if she had not gone through this hardship. Granted, there are still many unknowns in her life, and this scene doesn't bring any sort of full-circle to many of the events around her. But that's the beauty of it- because it shows that a person can grow to find balance even when life isn't completely figured out yet, and Cara is slowly realizing that about herself.

Using This Novel in the Classroom

Appropriate Grade Levels: 8th -10th Grade

Teaching Ideas

- Reflective Writing Prompts: What big changes have you gone through in life?
- Learning figurative language: analyse the rock-climbing metaphor used throughout the book
- Responsive Writing Prompts: What are some things you would tell someone who had to move? What advice would you give them to not feel so lonely?

Categories This Book Falls Under

Chapter 4: Books about Real-Life Experiences

- This novel is realistic fiction, and there are many aspects to Cara's life that many teenagers can relate to, such as first loves, learning to drive, dealing with the death of a loved one, etc.

Chapter 5: Books about Facing Loss and Death

- Much of Cara's journey is internal, and it involves processing and learning to live with her beloved Uncle Max's death.

Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival

- Internally not dying is a big theme of this novel. Finding things to love and be at peace with oneself is something Cara learns to do throughout the course of the novel.

Text Complexity

Dale-Chall Formula

Raw score: 2.6428

Adjusted Score: $(3.6365 + 2.6428)$

Final Score: 6.3

Readability Index: 7th - 8th grade

Lexile Complexity Score

640L

I agree with the Dale-Chall Formula score, but think that the Lexile Score is a bit too low. Even though this novel is evidently not a hard read, I think the themes and nuances of meaning involved would make this book more appealing to late middle schoolers and high schoolers.