

- PROMOTE LANGUAGE ARTS SKILLS •
- RAISE DISABILITY AWARENESS •
- STIMULATE DIALOGUE •

Excerpt from
The History of My Shoes and the Evolution of Darwin's Theory
by Kenny Fries

Discussion Questions

1. This is an excerpt from a book called *The History of My Shoes and the Evolution of Darwin's Theory*. Who is Charles Darwin? What do you know about Charles Darwin's theory of evolution? How might the theory of evolution relate to disability?
2. What does the phrase "survival of the fittest" mean? How might this apply in today's fitness-crazed world and how is this different from what Darwin meant by "survival of the fittest?"
3. The author mentions explorer John Wesley Powell, who explored the Grand Canyon, as having one arm. Are there other historical figures you know about who had a physical disability? Did their disabilities affect their lives or how they were perceived by others?
4. Kenny Fries describes many things that we take for granted as adaptations to help us do the things we want to do. What around you is an adaptation?
5. The author talks about Joan Tollifson who writes about what people say to her because she has one arm. How does Joan Tollifson feel when people complement her ability to tie her own shoes? Do you think we have different expectations for people with disabilities than for those who are nondisabled?
6. What is the myth of the "supercrip"? If it is a myth and not a reality, why would someone like Kenny Fries, who has first hand experience of what he is able to do as someone who lives with a disability, say that he too is influenced by this myth?
7. In this section of his book, the author does not describe his physical difference in great detail, yet we learn about it through his actions, feelings, and fears. Did it occur to you before you read this story that your shoes, or your feet, could have such an effect on your life? What else in your life might you have taken for granted before reading this story?

8. Kenny Fries talks about “reciprocal altruism” as relating to Charles Darwin’s belief that if you aid others you will receive aid in return. How often do you ask for help in your daily life? How do you feel when you ask for help? Are there things you would be more likely or less likely to ask for help with? What is the difference between them? Why are people more comfortable using a tool for help rather than asking for help from another person?
9. During his Grand Canyon trip, Kenny Fries shows how the entire group of rafters is interdependent upon each other. How does interdependence affect the group of rafters? How does interdependence affect your own life and the life of your family and friends?
10. Kenny Fries wonders if families with disabled members share an “altruistic gene.” Why do you think people with family members or friends who are disabled might make better guides? What are some expectations and judgments that might be different because they know disabled people in their lives?
11. Kenny Fries mentions that he is one of the “most able” on his rafting trip through the Grand Canyon. Another rafter, Sally, asks for less help than he does but is “constantly tired.” Does this observation change your ideas about asking for and offering help?
12. In this piece, the author goes on an outdoor adventure that many, disabled and nondisabled people, would be afraid of. Do you think such fear is justified? What is the fear based on? Does he overcome his fear? If so, how?
13. Language can have a big impact on the way we think. For this reason, many people in the disability community prefer "people-first" language—such as "person who is blind" rather than "blind person"—because it puts the emphasis on the person before the disability.

The author, however, does not use "people-first" language, choosing instead terms like "disabled people" (rather than "people with disabilities") throughout his writing. Can you think why the author might have chosen language that is NOT "people-first"?

Writing Activities

- Think about a situation when you were impressed that someone could do something that you could also do. Write about this situation and why you were impressed, as well as the assumptions your feelings were based on. Then, think about a situation when you were impressed that someone could do something that you could not do. Write about this situation and why you were impressed, as well as the assumptions your feelings were based on. How are your assumptions about that person and yourself different in both situations?
- Write about how Charles Darwin's theory of evolution changed the way we look at the world. Are there other "discoveries" that you know about that changed our perception of the world?
- Write about something you use every day and how you think your life would change if you didn't have it.
- Have you ever been able to do something you were told you wouldn't be able to do? Write about this. Who told you wouldn't succeed and how did you accomplish it?

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