

Mulan did it. Arya Stark did it. Joan of Arc did it. Girls and women throughout history and fiction have dressed in traditional boys' clothes for a variety of reasons, such as comfort and safety. In this month's book, *Riding Freedom*, Charlotte dresses like a boy to save her own life. She escapes from the orphanage and goes into hiding as a boy. But she continues the charade long into her adulthood because dressing like a boy affords her opportunities to do the things she loves to do. Charlotte risks being discovered in order to enjoy the freedoms and privileges that boys automatically received in the 19th century.

What about in our contemporary American culture? Sure, maybe there's no need to dress up as a boy in order to get a job, but do girls and women wear more subtle disguises? As I read this month's title, I became very curious about the ways in which women - even now - might feel the need to conceal their femininity. For example, might women and girls feel the need to downplay their female-ness while out at night or traveling alone, for fear of unwanted attention or even assault? Or, might women decide to behave in a more "masculine" way in order to be taken seriously in the workplace?

I hope you enjoy this month's book and that your club's conversation takes you in many interesting directions. I'd love to hear your thoughts on the Girls Leadership Book Club Facebook page! bit.ly/GLbookFB

Munch 'n' Chat, 20-30 minutes

As grown-ups and girls arrive, allow some time for snacking and catching up.

Ice-Breaker, 10-15 minutes

This month's book is about a girl who dons a boy's clothing (and identity) in order to create the life she wants. But, even if Charlotte hadn't had to disguise herself as a boy, chances are she would have spent a lot of time in boy's clothing because they were more comfortable for the types of things she liked to do - namely, riding horses.

Imagine yourself wearing something that is undoubtedly *you* and that makes you feel comfortable and good about yourself. What are you wearing? What kind of clothing feels best to you? (Maybe there are different answers for this, or maybe the answer is that clothing doesn't affect how you feel at all.)

Pair up and discuss, or share as a whole group. Alternatively, everyone could get a blank piece of paper and take five minutes to sketch their ideal clothing.

Book Discussion, 30 minutes or so

You might decide to start the discussion with every member saying her favorite part of the book before reading discussion questions. Some groups might have time to get to all of these questions, but many groups will pick one or two questions and spend the whole meeting discussing those. Feel free to come up with your own discussion questions, or bring up any ideas that came up while you were reading.

- How would you describe Charlotte? How do you think she sees herself? How do others in the book see her?
- Why is it so easy for Charlotte to fool people into thinking she's a boy?
- What do you think it would be like to wear a disguise for so many years? What do you think it was like for Charlotte?

- When Charlotte meets the suffragette (page 90), she tips her hat and says, “You are much braver than me.” What does she mean by this?
- Charlotte has to prove herself over and over. For example, when she first drives a stagecoach it goes very badly but she eventually shows that she’s capable. What personality traits help her keep going, even when faced with an enormous challenge?
- Was Charlotte right to cast her vote at the end, even though no one knew she was a woman when she did it? Why or why not?

Leadership Goals, 15 minutes

In this month’s book, Charlotte disguises herself as a boy, and later a man, so that she can live the life of adventure and opportunity that she has always wanted. Hopefully you will not have to go “under cover” in order to achieve your dreams (unless your dream is to be a spy!). But, we tend to make more progress when we have clearly defined goals. What is the life that you envision for yourself? Can you talk about it in as much detail as possible? Try focusing on what’s really exciting and amazing about your plans and goals. Next time you’re feeling frustrated, go back to that plan and see if you can focus on making some part of it happen.

If your group is feeling crafty, you might do this as a drawing exercise or even a collage activity with pictures cut from old catalogues and magazines.

Girls and grown-ups might decide to share around the circle so everyone has a turn, or give time so anyone who wants to share can do so. If you’ve made art, you can place it around the room, gallery-style, and let everyone walk around the room checking out the different pieces.

Closing, 5 minutes

Make sure you've chosen a date for your April meeting (the last one of the year!) before parting ways.

Further Reading

If you really loved this book, and you'd like to read more books like it, here are some suggestions. If there are other books you would like to recommend, we'd love to hear them! Please share them on our **Girls Leadership Book Club Facebook Group** bit.ly/GLbookFB so our community can keep growing our list of great titles.

(Note: Depending on your young reader, some of these books might be too sophisticated for her or be better suited for reading aloud.)

Ronia, the Robber's Daughter by Astrid Lindgren - This is an enchanting and hilarious story by the author of the classic *Pippi Longstocking*. Ronia is raised by her father, mother, and the whole band of robbers. She's adored but never coddled, cared for but never rescued. And because the adults in her life think she can do anything, she grows up knowing that it's true.

Rickshaw Girl by Mitali Perkins - Ten-year-old Naima accidentally breaks her father's rickshaw, the family's sole source of income. All she wanted to do was help her parents, but now she must think of a plan to make things right.

Upside-Down Magic by Sarah Mlynowski, Lauren Myracle, and Emily Jenkins - Nory can't do anything right. Despite her super successful father, she fails her magic test and has to go live with her aunt and attend a special school. All the other kids in her class have weird, troublesome magic, too. The other students tease them, and even Nory and her friends think they're bound for more failure. But, these misfit magicians soon see that they can accomplish a lot by believing in themselves and working together.