

Comprehension

Genre

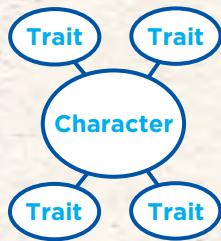
Realistic Fiction is a made-up story that could have happened in real life.



Make Inferences and Analyze

Character

As you read, fill in your Character Web.

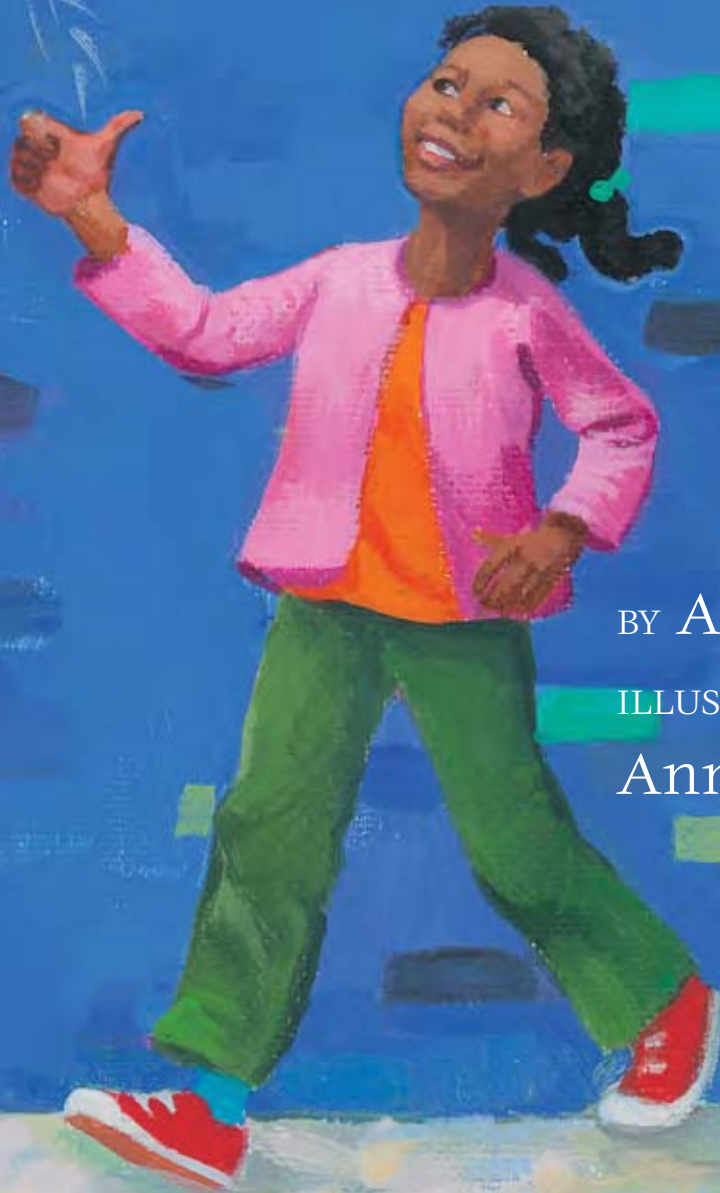


Read to Find Out

How does a trip to the supermarket change Gloria?



The Astronaut and the Onion



BY Ann Cameron

ILLUSTRATED BY
Anna Rich

MY MOTHER was making spaghetti sauce. She said, "Gloria, honey, would you go buy me an onion?"

"Sure," I said. She gave me some money, and I went.

The store was crowded with old people holding tightly to their shopping carts, little kids hollering to their parents for candy, and lots of people staring at shopping lists and blocking the aisles.

I ducked around all the carts and went to the back where the vegetables are. From all the onions in the bin, I took the prettiest—a big round one, light tan and shiny, with a silvery glow to its skin.

I carried it to the express checkout and stood at the end of a very long line.

Next to me there was a giant Berkbee's Baby Food display. It was like a wall of glass, and taller than I am. All the little jars were stacked up to look like a castle, with pennants that said "Baby Power" sticking out above the castle doorways and windows. At the top there was a high tower with a red-and-white flag that said "Berkbee's Builds Better Babies!" I started counting the jars, but when I got to 346, I gave up. There must have been at least a thousand.

The checkout line didn't move. To pass the time, I started tossing my onion from hand to hand. I tried to improve and make my throws harder to catch.

A woman wearing a sky-blue jogging suit got in line behind me. She was holding a cereal box. She smiled at me, and I smiled back.

I decided to show her what a really good catcher I am. I made a wild and daring onion throw.



Character

What was wild and daring about Gloria's actions?





I missed the catch. The onion kept going, straight for the middle of the baby food castle. The castle was going to fall!

My folks would have to pay for every broken jar! The store manager would kill me. After that, my folks would bring me back to life to tell me things that would be much worse than death.

I was **paralyzed**. I shut my eyes.

I didn't hear a crash. Maybe I had gone deaf from fright. Or maybe I was in a time warp because of my fear. In fifty years the onion would land, and that would be the end of me.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. If I opened my eyes, I would see the store manager and all the broken jars.

I didn't want to see him. I didn't want to know how bad it was.

There came a tap again, right on the top of my head.

I heard a woman's voice. "I have your onion."

I opened my eyes. The woman in the jogging suit handed the onion to me.

"Lucky I used to play baseball," she said.

"O-o-o-h," I said. I clutched the onion.

"O-o-o-h," I moaned again.

"You're welcome," was all she said.

She had brown eyes with a sparkle in them, and her hair was in shiny black ringlets. She wore blue-green earrings that hung on tiny gold chains. When she tilted her head, her earrings spun around, and I saw they were the Earth—I mean, made to look like the Earth, jeweled with green continents and blue oceans.

“Your earrings are beautiful,” I said.

She smiled. “Some friends got them for me,” she said, “to remind me of a trip we made.”

When she said “trip,” her face started to look familiar, but I didn’t know why. Then I remembered.

“I’ve seen you!” I said. “I saw you on TV!”

She smiled. “Could be.”

“And you come from right here in town, but you don’t live here anymore,” I said.

“That’s right,” she said.

“And you are—aren’t you?—Dr. Grace Street, the **astronaut!**”

She tilted her head, and the little Earths on both her ears spun round. “That’s me,” she said.

I was amazed, because I never thought I would meet a famous person in my life, and yet one was right beside me in the supermarket, and I myself, Gloria Jones, was talking to her, all because of my onion throw.

“We learned about the space station in school last year,” I said. “You were up there, orbiting the Earth.”

“My team and I were there,” Dr. Street said.

“What is space like?”

“You know,” she said.

“How could I know?” I said.

“We’re always in space,” Dr. Street said. “We’re in space right now.”

“Yes,” I said, “but what was it like out there, where you went? Out there it must seem different.”

“Do you really want to know?” she asked, and I said yes.



“The most awesome part was when we had to fix things on the outside of the station. We got our jobs done and floated in our space suits, staring out into the **universe**. There were zillions of stars—and space, deep and black, but it didn’t seem exactly empty. It seemed to be calling to us, calling us to go on an **endless** journey. And that was very scary.

“So we turned and looked at Earth. We were two hundred miles above it. We saw enormous swirls of clouds and the glow of snowfields at the poles. We saw water like a giant blue cradle for the land. One big ocean, not ‘oceans.’ The Earth isn’t really chopped up into countries, either. Up there you see it is one great big powerful living being that knows a lot, lot more than we do.”

“What does it know?” I said.

“It knows how to be Earth,” Dr. Street said. “And that’s a lot.”

I tried to imagine everything she had seen. It gave me a shiver.

“I wish I could see what you saw,” I said. “I’d like to be an astronaut. Of course, probably I couldn’t.”

Dr. Street frowned. “Why do you say ‘Probably I couldn’t?’ ”

“Practically nobody gets to do that,” I said.

“You might be one of the people who do,” she said. “But you’ll never do anything you want to do if you keep saying ‘Probably I couldn’t.’”

“But maybe I can’t!” I **protested**. I looked down at my onion. I didn’t think a very poor onion thrower had a chance to be an astronaut.





Dr. Street looked at my onion, too. “It was a good throw—just a bad catch,” she said. “Anyhow—saying ‘Maybe I can’t’ is different. It’s okay. It’s **realistic**.”

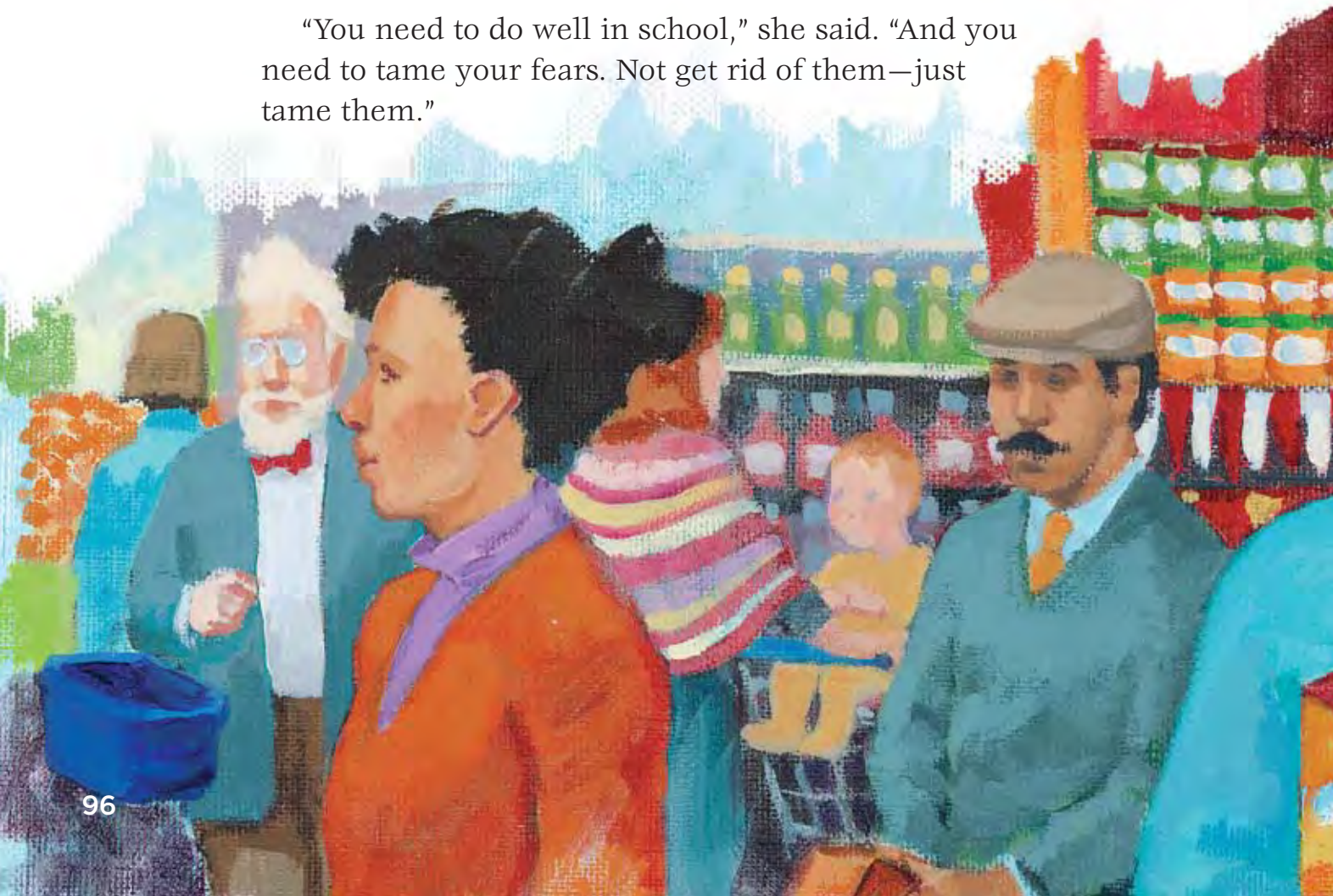
“Even ‘I can’t’ can be a good, **sensible** thing to say. It makes life simpler. When you really know you can’t do one thing, that leaves you time to try some of the rest. But when you don’t even know what you can do, telling yourself ‘Probably I couldn’t’ will stop you before you even start. It’s paralyzing. You don’t want to be paralyzed, do you?”

“I just was paralyzed,” I said. “A minute ago, when I threw my onion. I didn’t enjoy it one bit.”

“If you don’t want to be paralyzed,” Dr. Street said, “be careful what you tell yourself—because whatever you tell yourself you’re very likely to believe.”

I thought about what she said. “If maybe I could be an astronaut,” I asked, “how would I get to be one?”

“You need to do well in school,” she said. “And you need to tame your fears. Not get rid of them—just tame them.”



The line moved forward suddenly, and we moved up. Maybe the people in line behind us thought Dr. Street and I were mother and daughter having a serious conversation, because they left some space around us.

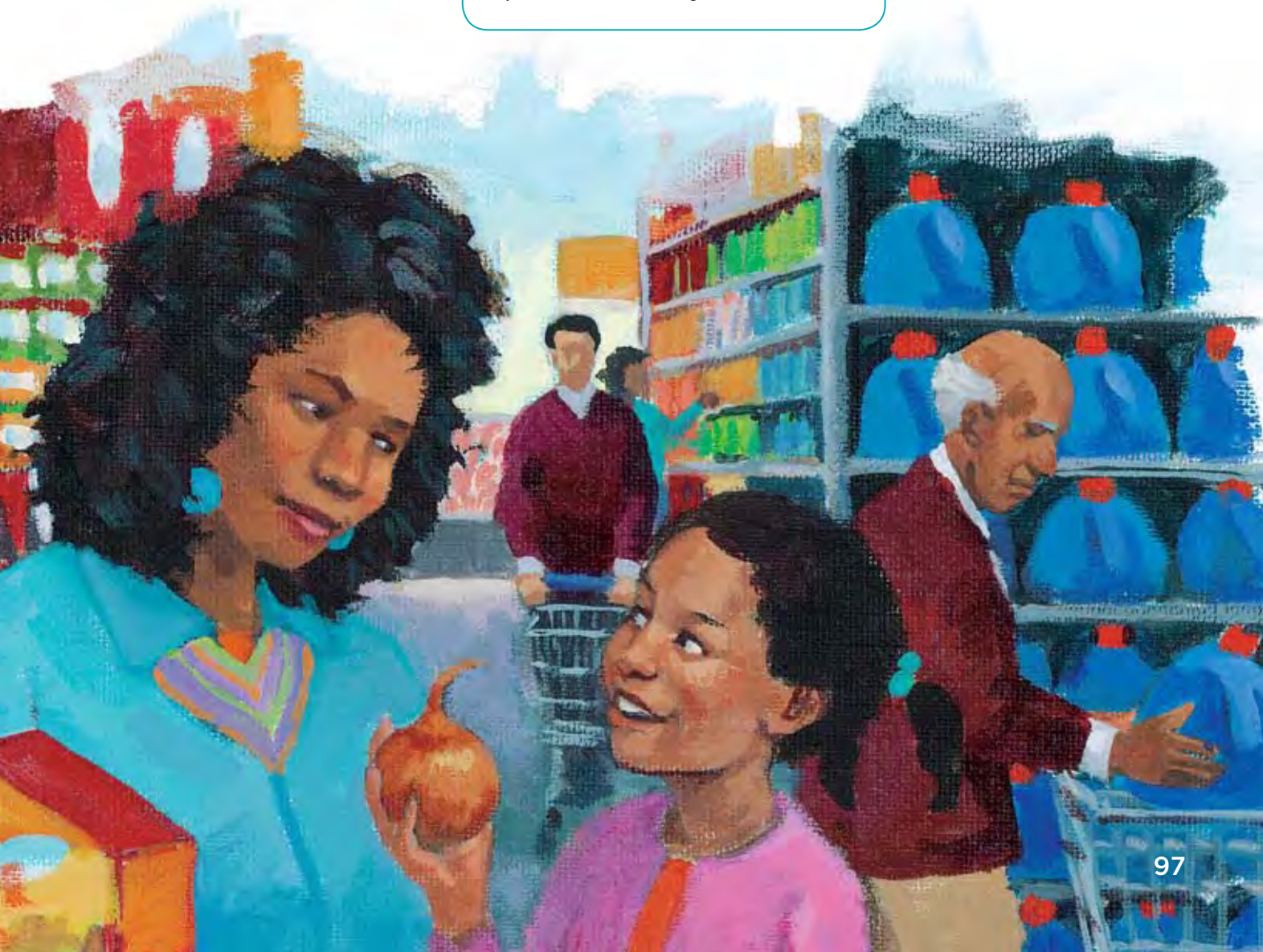
“So how does a person tame fears?”

“By doing things that are difficult, and succeeding,” Dr. Street said. “That’s how you learn you can count on yourself. That’s how you get confidence. But even then, you keep a little bit of fear inside—a fear that keeps you careful.”



Character

How do you think Dr. Street felt when she was out in space? How do you know?



The checkout line moved again, and we moved with it.

“Big things are really little,” Dr. Street said. “That’s a great secret of life.”

“How—” I began. But I never got to ask how big things are really little, because I was the first person in line.

The checkout man looked at my onion.

“Young lady, didn’t you weigh that?” he asked.

“No, sir,” I said.

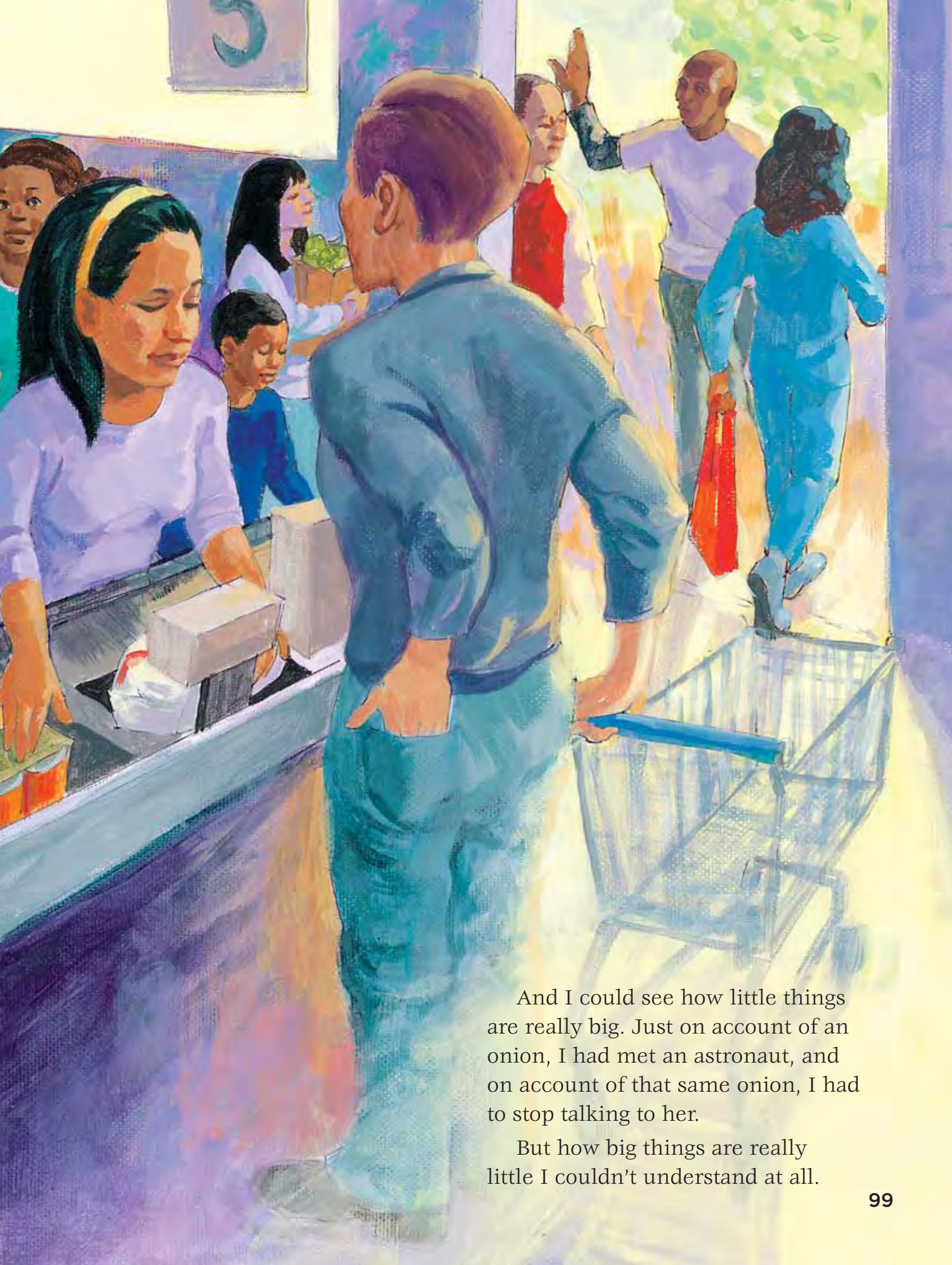
“Go back to Produce and have it weighed.”

So I had to go.

“Goodbye,” Dr. Street said.

“Goodbye,” I said. On the way to Produce, I looked back at her. She was walking toward the exit with her cereal box. I waved, but she didn’t notice.





And I could see how little things are really big. Just on account of an onion, I had met an astronaut, and on account of that same onion, I had to stop talking to her.

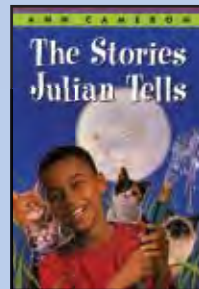
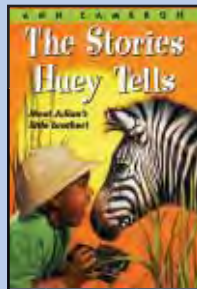
But how big things are really little I couldn't understand at all.

Blast Off with Ann and Anna



Ann Cameron is a well-known writer. When she was a young girl, like Gloria, she was always outside exploring and wondering about the world around her. Ann did not have a TV until she was nine years old. She spent time listening to stories on the radio and reading books. Today Ann still loves nature and books. She lives in Guatemala, near a waterfall and volcanoes.

Other books by
Ann Cameron



Anna Rich has always loved to draw. From an early age, her mother saw her talent and encouraged Anna to follow her dream. Her passion for illustration eventually became a full-time job.

Good thing, too, because Anna has never considered doing anything else as a career. Anna, a native New Yorker, still lives there with her family.



Find out more about
Ann Cameron and Anna Rich at
www.macmillanmh.com

Author's Purpose

Think about Ann Cameron's purpose for writing this story. Did she mainly write to inform, persuade, entertain, or explain something to the reader? How do you know?



Comprehension Check



Summarize

Summarize the plot of *The Astronaut and the Onion*. In your summary include details about Gloria's character.

Think and Compare



1. How might Gloria's character traits help her become an astronaut? Use the Character Web and story details to support your answer. **Make Inferences and Analyze: Character**
2. Reread page 97. Dr. Grace Street tells Gloria that she still keeps some fear inside of her. What character traits might have helped her overcome that fear? **Analyze**
3. Suppose you meet someone who has a career that interests you. What kind of questions would you ask that person? **Apply**
4. Why does Dr. Street tell Gloria not to be **paralyzed** by her fears? Explain your answer. **Evaluate**
5. Read "Astronauts in Training" on pages 84-85. Compare Ana's character to Dr. Street's character. In what ways are they alike? How are they different? **Reading/Writing Across Texts**

