

# Novel Resource for The Society of Super Secret Heroes

by Phyllis Shalant

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## About the Author

Phyllis Shalant grew up in Brooklyn, New York. She loved to tell stories before she could read or write. Before long she was writing as many stories as she could. As an adult she tried several careers—high school English teacher, advertising, and reporting. Finally she decided to go back to what she loved—writing and using her imagination. When she's not writing, Phyllis makes author visits and teaches a class on writing children's literature at Manhattanville College. Phyllis is married and lives in White Plains, New York. She has two grown daughters.

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## Awards

- Texas Bluebonnet Award Master List, 1997, for Beware of Kissing Lizard Lips
- Florida Sunshine State Young Readers Award Master List, 1997, for The Great Eye
- "Best Book" citation from New York Public Library, 2000, and Washington Irving Children's Choice Honor Book, 2002, both for Bartleby of the Mighty Mississippi
- "Best Children's Book" citation, Bank Street College of Education, 2002, for When Pirates Came to Brooklyn. The Rock Star, The Rooster, & Me, The Reporter, Dutton Children's Books (New York, NY), 1990.

## Fiction

- *The Transformation of Faith Futterman*, Dutton Children's Books (New York, NY), 1990.
- *Shalom, Geneva Peace*, Dutton Children's Books (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Beware of Kissing Lizard Lips*, Dutton Children's Books (New York, NY), 1995.
- *The Great Eye*, Dutton Children's Books (New York, NY), 1996.
- *Bartleby of the Mighty Mississippi*, Dutton Children's Books (New York, NY), 2000.
- *When Pirates Came to Brooklyn*, Dutton Children's Books (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Bartleby of the Big, Bad Bayou*, Dutton Children's Books (New York, NY), 2005.

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## Nonfiction

- Look What We've Brought You from Vietnam: Crafts, Games, Recipes, Stories and Other Cultural Activities from Vietnamese Americans, Silver Burdett Press, 1988.
- Look What We've Brought You from Korea: Crafts, Games, Recipes, Stories and Other Cultural Activities from Korean-Americans, Silver Burdett Press, 1994.
- Look What We've Brought You from India: Crafts, Games, Recipes, Stories and Other Cultural Activities from Indian Americans, Silver Burdett Press, 1997.
- Look What We've Brought You from the Caribbean: Crafts, Games, Recipes, Stories, and Other Cultural Activities, Silver Burdett Press, 1998.
- Look What We've Brought You from Mexico: Crafts, Games, Recipes, Stories and Other Cultural Activities from Mexican Americans, Silver Burdett Press, 1998.

## **Annotation**

Phyllis Shalant, an author and teacher, has written several award winning books for children. Her newest, The Society of Super Secret Heroes, is another great book for children. This appears to be the first in what will become a series. This one is entitled the “The Great Cape Rescue”.

This is the story of Finch and his three best friends. They have always loved playing superheroes. However, now that they are entering the fourth grade they have been told they are too old for it.

One of Finch’s favorite items from when he was in kindergarten, a green cape with lightning bolts, has suddenly acquired magical powers. With the cape’s help, Finch and his friends from the Society of Super Secret Heroes decide to use their powers for good.

While dealing with school, divorced parents, a sister and bully issues keep the boys busy, they do help others. Finch finds that he has always had some “superpowers” he just needed to release them.

This is an excellent book for fourth graders. Boys and girls will both enjoy and relate to the issues that Finch faces. As happens in many children’s fantasies, Finch makes some choices that would go against many basic rules for this age group. Examples are sneaking onto the internet when parents are sleeping, riding you

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bike outside your allowed area and using your teacher's email without permission. Finch is able to justify what he does and everything works out for him. These topics can make for some great class discussion.

Phyllis Shalant has written an entertaining book that shows she understands the difficulties of 10 year olds.

## **Genre**

Fantasy

## **Point of View**

Third Person

## **Theme**

There are several general themes in this story. One is perseverance and believing in oneself. The importance of friendship and family are present also. What a superhero really is the last major theme in this book.

The title of the book, The Society of Super Secret Heroes, introduces us to a new series. The boys choose the name of their group because they are embarrassed that they are still interested in superheroes. This first one "The Great Cape Rescue" has a title that tells exactly what's going to happen. The boys will need to save the cape from the classroom bullies.

## **Conflict**

The book has both internal and external conflict. Finch's internal conflict comes from how he is dealing with his parents being divorced and his dad's new family. Finch is unsure of how he fits into this new group.

Externally, Finch is dealing with a new year of school, classroom bullies and growing up.

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## **Conflict Resolution**

The resolution comes when Finch learns to make decisions with his head instead of only reacting in an emotional manner. As Mr. Burns, his teacher, tells him, “Anyone can fight....The thinking person figures out a better way to solve a problem.”

## **Characters**

**Finch Mundy** is a 4th grade boy who loves superheroes, owns The Thinking Cape and creator of the Society of Super Secret Heroes (SSSH)

**Rajiv Shah** is one of Finch’s best friends, a magician and a member of SSSH.

**Kevin Chan** is one of Finch’s best friends, artistic and a member of SSSH.

**Elliot Levenson** is one of Finch’s best friends, loves to joke and a member of SSSH.

**Mimi Mundy** is Finch’s 7<sup>th</sup> grade sister.

**Elaine Mundy** is Finch’s mom.

**Pete Mundy** is Finch’s dad. He is remarried and has a new baby son.

**Slope Burns** is Finch’s teacher. He loves yoga and is new at their school.

**Norman “Bud” Rosebud** is Finch’s classmate and bully.

**Irwin “Thorn” Thornton** is Finch’s classmate and bully.

## **Setting**

This story takes place in modern times at the beginning of the school year. The story takes place mainly at school and Finch’s house.

## **Interest Level and Reading Level**

The interest level is grades 2-6. The reading level is 3.9.

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## **Booktalk**

Has anyone ever told you that you were too old for something? That you can't play a certain game, or wear certain clothes, or play with baby toys? In the Society of Super Secret Heroes by Phyllis Shalant, that's what happens to Finch and his friends.

They have always loved to play superheroes. It's actually how they became friends. Finch always wore this green cape with lightning stripes on it to Kindergarten. Well, now that they are going into the fourth grade, people say they're too old for superheroes. And Finch is certainly too old for his green cape.

Until the day they discover it has magical powers! The four friends form a new group of superheroes and set out to help people in need. However, Finch's sister and the classroom bullies are doing everything they can to stop these superheroes.

Their biggest mission will be to save The Thinking Cape from the classroom bullies. Can they do it before the cape is destroyed and the magic is gone? Join Finch and his friends as they try to outwit the powers of evil.

## **Discussion Questions**

### **Chapter 1**

Prereading: Do you still own any special items from when you were younger? Why have you kept them? Is it something you would still use or play with?

During: Do you have a sibling like Mimi? What types of things do you do to drive each other nuts?

Postreading: What types of activities do you like to do with your friends? The boys are not happy that their summer break is ending. Why is this?

## **Chapter 2**

Prereading: What does it mean to be a superhero?

During: Finch and the boys discuss being superheroes versus being themselves. Would you want to be something different than you are?

Postreading: Finch is worried about something at the end of this chapter and it's not just going back to school. What's going on?

## **Chapter 3**

Prereading: How do you feel on the first day of school? Do you think this is a good day or bad day?

During: What kind of teacher do you think Mr. Burns is going to be? Why?

Postreading: Have you ever tried to include someone like Thorn in your group of friends? How did it work out? Was this a good suggestion by the teacher?

## **Chapter 4**

Prereading: Peter Parker says, "With great power comes great responsibility." What do you think of this statement?

Postreading: Thorn describes his birthday as his best day that summer—three Star Wars movies watched from midnight to 6am, six grape popsicles that cause purple teeth for two weeks. Does this sound like a birthday you would enjoy? What would you add or change?

## **Chapter 5**

Prereading: Has one of your friends ever convinced you to do something you didn't want to do? What happened? Were you right to not want to do it? Or did they help you overcome a fear?

During: Elliot convinces his friends it's ok to play Superheroes. How did that turn out? How do you think Elliot feels? What would you do or say if you were Elliot?

Postreading: The boys don't tell Mr. Burns the truth about what happened? Is this Ok? Would you have told?

## **Chapter 6**

Prereading: Finch believes that Mimi put his cape in his backpack. Is he right?

During: Mimi is being extra nice to Finch. Why do you think so? Finch is being extra mean to Mimi. Is he justified in behaving this way?

Postreading: Why can't Finch accept the fact that the cape is speaking to him?

## **Chapter 7**

Prereading: Mimi's best friend, Kelly, tells her secret and embarrasses her. Has this happened to you before? How did you handle it?

Postreading: Finch wants to tell his family about Sodaman and Spraybuddy so they can help him decide how to handle it if it happens again. He doesn't get the chance. What advice would you give him?

## **Chapter 8**

Prereading: What's a bully?

During: Anthony the crab had a very close call. Whose fault was it? What part of the story makes you believe that?

Postreading: Do you think Mr. Burns is punishing Fin by making him do yoga for recess? Why do you think Thorn didn't have to stay inside?

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## **Chapter 9**

Prereading: What is an oath? Have you ever taken one? What did it mean to you?

During: How does Fin react when he realizes it's the cape he's been hearing? Describe Fin's relationship with his dad. Would you have told your dad about hearing voices?

Postreading: This chapter talks about "kapows!" and "kapops!" These are examples of onomatopoeia. (discuss the definition). Make a list of other examples.

## **Chapter 10**

Prereading: Fin's going to tell his friends about the cape? How do you think they will react?

Postreading: The boys seem to accept the Thinking Cape's powers quickly. Why do you think they can do this?

## **Chapter 11**

Prereading: What's an emblem? What symbol would represent you? Create an emblem that would tell us about you.

During: Why do you think Mimi wants to go to private school? Do you agree with the statement, "Grown-ups aren't good at keeping secrets."? Give examples to support your answer.

Postreading: At the end of the chapter, the cape asks Fin to tell him what a DVD is. Can you think of anything else Fin might need to explain?

## **Chapter 12**

Prereading: Has anyone ever threatened to fight you before? How did you handle it?

During: Fin wonders if it's the same for new teachers as it is for new students. What do you think?

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Postreading: The cape told Fin to bring bandages, crutches, an ice pack and smelling salts to his fight with Thorn. Would you feel confident? Why or Why not?

### **Chapter 13**

Prereading: Fin's going to be headed back to class to wait for the fight with Thorn and Bud. Should he tell Mr. Burns what is going on? Would you? Would this help the situation with Thorn?

During: Would you volunteer to be a hospitality captain? Why do you think Thorn and Bud volunteer?

Postreading: How did the cape's idea work out? Do you think it was a good idea? Is the problem now over?

### **Chapter 14**

Prereading: Have you ever felt lonely or like you don't have any friends? Do you think Mr. Burns is feeling that way?

During: Raj's younger brother, Sonny, wants the cape for himself. What do you think of Elliot's question, "But how come if the thinking cape is so smart, it can't save itself."

Postreading: What do you think of the boys' plan to throw Mr. Burns a surprise party? Do you think it's a job for superheroes?

### **Chapter 15**

Prereading: Mimi decides to hold a yard sale to make money. Have you ever tried to make money before? What were your business ideas? Did you have any success?

Postreading: Finch is keeps a lot of secrets right now. He even sneaks in to use the computer without his mom knowing. Do you think he is being responsible? What rules about computers do you have at your house?

## **Chapter 16**

Prereading: Have you ever heard of Aladdin's lamp? (Discuss the basics of the story) Do you think it's a true story?

During: Do you believe the story the cape told? Was it still a good story? Mimi and Kelly have made up. Do you think Kelly came to the sale to see her? Did either girl need to do anything to end the fight?

Postreading: Why do you think Mimi helped Finch save his cape? He lied to save the cape. Was this ok? Did he have any alternatives? What would you have done?

## **Chapter 17**

Prereading: At the end of the last chapter, Fin caught Bud staring at him while he was talking out loud to the cape. What do you think this means? Any predictions?

Postreading: Do you think it's Fin's fault that the hermit crabs got into a fight? Does Fin feel that it is?

## **Chapter 18**

Prereading: Fin sent himself to the principal's office. What do you think Mr. Kutler will do or say? What would you do if you were principal?

During: Reread the cape's quote on p. 148. Do you agree with Fin's translation? Can you think of any others? Do you think the cape is correct that Thorn and Bud should be invited to Mr. Burn's party? Why?

Postreading: At the end of the chapter, the cape isn't speaking to Fin at all. Why?

## **Chapter 19**

Prereading: What does it mean to be outwitted? Give an example from the book.

Postreading: Fin reads a story to the cape about a fisherman and a jinni. The cape adds to the story. Does Fin believe him? What was bothering him about the story?

## **Chapter 20**

Prereading: What do you think a hospitality captain's job is? Do you think Thorn and Bud will be good at this? Do you have any predictions on what might happen?

During: Describe how Mrs. Mundy outwits Thorn? Why doesn't Fin want his parents together? Should Fin have been nicer to his dad?

Postreading: Fin is using his teacher's computer without permission. He is even looking up his personal email addresses. How do you feel about this? Is this an invasion of privacy? Is Fin justified in doing this? What might happen if he is caught?

## **Chapter 21**

Prereading: At the end of the last chapter, Fin heard voices in the hall. Whose voices do you think they are? What might happen next?

During: Did the cape help Fin this time? Why or Why not?

Postreading: Did Fin do the right thing by confronting Thorn and Bud? Would you have done so?

## **Chapter 22**

Prereading: Have you ever lost anything important to you? What did you do to find it?

During: Fin discovers that his cape is gone. What do you think happened to it? Fin's dad stays to help him look for the cape (notebook). Why can't Fin tell him the truth?

Postreading: Does his dad seem to care? Give examples from the story proving your answer.

## **Chapter 23**

Prereading: Elliot says Thorn and Bud may have taken the cape through the art of distraction. What does this mean? What kind of distraction could there have been?

Postreading: During this chapter Finch goes from being upset with Mimi to being pleased. What happened? Does Mimi seem like the same person we met at the beginning of the book? How has she changed?

## **Chapter 24**

Prereading: The day of Mr. Burns' party is approaching. How is Finch feeling about it right now?

During: Did Elliot's distraction work? Did they find what they were looking for? After reading the note to Bud from Ollie, do you have a different opinion of Bud? How do you think he is treated by his brother?

Postreading: What do you think Thorn's surprise is going to be?

## **Chapter 25**

Prereading: Do you like surprises? Do you think Mr. Burns will?

Postreading: Fin's decided that there might be a magical trade. What was the trade? Do you think he's right?

## **Chapter 26**

Prereading: What do you think Mr. Burns' reaction is going to be to seeing his brother?

During: How did Fin handle the situation with Thorn? Do you think the cape is ruined?

Postreading: Fin said it felt like something inside of him had been snipped? What does this mean? Have you ever felt this way?

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## **Chapter 27**

Prereading: If you were throwing a party for someone, would you want to give all the special jobs to someone else? Why did Fin do this? How did it make Thorn and Bud feel when they thought they had been chosen by the class?

During: How did Thorn handle being tricked? How did Mr. Burns handle the joke gift? Was it a good gift for him? Why?

Postreading: Was it fair that Thorn took credit for the party? Is it important? Do you think Mr. Burns knows the truth?

## **Chapter 28**

Prereading: The party is now over. But Fin still needs to deal with the damage to the cape. What can he do to fix it?

During: Fin has never asked any adult for help before in the story? Why do you think he turns to his dad now? Do you think Mr. Mundy is a good dad? How does Finch now feel about him?

Postreading: Right after seeking help from his dad, Fin again turns away from adult help and breaks a rule. Why does he keep doing this? Thorn and Bud confront Fin at the video store. Describe what happened. Does Fin care about being embarrassed right now? Why or why not?

## **Chapter 29**

Prereading: Fin plans on watching *Lawrence of Arabia* with Cape to bring him back. Why did he choose this movie? Is this a good plan? Do you think it will work?

During: Finch asks Mimi to keep it a secret that he rode to the video store. Should she do this? What might have happened to Finch? Did the video bring cape back? What else does Fin try?

Postreading: Did you know the cape was lying? What clues did you have?

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## **Chapter 30**

Prereading: What do you think the cape's secret is going to be?

During: What is the real story of the cape? Does this seem believable to you? Do you think his past will affect his future?

Postreading: At the end of the story, Fin takes off to get his friends and start a new mission. What do you think they might do next? Do you think they have behaved like superheroes?

### **Language**

Skittering (9)-to run or glide rapidly

Extracted (10)-to pull out something

Maturity (15)-being fully grown

Unruly (17)-disruptive

Contestant (26)-a person in a contest

Perchance (32)-perhaps

Repast (32)-meal

Stalks (38)-slender supporting structure

Artificial (40)-fake

Bionic (40)-mechanical part to replace a missing part

Prejudiced (42)-unreasonable feelings toward someone or thing

Dashing (44)-showy, stylish

Incapacitated (47)-unable to act or respond

Hunkered (52)-to squat on your heels

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Odiferous (60)-smelly

Polecat (60)-skunk

Preposterous (75)-ridiculous

Ventriloquism (76)-projecting your voice so it seems to come from somewhere else

Century (87)-100 year time period

Emblem (87)-a sign or design that represents something

Antsy (90)-squirmy

Stalling (103)-to keep something from happening

Scowled (103)-to have a threatening look

Mission (108)-the job of a group

Advised (129)-informed

Writhing (129)-to squirm

Heirloom (137)-a family possession handed down generation to generation

Influence (147)-to encourage some to do something

Depressed (153)-sad and gloomy

Ferocious (160)-violent or fierce

Diligent (161)-hardworking

Truce (177)-a moment of peace

Empathize (186)-to understand how someone else feels

Smirking (189)-to smile in a rude manner

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Piercing (201)-loud or shrill voice

Contribution (206)-donation

Ambled (213)-walk slowly

Replica (217)-a copy of something

Trudged (236)-to walk slowly and heavily

Generation (240)-a group from the same time period

## **Indiana Academic Standards met by novel content**

Language Arts 3.1, 3.3, 4.1, 4.3, 5.1, 5.3, 6.1, 6.3

## Anticipation Statements

### The Society of Super Secret Heroes by Phyllis Shalant

Before		Anticipation Guide	After	
Agree	Disagree		Agree	Disagree
		Superheroes are for babies.		
		You should always fight a bully.		
		Divorced parents love their children.		
		Siblings can be our friends.		
		Magic is real.		
		Adults can help us if we let them.		

## **Read Aloud Pages**

Chapter 2, pages 15-16—In this passage we learn about Finch’s superhero cape and why it is so important to him. It’s also one of the first times we see that the cape can speak to Finch.

Chapter 8, pages 56-57—Finch and his teacher are together after Finch has a fight with Thorn. We learn about some of Finch’s worries and we learn more about his teacher.

## **Read-Alikes**

The first three are other books by the same author.

When Pirates Come to Brooklyn

Bartleby of the Mighty Mississippi

Bartleby of the Big Bad Bayou

The next three are all other fantasy books. Although they are not quite as light-hearted as The Society..., I felt the quirky nature of the stories would appeal.

Punished by David Lubar

Emily and the Incredible Shrinking Rat by Lynne Jonell

The Mysterious Benedict Society by Trenton Lee Stewart and Carson Ellis

This group is a series that is extremely popular with this age range of readers. It also deals with some of the same themes of social situations, friendship and bullies.

The Diary of a Wimpy Kid by Jeff Kenny

The Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Roddick Rules by Jeff Kenny

The Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Last Straw by Jeff Kenny

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Phyllis Shalant also mentions several books in The Society:

Tales from the Arabian Nights—there are many versions and authors

Indian in the Cupboard by Lynne Reid Banks

A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket and Brett Helquist

## **Across the Curriculum Connections**

1. Fin and his friends enjoyed writing Super Ferrets. Create a comic about your own super pet. These will be placed on the bulletin board for all to read and enjoy.

(The teacher should have copies of different comics available so the students can see the different components of a comic strip—panel, dialogue bubble, etc.)

Standards: Language Arts 3.5, 3.7, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 5.5, 5.6, and 5.7

Visual Arts 3.6, 3.7, 4.6, 4.7, 5.6, and 5.7

2. Mr. Burns enjoys yoga. Learn some yoga poses to share with the class. Be sure to know their names and how to demonstrate them. Also discuss how yoga is beneficial to the mind and body.

(Teacher can also ask a yoga instructor or a knowledgeable parent to come in and lead the whole class.)

Standards: Physical Education 3.3, 3.6, 4.3, 4.6, 5.3, and 5.6

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## Book Activities

1. Fin would love to have a dog but his mother is allergic so instead he has two ferrets. Phyllis Shalant makes them seem like great pets. Research ferrets and decide if they would make a good pet for you. Using the chart below list the pros and cons of ferrets as pets. Be prepared to share with a small group what you have decided using the information you found as proof.

### Is a Ferret a Good Pet for Me?

Reasons why ferrets are good pets	Reasons why ferrets are bad pets

Circle your finding:

A ferret is a good pet for me.

A ferret is a bad pet for me.

(The teacher will need to have some books available for research.)

Standards: Language Arts 3.2, 4.2, and 5.2

Science 3.2, 3.4, 4.2, 4.4, 5.2 and 5.4

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2. If you could have any super powers, what would they be? Write a brief description of your powers and how you would use them to help people. Use your imagination and try to create powers that you have never heard of before. Then create a visual of yourself as the superhero, labeling any special features you or your costume has (ie. Bat potions, webs, x-ray eyes). Use may use whatever art medium you would like. Be prepared to share with the class.

(A collection of superhero books should be made available for the students to browse through.)

Standards: Language Arts 3.5, 3.7, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 5.5, 5.6, and 5.7

Visual Arts 3.6, 3.7, 4.6, 4.7, 5.6, and 5.7

## **Bibliography**

[www.phyllisshalant.com](http://www.phyllisshalant.com) The author's official site. It does not include information about all of her books. It is for the more recent books, including Bartleby books and the SSSH.

<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/457/Shalant-Phyllis-1949.html> This website included more information about the author and listed all of her publications.

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