

## Commissioner's Book Club: Discussion guide

# Junko Tabei Masters the Mountain

By Rebel Girls

## Introduction

B.C.'s Human Rights Commissioner's Book Club offers monthly book selections that use stories to help readers connect with human rights issues and build connection with the characters they encounter. We hope to bring together a province-wide community of readers and deepen their understanding of human rights and those who are most affected by human rights issues. This guide has been prepared to assist parents, teachers, librarians and other trusted adults explore themes in the Rebel Girls' book, Junko Tabei Masters the Mountains.

In this story about extraordinary athletic accomplishment we meet a young Junko Tabei, a girl who failed gym class but is nonetheless drawn to the adventure of mountain climbing. During her journey to becoming one of the world's best mountain climbers, Junko grapples with skepticism from peers and family as well as her own internal insecurity about her capabilities. Her insecurity and doubts are no match for her determination and the support she receives from friends, other climbers and her beloved teacher, Mr. Watanabe. Against the backdrop of gendered expectations and limited opportunities, Junko Tabei continues to find ways to do what she loves—climbing mountains.

## Discussion questions

1. What did you think of the story? Do you have a favourite moment or part of the book?
2. In the story we learn that Junko is drawn to mountain climbing as a young girl even though she is unsure of herself and her abilities. Is there an activity that

- you think seems interesting and want to try but have been too nervous or scared to try? What is it?
3. Think of a few examples from your own life where you tried something new—an activity, a hobby, a sport or even a new subject at school. Try to remember what it felt like to try those things for the first time. What do you think is the best part of trying something new? What do you think is the worst part?
  4. What do you think Junko’s story is trying to tell us about trying new and/or hard things?
  5. In the book, we learn a lot about what girls were expected to do (and not do) in Japan during Junko’s childhood, and we learn about how Junko often didn’t meet those expectations and does things her own way. List some of the things that Junko does that are different from what is expected of her as a girl. How do people react to her choices? Are they supportive or critical?
  6. When Junko was growing up, there were very gendered expectations of young people. Girls were not encouraged to study at university or work outside the home and were expected to marry and look after the home and children. Boys, on the other hand, were not expected to stay home and look after children. Have you noticed in your school or your family that people have ideas about what different people can and can’t do? Where do you think these ideas come from? What do you think of these ideas?
  7. Junko’s husband, Masanobu, is also a mountain climber. In the book he tells Junko that “I’m not a typical Japanese man.” What does he mean by that? In what ways is he different? How do these differences affect Junko’s life and her mountain climbing?
  8. When Junko is young, she feels very unathletic. She even failed gym class. However, she kept trying to improve at mountain climbing and over time, by putting one foot ahead of another, and with the support of her friends and other climbers, she became one of the best mountain climbers in the world. What does her story tell us about athletic ability? Is it different from other stories about athletes that you have heard? Can you imagine (or have you experienced) being new to something and being told that you aren’t good enough because you are a girl? Would it be hard to keep trying to improve?
  9. Imagine if more sports were not divided into boys and girls teams, and that all children played together on the same teams. How do you think that might change how you play with each other? Do you think it might change how you



think about your teammates or opponents, or even who you become friends with?

10. How important is it to be good at the things you do? Do you give yourself time to learn new things, like Junko did with mountain climbing? Is it hard to not be good at things when you first try them? Why do you think that is?

## Activity prompts:

Junko Tabei Masters the Mountain takes place in many areas of the world and mentions many mountains and mountain ranges.

- What do you know about the mountains mentioned in the book? Which ones are the tallest? In which countries can they be found?
- Can you locate them on a world map?
- Can you also locate Junko's hometown of Miharu, in Fukushima Prefecture, Japan?

Write a letter to a young person who is nervous about trying something new.

- Using what you have learned from Junko's experiences, what do you think Junko would tell them about pushing through hard times and finding support?
- What would she tell them about feeling unsure or doubting their abilities?
- What would Junko tell them about expectations that are put on boys or girls or gender diverse kids?

Think of a sport and research an athlete who has defied gender norms. Write a brief report about that person and their journey.

- What challenges did they face?
- Where did they find support?

Sports are about athletics, friendship, team building and fun. However, sports have also been a place of exclusion and discrimination based on gender, race, sexuality, disability and class. Choose a sport that interests you and do some research about the history of that sport.

- Does it have a history of excluding certain groups of people?
- Were there athletes or allies who worked to create positive change within the sport?
- Who were they and what did they do to create change?
- Create a poster about the sport, its history of exclusion and some of the people who tried to create positive change.

