

# READING ACTIVELY

## Short Stories

A short story is fiction—a work of literature in which the characters and events are created by the author. Fiction allows you to explore new worlds, share joys and sorrows of characters, and learn from their experiences.

Reading short stories is an active process. It is a process in which you envision what is happening in the story and derive meaning from the picture you are envisioning. You do this through the following active-reading strategies:

**QUESTION** What questions come to mind as you are reading? For example, why do the characters act as they do? What causes events to happen? Why does the writer include certain information? Look for answers to your questions as you read.

**VISUALIZE** Use details from the story to create a picture in your mind. As you read along, change your picture as the story unfolds and your understanding grows. If you find yourself confused, try to state your confusion. Use your visualization to clarify whatever hasn't been clear to you.

**PREDICT** What do you think will happen? Look for hints in the story that seem to suggest a certain outcome. As you read on, you will see if your predictions are correct.

**CONNECT** Bring your own experience and knowledge to the story. Make connections with what you know about similar situations or people in your life.

Also make connections between one event and another in the story. Try to summarize how all the pieces of the story fit together.

**RESPOND** Think about what the story means. What does it say to you? What feelings does it evoke in you? What has the story added to your understanding of people and of life in general?

Try to use these strategies as you read the stories in this unit. The strategies will help you increase your understanding and enjoyment of literature.



On pages 3–13 you will see an example of active reading by Marlene Sanchez of Oñate High School in Las Cruces, New Mexico. The notes in the side column include Marlene's thoughts and comments as she read "Games at Twilight." Your own thoughts as you read the story may be different because each reader responds differently to a story.

## MODEL

## Games at Twilight

Anita Desai

It was still too hot to play outdoors. They had had their tea, they had been washed and had their hair brushed, and after the long day of confinement in the house that was not cool but at least a protection from the sun, the children strained to get out. Their faces were red and bloated with the effort, but their mother would not open the door, everything was still curtained and shuttered in a way that stifled the children, made them feel that their lungs were stuffed with cotton wool and their noses with dust and if they didn't burst out into the light and see the sun and feel the air, they would choke.

"Please, Ma, please," they begged. "We'll play in the veranda and porch—we won't go a step out of the porch."

"You will, I know you will, and then—"

"No—we won't, we won't," they wailed so horrendously that she actually let down the bolt of the front door so that they burst out like seeds from a crackling, over-ripe pod into the veranda, with such wild, maniacal yells that she retreated to her bath and the shower of talcum powder and the fresh sari<sup>1</sup> that were to help her face the summer evening.

They faced the afternoon. It was too hot. Too bright. The white walls of the veranda glared stridently in the sun. The bougainvillea<sup>2</sup> hung about it, purple and magenta, in livid balloons. The garden outside was like a tray made of beaten brass, flattened out on the red gravel and the stony soil in all shades of metal—aluminum, tin, copper and brass. No life stirred at this arid time of day—the birds still drooped, like dead fruit, in the papery tents of the trees; some squirrels lay

**Question:** *What are the "games at twilight"? Who plays them?*

**Predict:** *This story must be set in a hot climate or in a hot season. Maybe it takes place during summer.*

**Connect:** *The mother wears a sari; the story probably takes place in India, where people must protect themselves from the sun and the heat. That is why the children couldn't play outside.*

**Visualize:** *These descriptions make the heat seem like oven heat.*

1. **sari** (sā' rē) n.: A long piece of cloth wrapped around the body forming a skirt and draped over one shoulder; worn by Hindu women.

2. **bougainvillea** (bōō gān vil' ē ə) n.: Woody, tropical vines with flowers.

**Question:** *Why does the author call "play" children's "business"? Isn't play supposed to be fun, not serious?*

**Connect:** *The children seem to take their play very seriously, as if it were "business."*

**Visualize:** *This description lets you see every little kid jumping and running to find a hiding space, while Raghu stands on the porch.*

limp on the wet earth under the garden tap. The outdoor dog lay stretched as if dead on the veranda mat, his paws and ears and tail all reaching out like dying travelers in search of water. He rolled his eyes at the children—two white marbles rolling in the purple sockets, begging for sympathy—and attempted to lift his tail in a wag but could not. It only twitched and lay still.

Then, perhaps roused by the shrieks of the children, a band of parrots suddenly fell out of the eucalyptus tree, tumbled frantically in the still, sizzling air, then sorted themselves out into battle formation and streaked away across the white sky.

The children, too, felt released. They too began tumbling, shoving, pushing against each other, frantic to start. Start what? Start their business. The business of the children's day which is—play.

"Let's play hide-and-seek."

"Who'll be It?"

"You be It."

"Why should I? You be—"

"You're the eldest—"

"That doesn't mean—"

The shoves became harder. Some kicked out. The motherly Mira intervened. She pulled the boys roughly apart. There was a tearing sound of cloth but it was lost in the heavy panting and angry grumbling and no one paid attention to the small sleeve hanging loosely off a shoulder.

"Make a circle, make a circle!" she shouted, firmly pulling and pushing till a kind of vague circle was formed. "Now clap!" she roared and, clapping, they all chanted in melancholy unison: "Dip, dip, dip—my blue ship—" and every now and then one or the other saw he was safe by the way his hands fell at the crucial moment—palm on palm, or back of hand on palm—and dropped out of the circle with a yell and a jump of relief and jubilation.

Raghu was It. He started to protest, to cry "You cheated—Mira cheated—Anu cheated—" but it was too late, the others had all already streaked away. There was no one to hear when he called out, "Only in the veranda—the porch—Ma said—Ma said to stay in the porch!" No one had stopped to listen, all he saw were their brown legs flashing through the dusty shrubs, scrambling up brick walls, leaping over com-

post heaps and hedges, and then the porch stood empty in the purple shade of the bougainvillea and the garden was as empty as before; even the limp squirrels had whisked away, leaving everything gleaming, brassy and bare.

Only small Manu suddenly reappeared, as if he had dropped out of an invisible cloud or from a bird's claws, and stood for a moment in the center of the yellow lawn, chewing his finger and near to tears as he heard Raghu shouting, with his head pressed against the veranda wall, "Eighty-three, eighty-five, eighty-nine, ninety . . ." and then made off in a panic, half of him wanting to fly north, the other half counseling south. Raghu turned just in time to see the flash of his white shorts and the uncertain skittering of his red sandals, and charged after him with such a bloodcurdling yell that Manu stumbled over the hosepipe, fell into its rubber coils and lay there weeping, "I won't be It—you have to find them all—all—All!"

"I know I have to, idiot," Raghu said, superciliously kicking him with his toe. "You're dead," he said with satisfaction, licking the beads of perspiration off his upper lip, and then stalked off in search of worthier prey, whistling spiritedly so that the hidiers should hear and tremble.

Ravi heard the whistling and picked his nose in a panic, trying to find comfort by burrowing the finger deep—deep into that soft tunnel. He felt himself too exposed, sitting on an upturned flower pot behind the garage. Where could he burrow? He could run around the garage if he heard Raghu come—around and around and around—but he hadn't much faith in his short legs when matched against Raghu's long, hefty, hairy footballer legs.<sup>3</sup> Ravi had a frightening glimpse of them as Raghu combed the hedge of crotons and hibiscus,<sup>4</sup> trampling delicate ferns underfoot as he did so. Ravi looked about him desperately, swallowing a small ball of snot in his fear.

The garage was locked with a great heavy lock to which the driver had the key in his room, hanging from a nail on the

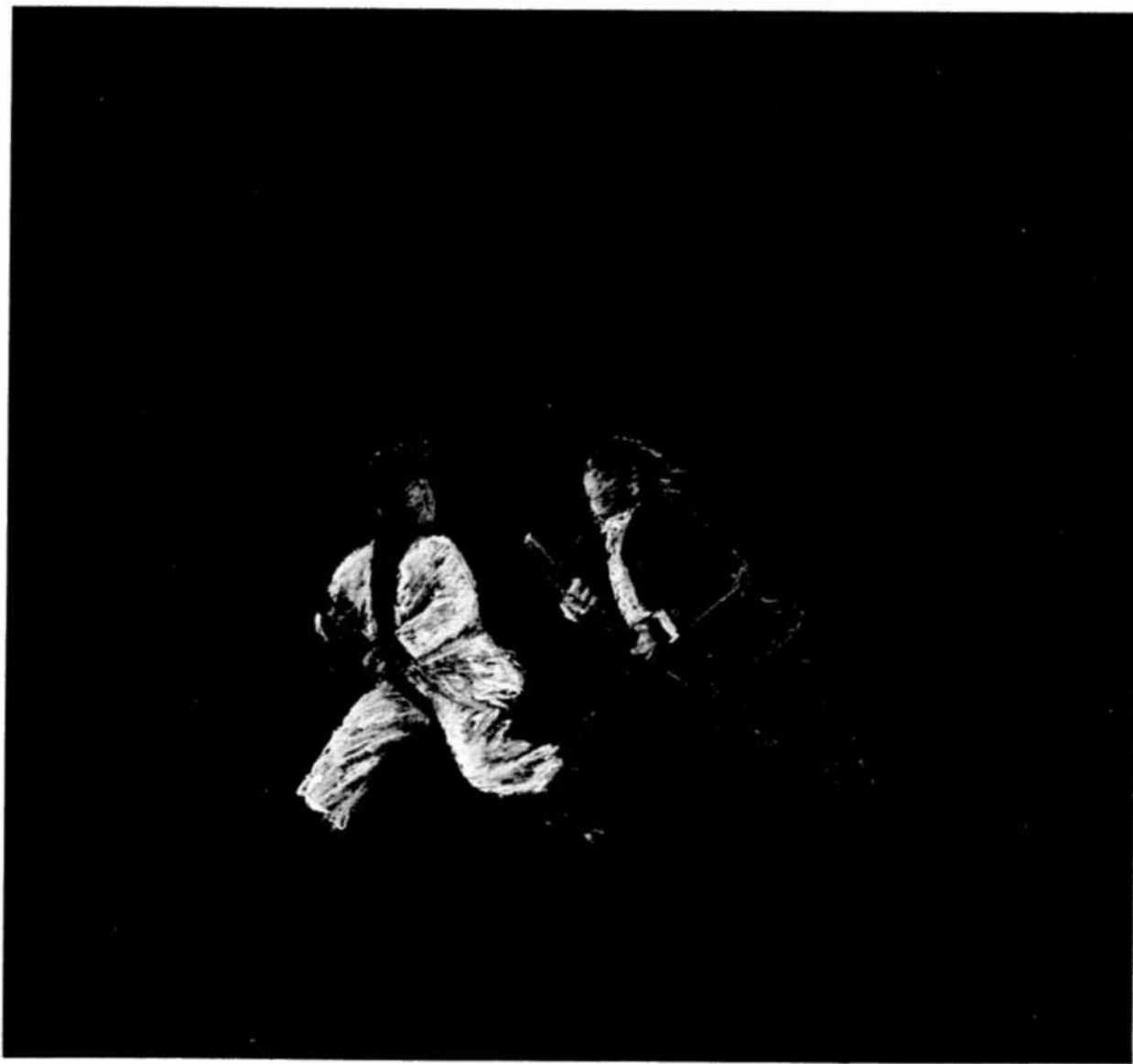
*Predict: Raghu will catch Manu.*

*Connect: Manu was too easily caught, so Raghu wants his next victims to be more challenging.*

**3. footballer legs:** The powerful legs of a soccer player.

**4. crotons** (krōt' 'nz) **and hibiscus** (hī bis' kəs): Types of tropical shrubs.

**RACING GAME. 1982**  
*Tony Wong*  
*Courtesy of the Artist*



wall under his work-shirt. Ravi had peeped in and seen him still sprawling on his string-cot in his vest and striped underpants, the hair on his chest and the hair in his nose shaking with the vibrations of his phlegm-obstructed snores. Ravi had wished he were tall enough, big enough to reach the key on the nail, but it was impossible, beyond his reach for years to come. He had sidled away and sat dejectedly on the flower pot. That at least was cut to his own size.

But next to the garage was another shed with a big green door. Also locked. No one even knew who had the key to the lock. That shed wasn't opened more than once a year when Ma turned out all the old broken bits of furniture and rolls of matting and leaking buckets, and the white ant hills were broken and swept away and Flit sprayed into the spider webs and rat holes so that the whole operation was like the looting of a poor, ruined and conquered city. The green leaves of the door sagged. They were nearly off their rusty hinges. The hinges were large and made a small gap between the door and the walls—only just large enough for rats, dogs, and, possibly, Ravi to slip through.

Ravi had never cared to enter such a dark and depressing mortuary<sup>5</sup> of defunct household goods seething with such unspeakable and alarming animal life but, as Raghu's whistling grew angrier and sharper and his crashing and storming in the hedge wilder, Ravi suddenly slipped off the flower pot and through the crack and was gone. He chuckled aloud with astonishment at his own temerity so that Raghu came out of the hedge, stood silent with his hands on his hips, listening, and finally shouted "I heard you! I'm coming! Got you—" and came charging round the garage only to find the upturned flower pot, the yellow dust, the crawling of white ants in a mud-hill against the closed shed door—nothing. Snarling, he bent to pick up a stick and went off, whacking it against the garage and shed walls as if to beat out his prey.

Ravi shook, then shivered with delight, with self-congratulation. Also with fear. It was dark, spooky in the shed. It had a muffled smell, as of graves. Ravi had once got

**Visualize:** *The shed seems like a hiding spot where no one would dare to look for Ravi.*

**Predict:** *Ravi wants to hide in the shed; maybe he will get stuck there.*

**5. mortuary** (môr' chōō er ē) *n.*: A place where dead bodies are kept before being buried or cremated.

**Connect:** *Rather than be caught by Raghu, Ravi is tormenting himself by staying in the scary, smelly shed.*

**Question:** *Why doesn't Raghu try to look in the shed?*

**Question:** *Knowing that Raghu is gone, why doesn't Ravi find a new hiding spot, out of the shed and away from its creatures?*

**Connect:** *Ravi wants the game to be over so that he can join everyone for the evening games; he might even be relieved if Raghu captured him.*

locked into the linen cupboard and sat there weeping for half an hour before he was rescued. But at least that had been a familiar place, and even smelled pleasantly of starch, laundry and, reassuringly, of his mother. But the shed smelled of rats, ant hills, dust and spider webs. Also of less definable, less recognizable horrors. And it was dark. Except for the white-hot cracks along the door, there was no light. The roof was very low. Although Ravi was small, he felt as if he could reach up and touch it with his finger tips. But he didn't stretch. He hunched himself into a ball so as not to bump into anything, touch or feel anything. What might there not be to touch him and feel him as he stood there, trying to see in the dark? Something cold, or slimy—like a snake. Snakes! He leapt up as Raghu whacked the wall with his stick—then, quickly realizing what it was, felt almost relieved to hear Raghu, hear his stick. It made him feel protected.

But Raghu soon moved away. There wasn't a sound once his footsteps had gone around the garage and disappeared. Ravi stood frozen inside the shed. Then he shivered all over. Something had tickled the back of his neck. It took him a while to pick up the courage to lift his hand and explore. It was an insect—perhaps a spider—exploring *him*. He squashed it and wondered how many more creatures were watching him, waiting to reach out and touch him, the stranger.

There was nothing now. After standing in that position—his hand still on his neck, feeling the wet splodge of the squashed spider gradually dry—for minutes, hours, his legs began to tremble with the effort, the inaction. By now he could see enough in the dark to make out the large solid shapes of old wardrobes, broken buckets and bedsteads piled on top of each other around him. He recognized an old bathtub—patches of enamel glimmered at him and at last he lowered himself onto its edge.

He contemplated slipping out of the shed and into the fray. He wondered if it would not be better to be captured by Raghu and be returned to the milling crowd as long as he could be in the sun, the light, the free spaces of the garden and the familiarity of his brothers, sisters and cousins. It would be evening soon. Their games would become legitimate. The parents would sit out on the lawn on cane basket chairs and



watch them as they tore around the garden or gathered in knots to share a loot of mulberries or black, teeth-splitting *jamun*<sup>6</sup> from the garden trees. The gardener would fix the hosepipe to the water tap and water would fall lavishly through the air to the ground, soaking the dry yellow grass and the red gravel and arousing the sweet, the intoxicating scent of water on dry earth—that loveliest scent in the world. Ravi sniffed for a whiff of it. He half-rose from the bathtub, then heard the despairing scream of one of the girls as Raghu bore down upon her. There was the sound of a crash, and of rolling about in the bushes, the shrubs, then screams and accusing sobs of, “I touched the den—” “You did not—” “I did—” “You liar, you did *not*” and then a fading away and silence again.

**Predict:** *Ravi will get out of the shed soon.*

Ravi sat back on the harsh edge of the tub, deciding to hold out a bit longer. What fun if they were all found and caught—he alone left unconquered! He had never known that sensation. Nothing more wonderful had ever happened to him than being taken out by an uncle and bought a whole slab of chocolate all to himself, or being flung into the soda-man’s pony cart and driven up to the gate by the friendly driver with the red beard and pointed ears. To defeat Raghu—that hirsute,<sup>7</sup> hoarse-voiced football champion—and to be the winner in a circle of older, bigger, luckier children—that would be thrilling beyond imagination. He hugged his knees together and smiled to himself almost shyly at the thought of so much victory, such laurels.<sup>8</sup>

**Connect:** *Ravi is driven by his ambition to win, especially if it means beating the older children.*

There he sat smiling, knocking his heels against the bathtub, now and then getting up and going to the door to put his ear to the broad crack and listening for sounds of the game, the pursuer and the pursued, and then returning to his seat with the dogged determination of the true winner, a breaker of records, a champion.

**6. jamun** (jā' mōon') *n.*: A tart fruit with reddish-purple pulp and juice.

**7. hirsute** (hur' sōot') *adj.*: Hairy.

**8. laurels** (lōr' əlz) *n.*: Foliage from the laurel tree, worn in a crown as a symbol of victory in a contest.



**Visualize:** *As it's getting darker in the shed, you can see Ravi sitting there, getting lonelier.*

**Predict:** *Now that Ravi has been gone for so long and it's dark, people must be worried about him.*

**Predict:** *He won't win, after all.*

**Connect:** *The disappointment of not being recognized as the winner overwhelms Ravi.*

It grew darker in the shed as the light at the door grew softer, fuzzier, turned to a kind of crumbling yellow pollen that turned to yellow fur, blue fur, gray fur. Evening. Twilight. The sound of water gushing, falling. The scent of earth receiving water, slaking its thirst in great gulps and releasing that green scent of freshness, coolness. Through the crack Ravi saw the long purple shadows of the shed and the garage lying still across the yard. Beyond that, the white walls of the house. The bougainvillea had lost its lividity, hung in dark bundles that quaked and twittered and seethed with masses of homing sparrows. The lawn was shut off from his view. Could he hear the children's voices? It seemed to him that he could. It seemed to him that he could hear them chanting, singing, laughing. But what about the game? What had happened? Could it be over? How could it when he was still not found?

It then occurred to him that he could have slipped out long ago, dashed across the yard to the veranda and touched the "den." It was necessary to do that to win. He had forgotten. He had only remembered the part of hiding and trying to elude the seeker. He had done that so successfully, his success had occupied him so wholly that he had quite forgotten that success had to be clinched by that final dash to victory and the ringing cry of "Den!"

With a whimper he burst through the crack, fell on his knees, got up and stumbled on stiff, benumbed legs across the shadowy yard, crying heartily by the time he reached the veranda so that when he flung himself at the white pillar and bawled, "Den! Den! Den!" his voice broke with rage and pity at the disgrace of it all and he felt himself flooded with tears and misery.

Out on the lawn, the children stopped chanting. They all turned to stare at him in amazement. Their faces were pale and triangular in the dusk. The trees and bushes around them stood inky and sepulchral,<sup>9</sup> spilling long shadows across them. They stared, wondering at his reappearance, his passion, his wild animal howling. Their mother rose from her basket chair and came toward him, worried, annoyed, saying,

**9. sepulchral** (sə pul' krəl) *adj.*: Dismal; gloomy.



**HIDE AND SEEK**  
*Tony Wong*  
Courtesy of the Artist

Visualize: *You can just see him carrying on hysterically.*

"Stop it, stop it, Ravi. Don't be a baby. Have you hurt yourself?" Seeing him attended to, the children went back to clasping their hands and chanting "The grass is green, the rose is red. . . ."

But Ravi would not let them. He tore himself out of his mother's grasp and pounded across the lawn into their midst, charging at them with his head lowered so that they scattered in surprise. "I won, I won, I won," he bawled, shaking his head so that the big tears flew. "Raghu didn't find me. I won, I won—"

It took them a minute to grasp what he was saying, even who he was. They had quite forgotten him. Raghu had found all the others long ago. There had been a fight about who was to be it next. It had been so fierce that their mother had emerged from her bath and made them change to another game. Then they had played another and another. Broken mulberries from the tree and eaten them. Helped the driver wash the car when their father returned from work. Helped the gardener water the beds till he roared at them and swore he would complain to their parents. The parents had come out, taken up their positions on the cane chairs. They had begun to play again, sing and chant. All this time no one had remembered Ravi. Having disappeared from the scene, he had disappeared from their minds. Clean.

"Don't be a fool," Raghu said roughly, pushing him aside, and even Mira said, "Stop howling, Ravi. If you want to play, you can stand at the end of the line," and she put him there very firmly.

The game proceeded. Two pairs of arms reached up and met in an arc. The children trooped under it again and again in a lugubrious<sup>10</sup> circle, ducking their heads and intoning

"The grass is green,

The rose is red;

Remember me

When I am dead, dead, dead, dead . . . "

**10. lugubrious** (lə ɡOO' brē əs) *adj.*: Sad and mournful, especially in an exaggerated way.

And the arc of thin arms trembled in the twilight, and the heads were bowed so sadly, and their feet tramped to that melancholy refrain so mournfully, so helplessly, that Ravi could not bear it. He would not follow them, he would not be included in this funeral game. He had wanted victory and triumph—not a funeral. But he had been forgotten, left out and he would not join them now. The ignominy<sup>11</sup> of being forgotten—how could he face it? He felt his heart go heavy and ache inside him unbearably. He lay down full length on the damp grass, crushing his face into it, no longer crying, silenced by a terrible sense of his insignificance.

11. **ignominy** (ig' nə min' ē) *n.*: Shame; dishonor.

**Respond:** *Ravi's obsession with winning the game interfered with his enjoyment of it. Ironically, the children who were caught are now happily playing another game. Ravi was so carried away with the glory of winning that he forgot how to achieve his goal.*

Usha Desai (1937– ), born of an Indian father and a German mother, has been called one of India's most gifted writers. She was educated in Delhi, and her work has won widespread critical acclaim. Of Desai's talent, the critic Victoria Glendinning said, "She has the gift of opening up a closed world and making it clearly visible and, by the end, familiar." Desai lives in Bombay with her husband and their four children.



## RESPONDING TO THE SELECTION

### Your Response

1. Put yourself in Ravi's place. What would you have done after Raghu left the shed area? Explain your answer.
2. If you could talk to Ravi, what would you tell him about games?

### Recalling

3. Where does Ravi hide?
4. What causes Ravi to lose the game even though he wasn't caught?

### Interpreting

5. How does Ravi feel about Raghu?
6. What do we know about Ravi's personality based on the choices he makes in the story?
7. What bitter lesson does Ravi learn at the end of the story?

### Applying

8. Do you think that Ravi's "sense of insignificance" at the end of the story will remain strong? Explain.

## ANALYZING LITERATURE

### Understanding Motivation

**Motivation** is the cause of a character's actions. Motives can arise from events involving the character, from the character's emotional needs, or from a combination of both. For example, Ravi is afraid of the shed. Yet he is motivated to overcome his fear because he wants to win the game and because he is afraid of Raghu.

1. What motivates Ravi to refuse to join the children in their evening game?
2. What motivates the children to play other games while Ravi is still hiding?

## CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

### Recognizing Relevant Details

**Relevant details** give information that is central to the situation, plot, or characters. Paying at-

tention to relevant details can give you insight into a character's motives or a character's effect on others. For instance, when Raghu finds Manu, Raghu kicks him and whistles "so that the hiders should hear and tremble." Later, Desai describes Raghu as a football champion. These details imply that Raghu frightens the other children.

1. Which details of the shed contribute to your understanding of Ravi's determination to avoid Raghu?
2. Ravi feels protected when he hears Raghu pound on the shed with his stick. How does this detail relate to Ravi's decision to stay in the shed?
3. When Raghu catches one of the girls, she insists that she "touched the den." How does this detail relate to the outcome of the story?

## THINKING AND WRITING

### Writing About Motivation

Reading about characters in a story is in some ways like being with people in real life. Now that you have spent some time with Ravi, perhaps you can guess how the events of the story will motivate him in the future. Imagine the next few days, months, or years of his life, and think of how Ravi's behavior might be influenced by his experience in the shed. Then predict the effect of this experience on his behavior, supporting your prediction with evidence from the story.

## LEARNING OPTION

**Art.** Take another look at the pictures on pages 6 and 11. They were not painted to illustrate "Games at Twilight," yet they depict scenes similar to the ones depicted in the story. How do these paintings relate to the story? Try to find other photographs or works of fine art that remind you of the story. You might look in a museum or in books of art in the library. If possible, bring to class the pictures you have found and show them to your classmates.