

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Afternoon of the Elves

by

Janet Taylor Lisle

Book Information

Janet Taylor Lisle, Afternoon of the Elves
Quiz Number: 353
Orchard Books, 1989
ISBN 0-531-05837-9; LCCN
122 Pages
Book Level: 5.0
Interest Level: MG

As Hillary works in the miniature village allegedly built by elves in Sara-Kate's backyard, she becomes more and more curious about Sara-Kate's real life inside her big, gloomy house with her mysterious, silent mother.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Newbery Honor

Topics: Family Life, Misc./Other; Family Life, Mothers; Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other

Main Characters

Hillary Lenox a fourth-grade girl who is captivated by the imagination of Sara-Kate

Jane Webster & Alison Mancini Hillary's fourth-grade friends

Mr. Lenox Hillary's father, an avid gardener

Mrs. Lenox Hillary's mother, an attentive woman

Sara-Kate Connolly a street-wise eleven-year-old girl from a needy family

Vocabulary

cache a secure hiding or storage place

fluted having grooves

impasse a predicament offering no obvious way of escape, a deadlock

larder a place to store food; a pantry

probed searched or explored in great detail

trellis a frame of lattice work or interwoven strips of wood used as a support for climbing plants

Synopsis

Sara-Kate Connolly shows her neighbor Hillary Lenox an elf village in the Connollys' run-down backyard. At school, classmates Jane and Alison try to deter Hillary from becoming friends with Sara-Kate,

who is a year older and dresses in men's black boots. Hillary is drawn to the Connolly yard when Sara-Kate announces the elves have built a Ferris wheel. Sara-Kate has sudden mood swings which puzzle Hillary, but Hillary accommodates them, since the lure of the yard is so strong.

Hillary is entranced with Sara-Kate's knowledge of elves and, though Hillary has not actually seen the elves, she helps Sara-Kate gather berries and mint leaves for them and spends much time on maintenance and building projects for their benefit. Consequently, her friends worry about her spending so much time with the shabby Sara-Kate, but Hillary sticks up for her new friend. Sara-Kate's house is run-down and always dark, though periodically, someone peeks out to watch the girls or motion to Sara-Kate. Hillary is never invited in. When the weather turns cold, Hillary wonders why Sara-Kate has no coat. Sara-Kate claims she is "like an elf" and has thick skin. Hillary accompanies Sara-Kate on errands and sees her dealing with grown-ups. She is amazed at how well Sara-Kate can persuade adults.

When Sara-Kate misses school for three days, Hillary goes to check on her. Finding the back door unlocked, she enters the house and sees a strange sight. Everything not attached to the wall in the kitchen has been moved to the middle of the floor. Since the house is cold inside, Hillary assumes her friend is away. But upon hearing noises upstairs, Hillary's desire to see elves takes her further. Upstairs she finds Sara-Kate rocking her sick mother. Sara-Kate screams at Hillary to get out and to forget everything she sees. Shaken, Hillary goes back to her other friends. At school she hears Sara-Kate's mother took her out of school and left town.

A week later, Hillary tries to talk to her father about Sara-Kate, but she stops before revealing too much. Adding to Hillary's confusion, her father knows the Connollys are in town because he saw Sara-Kate the previous night. Hillary sneaks out of the house and watches the Connolly backyard. When a dark figure comes out, Hillary approaches. It is

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Sara-Kate, who then creates an explanation for her absence and shows Hillary the Ferris wheel, which somehow begins to turn and glow in the dark.

The next morning a snowstorm closes school and gives Hillary the chance to excavate the village with Sara-Kate. Later in the day, Hillary offers to get money and buy food after Sara-Kate says her mother is sick and cannot be left alone. Hillary is surprised at how methodically she herself can steal money from her mother and lie about where she is going. When she finds herself short on money, she shoplifts a package of bologna. Back at the Connollys' house, Sara-Kate finally opens up to Hillary by explaining how her mother's sickness made her father leave and how she has learned to take care of things because her mother is unable. Hillary questions why she does not ask for help, and Sara-Kate claims that help does not come to people like her and her mother.

The family's situation is discovered when Mrs. Lenox comes looking for Hillary and intervenes. Mrs. Lenox makes calls and eventually relatives take Sara-Kate, and the house is repaired and sold. Back at school, the students and teachers treat Hillary as a victim of Sara-Kate. Hillary cannot understand why people do not see Sara-Kate as she does. She decides she must save the village to keep a part of Sara-Kate with her, so she moves the village to her yard in a unkept area behind the garage.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why would someone in obvious need, like Sara-Kate, be afraid to ask for help? How could Hillary help Sara-Kate without losing her friendship?

Sometimes poor people feel embarrassed to ask others for things. They want to do things for themselves without having people feel sorry for them. Others may not know how to ask for help or where to go. They may be afraid of losing something if they ask for help. Sara-Kate did not feel that others could take care of her mother better than she could. She saw her father leave because he could not take care of his wife. She may sense that she and her mother will be split apart if she seeks help. Hillary could try talking to teachers or a counselor at school who would know how to get aid to Sara-Kate and her mother. Students may ask why the teacher or school did not know about Sara-Kate's home life, especially since most schools today have psychologists, guidance counselors, or social workers to spot poor conditions at home. Students should understand that it was in Sara-Kate's best interest for Mrs. Lenox to get help rather than leave her in the house with her mother.

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Literary Analysis

Mrs. Lenox tells Hillary, "But have you ever wondered why she chose you for her friend? Why couldn't she have found someone her own age? Are you sure she really cared about you, Hillary? Or were you just someone who was useful to have around?" Why do you think Sara-Kate chose Hillary for a friend? Support your answer from the story.

The girls tell Hillary that Sara-Kate is just trying to trick her. They say that Sara-Kate is not a nice person. They claim that she just wants to control someone, and Hillary is an easy target. Sara-Kate is older than Hillary and intimidates her in some ways. Sara-Kate is nice to Hillary, but then suddenly refuses to sit with her at lunch or walk home with her. Hillary does not understand. She also uses Hillary to buy and steal food for her and to accompany her on her errands. Students could also argue that Sara-Kate needed a friend and Hillary fit her perfectly. They are close in age, and Hillary, too, believes in magic and elves. Sara-Kate needed someone trustworthy and had never known someone as faithful as Hillary. Her father left, and her mother is ill, so Hillary becomes the stable part of Sara-Kate's life, someone to count on being there and supporting her.

Inferential Comprehension

What do you think causes the Ferris wheel to spin and shine while Sara-Kate and Hillary watch it?

On a realistic level, a gust of wind could cause the wheel to turn somehow. Also, since it is dark out, Sara-Kate might have physically spun the wheel without Hillary noticing, especially since there is a bird call that takes Hillary's attention away from what is happening. On the other hand, if Sara-Kate is somehow magical then perhaps she made the wheel turn supernaturally. Also, if the elves really exist, they could have made the wheel spin without being seen.

Constructing Meaning

Jane and Alison want Hillary to be a part of their group. What do they say to try to persuade her to stay away from Sara-Kate?

The girls tell Hillary things that people say about Sara-Kate that are not necessarily true. They say her father is a criminal in prison. They criticize Sara-Kate's clothing and laugh at her unusual behavior. The girls try to convince Hillary that Sara-Kate has put her under a spell of some type and that she has to get away from Sara-Kate to break the spell. They also state some things which are true. Sara-Kate lies to people and her moods change quickly. However, Hillary is not easily able to distinguish truth from rumor.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Sara-Kate and Hillary work together to maintain the elf village. Have the students work together to turn the classroom into an elf village. Using examples from the book as well as the imagination, have students build houses, playgrounds, and other things in an elf town around your classroom. Use materials such as twigs, leaves, bottle caps, string, used paper, and other discarded items. Brown construction paper can be rolled into small "logs" in place of twigs. Remember to look at the world as an elf would when building and placing the things in your village.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Sara-Kate relates all sorts of details about elves to Hillary and impresses her with knowledge of elves. Elves and sprites have always been a part of folklore. Research in the library or the Internet to locate legends or myths about elves throughout the world. Give a report on the origins of various types of elves: gnomes, woodland elves, Santa's elves, leprechauns, or others.

Recognizing Cause and Effect Mrs. Connolly's behaviors in the book, such as an irrational fear of others, being unable to carry out tasks, and staying indoors, reflect symptoms of mental illness. Today mental illness is considered a

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disease often with physical causes, but once it was considered an affliction caused by evil or unknown sources. Research various types of mental illnesses and compare the treatments of fifty years ago with those of today. Compare symptoms to the behavior displayed by Sara-Kate and her mother.

Responding to Literature Sara-Kate and her mother are afraid to ask for help, so sometimes Sara-Kate steals food and necessary items. Many areas fund a food bank for low-income families. Check to see if you have a Salvation Army Food Pantry or other local agency which takes donations of food. Have the class organize a way to earn money to supply food for the food bank. Possible suggestions would be a bake sale, car wash, leaf raking or snow shoveling with all donations going for food. Another way would be to have a "video afternoon." Show a movie and supply popcorn with admission being a non-perishable food item. Middle schools could have a competition between homerooms or classes for collection of food items with the winning class receiving a sundae or pizza party funded by the PTO or PTA organization.