

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Amah

by

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Book Information

Laurence Yep, The Amah
Quiz Number: 31176
Putnam & Grosset Group, 1999
ISBN 0-399-23040-8; LCCN
181 Pages
Book Level: 4.2
Interest Level: UG

Twelve-year-old Amy finds her family responsibilities growing and interfering with her ballet practice when her mother takes a job outside the home.

Topics: Arts, Dance; People, Chinese American; People, Family; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+

Main Characters

- Amy Chin the principal character of the story, a twelve-year-old girl who must learn to adapt when her mother gets a new job
- Andy, Mimi, Didi, and Jason Chin Amy's younger siblings, whom Amy needs to baby-sit when Mama gets a job as an amah
- Auntie Ruby a woman who helps Mama get a job as Stephanie's amah
- Leah Amy's friend, who does not understand Amy's family problems
- Lou-Lou an acquaintance of Stephanie; a rich, snobbish girl
- Madame Amy's demanding ballet instructor, who challenges her students to look deeper into their roles and themselves
- Mr. Sinclair Stephanie's British-born father, who immersed himself in his business affairs after his wife died; he is emotionally detached from Stephanie but expects her to fill his wife's shoes when entertaining clients
- Mrs. Chin (Mama) a widowed mother of five children who tries to raise them well in America while instilling in them the values of the Chinese culture; she is employed as an amah to Stephanie
- Robin Amy's reassuring friend, who understands Amy's struggles and family obligations

Robin's grandmother a recent immigrant to the United States who becomes a grandmother to the neighborhood children and shares her wisdom with them

Stephanie Sinclair a twelve-year-old girl whose perfect manners mask a troubled past and who, with Amy's help, is able to confront some of her problems

Vocabulary

- amah** an Asian term for a nanny or governess
- hooligans** ruffians or rowdy people
- quack** a fraud or impostor who gives medical advice
- white elephant** an item that is no longer wanted but is difficult to get rid of

Synopsis

Amy Chin is a twelve-year-old, Chinese-American girl who lives in a San Francisco apartment with her widowed mother and four younger siblings. They are struggling financially, but her mother sacrifices to give Amy ballet lessons. Amy has been asked by Madame, her ballet teacher, to dance the part of a stepsister in the ballet *Cinderella*. Amy is nervous about this because she hates change and must learn a new part. She arrives home after practice to a nervous mother who is about to be interviewed for the job of amah, a position held in high esteem in China and is like that of a second mother. To make a good impression, Mrs. Chin (Mama), gets out the family heirloom, an old teapot. "Auntie" Ruby, who is really a friend of a friend rather than a relative, arrives to interview Mama on behalf of her potential employer. After scrutinizing the children, she tells Mama she has the position. Mama will be an amah to Stephanie Sinclair, the twelve-year-old British-American daughter of a wealthy widower who was raised in Hong Kong.

Amy's life now undergoes some changes. She is expected to supervise her younger siblings both before and after school while her mother is at work. Amy misses ballet practices because Mama works overtime to try to make a good impression on Mr.

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Sinclair. Amy begins to grow jealous of Stephanie because Stephanie sends comic books to the younger children and beautiful clothing to Amy. Amy also resents Mama's endless praise of Stephanie, as she feels she is making sacrifices but receives only criticism. Amy's life becomes a metaphor of the Cinderella story, with Amy being the wicked stepsister envious of Cinderella (Stephanie), who can do no wrong. Amy's friends Robin and Leah are concerned about Amy, and Robin volunteers her grandmother to baby-sit Amy's siblings so Amy can make her ballet practices. Amy draws some comfort knowing that Robin and her grandmother understand the expectations placed on first-born daughters in Chinese households.

Amy finally meets Stephanie when she reluctantly accepts an invitation to accompany Stephanie to a professional performance of the ballet *Cinderella*. Amy believes Stephanie will be a snobby rich girl, but she is surprised when she turns out to be "perfect" in speech and manners, and Amy feels guilty for misjudging her. At the performance Amy meets Madame, who challenges Amy to be open to change, both in her ballet role as well as in life. The evening ends on a sour note, however, when Amy learns that Stephanie will be staying with the Chins while Stephanie's father is away on business.

Amy and Mama's relationship becomes tense as they prepare for Stephanie's arrival. Amy expects Stephanie to arrive with a great deal of luggage but is surprised to see her with only one suitcase and a bag of gifts. Several days later, Amy begins to feel an attachment to Stephanie when they make a phony excuse to leave in the middle of an arrogant girl's luncheon. Stephanie admits she had dragged Amy along for support and did not like the girl in the first place.

When Stephanie asks why Amy does not like her, Amy tells her it is because she seems so perfect and appears to buy people's affection. Stephanie explains the perfection her father expects from her. Amy then feels sorry for her and agrees to coach her in the ways of being a "slob." Slob lessons begin and Stephanie is an avid learner.

Later, while preparing a dinner, Stephanie pours boiling water into Mrs. Chin's treasured teapot and accidentally breaks it. Amy notices a bad scar on Stephanie's arm when she is running cold water over the burn, but Stephanie becomes defensive when Amy asks about it. Sensing the trouble Amy would get into because of the broken heirloom, Stephanie insists she substitute her family's teapot for Mrs. Chin's. She knows it is identical and probably will not be missed. Amy reluctantly agrees. Stephanie's father returns from his trip early, and when he comes to pick her up at the Chins', she stands up to him saying she would prefer to stay with the Chins. Caught off guard, he agrees to let her stay, but as he is leaving, he comments that Mrs. Chin's teapot looks like his wife's. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Sinclair calls, insisting he does not want Stephanie to spend another moment with the Chins. Realizing Mr. Sinclair may suspect Mama of taking his teapot, Amy confesses the truth of the breakage and substitution. Amy's confession prompts Stephanie to admit her own wrongdoing in pawning her father's possessions in order to buy things for herself and gifts for others. Then, emotionally distraught, she reveals the scar on her arm and claims she got it when she was involved in the automobile accident that killed her mother. Mama assures Stephanie of her innocence in her mother's death, saying it was an unfortunate accident.

Amy now realizes that Stephanie's life is really not perfect. She also realizes why Mama tried to be so supportive of Stephanie. When Mr. Sinclair arrives, Stephanie confesses to stealing. Embarrassed, Mr. Sinclair says he will no longer need Mama's services. Amy challenges him to face his and Stephanie's problems, saying he ought to get to know his daughter. Mama adds her advice, admonishing him to stop hiding his hurt over his wife's death by burying himself in work. Humbled, Mr. Sinclair resolves to get to know Stephanie better, and Amy and her mother determine to make a new start on their relationship, too.

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Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

When Mr. Sinclair says he will no longer need Mama's services, Amy asks him, "And what are you going to do? Find another amah and go through the same thing all over again?" What does Amy mean?

Amy is challenging Mr. Sinclair to work through his and Stephanie's problems now that they are exposed. Mama is just one in a string of caretakers who had been hired to care for Stephanie. It seems when problems arose before, Mr. Sinclair would fire the caretaker and hire a new one. Mr. Sinclair would continue to hide in his business dealings, and Stephanie would be expected to wear the mask of perfection. Amy is asking Mr. Sinclair to break that cycle by confronting and solving problems rather than running from them.

Literary Analysis

The author hints in the story that all is not well with Stephanie. What hints does he give?

Students may suggest the following answers: the number of caretakers Mr. Sinclair has had to hire, Stephanie's statement that keeping a secret like Robin's grandmother would eat her alive, the number of presents she gives to the Chin family, the sob Amy thinks she hears at night, Stephanie wearing long sleeves and her defensiveness about her scar, and her perfect manners.

Inferential Comprehension

How does Amy's perception of her mother change during the story?

Amy matures during the course of the story, and her perception of her mother improves as well. When Amy's mother first gets the amah job, all Amy can see is how it affects her own life -- missed ballet practices, more baby-sitting, and more cleaning. She sees her mother as the source of her problems, because her mother places high expectations on her, yet gives her little praise or thanks. By the end of the story, with guidance from Robin's grandmother and Madame, Amy realizes if she changes her attitude, she can still have the things she wants and be happier. Stephanie's revelations also help Amy realize how much Mama silently struggles in order to protect and provide for her children. She comes to appreciate her mother and is able to feel the love her mother has for her.

Constructing Meaning

If the Cinderella story is a metaphor for Amy's life, what metaphor would you use to describe your life and what role would you play in it? Why?

The students should identify the position or role they play in their chosen metaphor and explain how this describes their life. For example, a student may compare himself to a pitcher in a baseball game because he has to outwit opponents with surprise, speed, and skill.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Much of Amy's frustration stems from being raised with traditional Chinese values in a Western culture. Have the students research the traditions of Chinese family life. What are the roles of the members in the family? How do the young view the elderly? What are some Chinese customs? Have students create a chart contrasting the differences between family life in America and China.

Extending Meaning Amy takes ballet lessons very seriously, wanting to please both herself and

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Madame. Madame has high expectations, and she challenges her dancers to meet them. Have the students choose a discipline in the performing arts and interview a person who is employed in the field. Some suggestions are vocalists, instrumentalists, dancers, and actors. Have them ask the artists how they trained for their professions, the disciplines involved in learning, and the sacrifices they made in order to work in the field. Students can give an oral presentation of what they learned.

Describing Actions or Events Madame encourages Amy to be open to change, and Amy in turn suggests that Stephanie do the same. For example, she gives Stephanie an opportunity to learn to cook. Ask students to develop their cooking skills by preparing a dish they have never made before. Remind them to get their parents' permission first. Teachers may wish to set aside a day for a class feast in which everyone brings in their dishes for others to try. If the students also bring in their recipes, the class can compile a cookbook.

Identifying Reading Strategies People in some cultures commonly raise their children with the help of a person such as an amah, a nanny, a governess, etc. Ask students to research these roles to form an opinion as to whether a child benefits from this association or if the child would be better raised by the parents alone. Have the students express their opinions in a composition using support from their research.