

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.* by Judy Blume

Book Information

Judy Blume, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.*

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Book Level: 3.6

Interest Level: MG

Margaret approaches adolescence with trepidation, but with the help of God and nature, she makes a successful transition.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Family Life, Growing Up; Read Now Power Up Recommended Lists, Know Yourself; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; Recommended Reading, Jewish Stars

Main Characters

Barbara Simon (Mom) Margaret's mother; she was raised in a Christian family

Freddy Barnett (Lobster) a classmate of Margaret; his nickname reflects his red face

Gretchen Potter Margaret's classmate and friend

Herb Simon (Dad) Margaret's father; he was raised in a Jewish family

Janie Loomis Margaret's classmate and friend; she is struggling with many of the same issues of growing up as Margaret

Laura Danker the tallest girl in Margaret's class; she is very pretty and is the most physically developed girl in the sixth grade class

Margaret Simon the eleven-year-old central character and narrator of the story; she is struggling to decide her religion and to fit in with her peers

Miles J. Benedict the teacher of Margaret's sixth grade class; it is his first teaching job

Moose Freed a friend of Nancy Wheeler's brother; he mows the Simons' lawn

Mr. and Mrs. Paul Hutchins Margaret's Christian grandparents, who live in Ohio; they disowned Margaret's mother when she married a Jewish man

Nancy Wheeler Margaret's friend and neighbor; she helps Margaret adjust to her new environment

Norman Fishbein a classmate of Margaret; he invites the entire class to a party at his house

Philip Leroy the best looking boy in Margaret's class; Margaret has a crush on him

Sylvia Simon (Grandma) Margaret's doting Jewish grandmother; she wants Margaret to become Jewish

Vocabulary

abominable hateful and disgusting

briefed gave information

dacron a synthetic fiber used for making clothing

foyer entranceway; hallway

lingerie women's undergarments

prude a person who is extremely modest

Synopsis

Eleven-year-old Margaret Simon has just moved from a rented apartment in New York City to a purchased home in Farbrook, New Jersey. She meets a neighbor girl her same age, Nancy Wheeler, who befriends her and invites her to join the secret girls club with Janie Loomis and Gretchen Potter. School is about to begin, and the four girls discover they will all be in the same sixth grade room and are all facing the uncertainty of puberty and fitting in with everyone else. On the first day of school, the girls are dismayed to discover that not only is their teacher a man but also that this is his first teaching job. The teacher, Mr. Benedict, assigns a year-long project that must be meaningful to each student. Margaret decides her project will be an experiment in religion to help her decide what religion she wants to be.

Margaret's mother is Christian and her father is Jewish. Fourteen years ago, Mrs. Simon's parents, the Hutchinses, objected to their daughter's marriage to a Jewish man and disowned her. Margaret's grandmother on her father's side, Grandma Simon, dotes over Margaret and believes she will become a "real Jewish girl." Margaret's parents have not raised Margaret in either of their

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religions, and they want her to make her own decision about religion when she grows up. Margaret feels the tug of the two religions and feels that having no religion makes her a "nobody" and keeps her from fitting in with her new school and friends. She often talks to God and tries to look for a sign to indicate which religious path she should take. She also begs God to help her mature physically so she will be like the other girls.

Margaret and her friends go through the school year facing their new feelings toward boys, their changing bodies, and competition from the largest and most physically developed girl in the class, Laura Danker. As the school year progresses, Margaret notices that she feels attracted to Moose Freed. Moose mows the lawn for the Simons family and is a friend of Nancy Wheeler's brother.

In April, Margaret's Christian grandparents come from Ohio to New Jersey to reunite with their estranged daughter and her family. An argument ensues over which religion Margaret should be, causing them to cut short their visit. Margaret gets angry with God because of the argument and determines never to talk to God again.

As the school year draws to a close, Margaret turns in her individual personal project to Mr. Benedict in the form of a letter stating that she is unable to come to any conclusion about what religion she wants to be. On the last day of school, Margaret gets her period and believes that God has helped her to grow up and be a normal girl.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Shortly after Margaret and her family move to their new house, Grandma Simon comes to visit. She tells Margaret she will call her every night. Margaret is to answer the phone, however, since her parents might not like Grandma calling so much. Explain why Margaret's parents might object to nightly phone calls from Grandma Simon.

Margaret suspects her parents decided to move farther away from Grandma Simon because she is too involved in Margaret's life. Her parents have made it clear that they want Margaret to determine her own religious beliefs. Grandma pays for Margaret's summer camp and knits sweaters for Margaret. She is always asking Margaret if she has boyfriends and if they are Jewish. The nightly phone calls might be objectionable to Margaret's parents since they will ensure Grandma's continued influence on Margaret and on her decision about religion.

Literary Analysis

Margaret frequently talks to God to relate the events and problems in her life and to ask for help. Explain why she always begins talking with God by saying, "Are you there God? It's me, Margaret."

Margaret is beginning to explore the meaning of her life and her religious beliefs. Since her parents have not brought her up in a distinct religious environment, she is not sure what God is all about or even if God exists. She does not know for sure how to call upon God nor how God will know who is speaking. Margaret uses the same preface for her conversations with God to help her establish a solid, predictable relationship in a life that she feels is unsteady and uncertain.

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Inferential Comprehension

When Mr. Benedict gives a test to the class, Freddy Barnett conspires with the class to not put names on any of the tests. Explain why Freddy suggests that idea and why Margaret goes along with the prank.

Freddy probably wants to play a trick on Mr. Benedict, knowing that this is his first year teaching. More importantly, however, Freddy has probably not studied for the test and is unprepared. His score of fifty-three indicates his lack of knowledge. By persuading all the students to leave their names off their papers, Freddy thinks he can avoid getting a low grade. Margaret participates in the conspiracy because she wants desperately to fit in with the other students. She has studied hard for the test and is well prepared but is willing to give up her good grade in order to fit in with the others.

Constructing Meaning

When Margaret confronts Laura with the rumors about her and Moose, Laura gets upset and leaves in a hurry. What is the main thing that Margaret realizes after she catches up with Laura and apologizes?

Margaret has always been somewhat jealous of Laura because of her good looks and striking physical appearance. Laura is tall and well-developed, while Margaret is one of the shortest girls and has barely begun to develop. In talking to Laura, Margaret realizes that Laura is not as happy as Margaret imagines. Laura says her height and physical attributes cause everyone to make fun of her. These facts make Margaret realize that she has been wrong about Laura.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Main Idea The story has twenty-five chapters that are untitled. Each chapter conveys a main idea to the reader. Ask the students to divide up into several small groups to create titles for each of the chapters. The groups should be encouraged to discuss all suggestions for titles for each chapter and then to agree on the one they think best conveys the

main idea of each chapter. The titles should then be shared with the entire class and discussion should follow on the reasons each group decided on the final titles. The class as a whole can determine which title best captures the main idea of each chapter.

Recognizing Setting Margaret and her parents have just moved from New York City. Grandma Simon still lives in New York and feels that it has more to offer Margaret than Farbrook. Have the students work in pairs to do research on New York City and its main points of interest. Have each pair select two interesting attractions of New York, such as Lincoln Center and Radio City Music Hall. The students should develop a brochure describing the attractions. Display the brochures around the classroom.

Understanding Hist/Cultural Factors The story mentions several major religious affiliations: Jewish, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Buddhist, and Moslem. Divide the class into six groups and assign one of the religious affiliations to each group. The group should research the religion. Fundamental beliefs and practices of each religion should be listed on posters, which can then be displayed in the room.

Understanding Characterization Although Margaret is obviously the main character, many other characters are described well enough to be interesting. Have each student select a character in the book and develop a script for introducing the character to the class. Each student should then present the character to the class and the class should ask questions of the character relating to the story.