

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Baby

by

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Book Information

Patricia MacLachlan, Baby
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Interest Level: MG

A girl and her family find an abandoned baby in their driveway. The time they spend with her helps them come to terms with the loss of their own infant son.

Topics: Family Life, Babies; Family Life, Death; Natural Environments, Islands; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice

Main Characters

Grandma Byrd Larkin's grandmother who lives with Larkin and her parents

John/Papa Larkin's father, editor of the island newspaper

Julia Sophie's mother who leaves her with Larkin's family because her husband is very ill

Lalo Baldelli a boy in Larkin's class who is her best friend

Larkin twelve-year-old girl who narrates the story

Lily/Mama Larkin's mother, an artist/painter

Ms. Eunice Minifred school librarian who teaches the students about words and poetry

Rebel school janitor who rides a Harley Davidson and has a tattoo

Sophie the baby girl whose mother leaves her on the island in a basket with a note for Larkin's family

Vocabulary

breakwater a barrier that protects the shore from the impact of the waves

dirge a sad, solemn piece of music

flawed not perfect

wharf a landing place or pier

Synopsis

After the tourist season on the island where they lived, twelve-year-old Larkin, her parents, her grandmother and her friend, Lalo, find a baby girl in a basket. The mother left a note telling them the baby's name was Sophie, and that she was almost a year old. She said she couldn't care for Sophie at that time, but would come back for her one day. She asked them to take care of Sophie and told them she would send money when she was able.

Sophie's arrival was very emotional for the family because they had lost an infant boy only six months earlier. Up until that time, Larkin's parents had not spoken about her baby brother with Larkin. They had not named the baby boy, and his gravestone was labeled simply, "Baby." Her mother's way of dealing with her grief had been to spend time in her studio, painting. Her father worked out his feelings in the evenings before dinner by tap-dancing on the coffee table.

Sophie's arrival forces the entire family to think about the baby they have lost. At first, Papa is afraid to love Sophie because he knows that one day they will lose her. He warns Mama and Larkin not to love her. They all welcome her into their home and do come to love her, however. Larkin begins to talk about some of her feelings with her parents.

The school librarian, Ms. Minifred, reads a poem that comforted her when her brother died. The poem awakens more feelings of anger in Larkin, and she confronts her mother with three things that were bothering her. She had never seen her baby brother, they hadn't named him, and they wouldn't talk to her about him.

The story climaxes when Sophie's mother returns for her and takes her off the island. The family tells Larkin about her brother, they name him William, and have William's name engraved on his tombstone and hold a service in the cemetery. The story ends ten years later when Sophie returns to the island for Byrd's funeral.

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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

Ms. Minifred told Larkin's class they would be studying the power of words and how they can change people. Larkin thought, "Silence can change you, too, Ms. Minifred." What did she mean?

She was angry because her parents would not talk about her baby brother.

Literary Analysis

How did Larkin's relationship with her parents change from the beginning to the end of the story?

Answers should reflect the idea that Larkin was able to share her feelings more freely with her parents by the end of the story. They were closer to one another. They could share one another's grief.

Inferential Comprehension

Larkin and her parents were eventually able to talk about her baby brother. What helped them to do this?

Answers could include Sophie's arrival, the poem Ms. Minifred read, and the arrival of Sophie's mother to take her home.

Constructing Meaning

Has your family ever had to face the loss of a loved one? How did the members of your family deal with the grief?

Answers will vary.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting *Baby* takes place on a small island. Discuss how life on an island is different from life on the mainland. What would be the advantages and disadvantages to living on an island? How might the story have been

different if it had not taken place on an island?

Understanding Literary Features *Baby*

addresses the way people handle grief after the loss of a loved one. The reader is introduced to the characters some time after the loss of Larkin's baby brother. We only know a little of what the characters' lives were like before he died.

Students may want to read other books dealing with the death of friends or loved ones. Two examples of books dealing with the death of a friend are *Bridge to Terabithia* and *A Taste of Blackberries*. Students could compare and contrast these books to *Baby*. Mama deals with her grief by losing herself in her painting, while Papa tap dances. These were things they enjoyed doing before the baby's death, but now they are using to escape their pain. Students could talk about activities they enjoy doing. How do these activities make them feel better when they're feeling down?

Understanding Characterization Ms. Minifred and Rebel are two rather colorful characters from the story. Students may enjoy drawing a picture of these characters together. It might also be fun to speculate on how the two characters met and what they were like in their younger days.

Understanding the Author's Craft The story was told in the first person by Larkin. It might be interesting to tell the story from Sophie's mother's point of view. The story would be totally different. The reader would learn about Sophie's parents and how they dealt with Sophie's father's illness. The reader would have more insight into why Sophie's mother chose Larkin's family and the difficulties she faced by leaving her baby with them.