

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Burning Up

by  
Caroline B. Cooney

### Book Information

Caroline B. Cooney, Burning Up  
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Interest Level: UG

When a girl she had met at an inner-city church is murdered, fifteen-year-old Macey channels her grief into a school project that leads her to uncover prejudice she had not imagined in her grandparents and their wealthy Connecticut community.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Misc./Other

**Topics:** Community Life, Prejudice; Community Life, School; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Mysteries, Murder; Recommended Reading, YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant YA; Recommended Reading, YARP

### Main Characters

Alice Yinson an attorney who once taught with Wade Sibley

Austin a sixteen-year-old boy struggling with his parents' separation, his interest in Macey, and her investigation of the fire

Macey Clare the principal character in the story; a fifteen-year-old girl trying desperately to seek the truth concerning a fire in her town thirty-eight years earlier

Macey's and Austin's parents four adults who love their children, but are very caught up in their own world and often seem distant to their children

The Maceys and the Fents grandparents of Macey and Austin, who refuse to give their grandchildren any important information about the fire

Venita a young black girl who becomes friends with Macey

Wade Sibley the black man who escaped harm when the barn fire occurred, and who was a science teacher in 1959

### Vocabulary

**contagion** a harmful or corrupting influence; the tendency to spread, as of an influence or emotional state

**Druids** ancient priests

**indigo** a shade of blue ranging from dark blue to grayish purple

**perambulator** a baby carriage

**trajectory** the path of a moving particle or body

### Synopsis

Fifteen-year-old Macey Clare has been assigned a school project researching local history in her small Connecticut town. She decides to investigate the history of a burned-out barn across the street from her grandparents' house. Her grandparents should be a wonderful source of information, but they make it very clear they do not want to talk about the fire. Everywhere Macey turns for help, she is greeted with evasive answers.

Sixteen-year-old Austin is spending the summer with his grandparents, while his mother and father try to come to terms with their disintegrating relationship. His grandparents live just down the road from Macey's grandparents.

Saturday Group, a school group providing community service, brings Macey and Austin to the inner city and the Church of the Good Shepherd. Macey develops a friendship with Venita, a tough black girl who surprises Macey by quoting Shakespeare. While the Group is repainting Sunday-school rooms, a fire breaks out, and Austin saves Macey when her hair catches fire. It's a traumatic experience and one they choose not to tell their grandparents. The two young people continue to research the 1959 fire. Macey is shocked to learn that the man who narrowly escaped being killed in the fire was a black man who taught science at the junior high school. Sparks of racial prejudice keep jumping out at every turn.

Macey is saddened by the cruel gang killing of

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Venita, and this sets her on an obsessive path to find out the truth concerning the intent behind the fire that put Wade Sibley out of his home. She leaves no stone unturned as she and Austin continue to question people who should know the details. An old childhood friend of her mother claims to have been sent to boarding school rather than be taught by a black man. The old church secretary said parents just couldn't have a "Negro" teaching their children. Bit by bit, Macey uncovers deep fears and old hatreds surrounding the history of her perfect little hometown. What frightens her most is that the fire appeared to be purposely set, and she wonders which of Mr. Sibley's neighbors could be so cruel. Could it possibly have been her grandparents? Could it have been Austin's grandparents? What role did her own mother play?

By the end of the story, Macey discovers she, in many ways, is much like her grandparents. They did nothing to help Mr. Sibley when the fire put him out of his home, and Macey believes she can do nothing when it comes to changing the views and prejudices of the people in her town. With the help of some thought-provoking words from Mr. Sibley, Macey challenges herself and her friends to make a difference. She decides to use Sophomore Class Day as a platform from which to begin. Macey knows and tells her friends, "There were fires to put out."

### Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Macey and Austin develop a strong bond during their time together. What do they have in common?

*Both seem to connect very strongly with their grandparents; both have parents who are preoccupied with their own lives, making it appear they have less time for their children; both have a strong sense of what is right and wrong; both are struggling with inner fears and emotions (Macey's fears concern the involvement of her grandparents in the fire; Austin's fears concern his parents' relationship.).*

### Literary Analysis

Re-read Dorothy Edna's letter to Macey. What does she mean when she tells Macey, "So you be true, and you run for Venita? Use that life you have."

*Students should understand that Dorothy Edna was expecting Macey to take charge and do something positive with her life. She might want Macey to fight for a worthwhile cause or spend time helping others. She didn't want Macey to become apathetic to the problems facing society, in this case, the problem of prejudice.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Macey notices Venita's obituary takes up a mere five inches in the newspaper. If Macey had the opportunity to write about Venita, what might she say?

*Answers will vary, but should include feelings that Venita had a love for life, a willingness to help, a positive and strong-willed personality; she didn't let things pass her by and stepped in when she saw a wrong being committed.*

### Constructing Meaning

Imagine yourself standing in the dark and watching Mr. Sibley's home being burned to the ground. How might you have reacted? Do you think times have changed? Are there still societal prejudices?

*Students' responses will vary depending upon personal views. There should be a strong agreement there are still societal prejudices.*

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### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Literary Features** The recurring theme throughout the story is racial prejudice. Macey discovered that prejudice existed in 1959 and seems to have continued into the 1990s. She read about several historical events, such as the nine Little Rock students and their attempt to attend a white school, Rosa Parks and the bus boycott, and the bombing of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, home. Have students research these events and others in American history. Using their information, have them prepare a newspaper with full headlines and articles based on one (or more) of these events.

**Understanding Characterization** Macey and Austin learn their grandparents stood by and laughed while Mr. Sibley's home burned. They stood and did nothing, offered him nothing, and this seemed to be the norm for most people in town. Have students divide into two debate teams. One side should argue why this could be seen as acceptable, based on the time, setting, and fears of a generation full of racial prejudices. The other side should argue against those points. Students should be well prepared, and guidelines should be set before the debating occurs.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Macey had a phone conversation with Wade Sibley at the end of the story. She had known few details about this man, other than he was black, taught science, and had the perseverance to remain in town after being subjected to a violent, racially initiated crime. The details surrounding his life were sketchy. Have students work in small groups to fill in some missing details of Mr. Sibley's life. Have them describe what they think his life was like. What might he have feared upon accepting the teaching job in Connecticut? What did he fear after the fire? Why did he choose to stay when it was evident he was unwanted? Where did he go once he left? How did he end up in California? Do students think the prejudice followed him wherever he went? Each group should choose a method to present their ideas. Examples include

a diary, short story, time line, biography board, and resume.

**Recognizing Setting** Macey's father told her he read in the *Times* that Harvard University published a report on segregation today. The report stated that Connecticut and Mississippi had the same level of segregation. They were the worst states. Have students do their own research concerning segregation in the United States. Have them begin with Connecticut and Mississippi to see if what Macey's father said was correct. Then, they can follow-up with segregation in their own state. In what cities are there records of segregation? Students may go one step further and compare segregation in their state during the 1950s and '60s to the present.