

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Cat Ate My Gymsuit

by
Paula Danziger

Book Information

Paula Danziger, The Cat Ate My Gymsuit
Quiz Number: 213
Delacorte Press, 1974
ISBN 0-440-41612-4; LCCN
147 Pages
Book Level: 3.9
Interest Level: MG

When the unconventional English teacher who helped her conquer many of her feelings of insecurity is fired, thirteen-year-old Marcy Lewis uses her new found courage to campaign for the teacher's reinstatement.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

Topics: Community Life, School; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Growing Up; Family Life, Mothers; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Work it Out: Conflicts; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8

Main Characters

Joel Anderson the smartest student in class, who befriends Marcy and plays a large role in the protest; like Ms. Finney, he encourages Marcy to be herself

Marcy Lewis the narrator of the story, a ninth-grade girl who changes from an introverted student with low self-esteem to a more confident student leader

Mr. Lewis Marcy's domineering father, who disapproves of Marcy's involvement with Ms. Finney and the change it creates in his wife

Mr. Stone the school principal, who disapproves of Ms. Finney's teaching methods and suspends her

Mrs. Lewis Marcy's timid mother, who becomes more assertive and stands up for herself and her children

Ms. Barbara Finney the English teacher who inspires the changes in Marcy; she is suspended from teaching because of her unconventional ways

Nancy Sheridan a friend of Marcy who began their friendship at her mother's insistence, but who truly grows to care for Marcy

Robert Alexander a student who becomes a leader in the movement to protest Ms. Finney's suspension; his mother disapproves of his involvement

Stuart Lewis Marcy's four-year-old brother, whose constant companion is a teddy bear named Wolf, whom he stuffs with orange pits

Vocabulary

commune a group of people who live together and share resources such as food, income, living quarters, etc.

group dynamics the study of how a group of people interact with one another

precedent an act or instance that may be used as an example in dealing with later similar cases

propaganda ideas or opinions specifically distributed in a way to promote someone or something

tranquilizer a prescription drug used to calm a person

Synopsis

Life is not easy for overweight, thirteen-year-old Marcy Lewis. She is unhappy with school, home, and herself. She feels lost and alone until the day the new English teacher, Ms. Finney, arrives. Inspired by Ms. Finney's innovative teaching approach, Marcy begins taking a much more active role in school. She begins participating in class, getting involved in extracurricular activities, and even starts making some friends (including a special friendship with Joel, the smartest boy in class).

Unfortunately, Ms. Finney is too good to last. The school principal, Mr. Stone, suspends her because of her controversial teaching methods, different style of dress, and refusal to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Shocked and appalled, Marcy defiantly stands up to Mr. Stone and defends her teacher. A student group quickly forms to decide what action to take to get Ms. Finney reinstated. Because of her

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courage with the principal, Marcy is elected to be a leader of the group, along with Joel, Nancy, and Robert. Mr. Stone discovers their attempt to stage a school-wide protest and promptly suspends the group for ten days. Shortly thereafter, school is closed until the hearing can take place.

Marcy's actions spark a conflict between her mother and father. Marcy's mother is inspired by and proud of the changes in her daughter. She supports her efforts and learns from her daughter's new assertiveness. Her father, on the other hand, is extremely angry with her and repeatedly tries to stop her involvement. He has always been verbally abusive to Marcy, calling her fat and stupid, but now he is even angrier and blames her for the growing tension in the family. Despite this resistance, Marcy feels compelled to keep fighting.

The hearing arrives and Marcy attends it with her mother, despite her father's attempt to prevent them from doing so. The Board of Education votes to reinstate Ms. Finney, based upon a legal precedent regarding the Pledge of Allegiance. Marcy and the others are relieved, until Ms. Finney shocks everyone by announcing her resignation. She explains that because the issue has divided the community, she does not believe she could be an effective teacher any longer. Marcy and her friends are hurt, but they finally accept Ms. Finney's decision.

Marcy knows she has grown from the experience tremendously. She is seeing a psychologist, has friends now, and while she is still making up far-fetched excuses to avoid gym class, she is learning to like herself.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Throughout the story, Marcy's father is strongly opposed to Ms. Finney's teaching methods. What are some possible reasons for this?

Marcy's father probably feels his authority is jeopardized because Marcy has become stronger and more independent since Ms. Finney began teaching. In addition, Marcy's mother is growing more assertive after being inspired by the changes in her daughter. On a broader level, this story takes place during a time of great social unrest: America was still engaged in the war in Vietnam, and Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements were strong across the country. America's youth were rising up and making themselves heard. It is possible Marcy's father is threatened by the change in society, and he does not want to see it in his own home.

Literary Analysis

In chapter twelve, Marcy's mother claims she has never paid much attention to women's liberation. Until then, she had always allowed Marcy's father to make the family decisions. By the end of the story, she is defending what she believes in and has decided to go back to school. How will this change the life of the Lewis family? Considering the setting of the book, why is this a shocking thing for her to do?

The relationship between Marcy's parents could change drastically. Marcy's father will need to accept more responsibility for household duties and will need to understand that life will not be the same as in the past. Marcy's mother will likely want more say in the family decisions; therefore, he will have to adjust to having an equal. During the time of this story, this was still a difficult conflict for many families to resolve. Conflict was rising in response to the demand for women's rights and their return to the workforce, so in many communities the expectation was still that women should stay at home.

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Inferential Comprehension

Marcy changes a great deal throughout the book. By the end of the book, she is a very different person than in the beginning. In what ways does Marcy change? In what ways does she stay the same?

In the beginning of the story, Marcy is very shy and introverted. She suffers from low self-esteem and is convinced no one wants to talk to her or be her friend. As the story progresses, she becomes more confident and comfortable with herself. She grows assertive and stands up for herself and what she believes in. She takes more of a stand against her father as well. She makes some new friends and has her first date. At the end of the story, she still has some trouble at home, and she will not participate in gym class, but she is experiencing some very positive changes.

Constructing Meaning

After reading *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, do you think a protest could happen in your school? Is there anything you would feel strongly enough about to risk possible suspension?

This question asks students to explore their value systems and to determine what they feel strongly about. This should not be an opportunity for students to complain, but rather a chance to seriously question their assumptions.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Mr. Stone's official reason for suspending Ms. Finney is that she refuses to say the Pledge of Allegiance. The members of the Board of Education, however, must reinstate her because there is a legal precedent to support her. Have students research the origin of the Pledge of Allegiance. They should write a one-page summary of their findings. Follow up with a discussion on Ms. Finney's refusal to say the Pledge.

Making Predictions By the end of the story, Marcy has made quite a bit of progress in her personal life. There are things that are still a

problem, however. She is still failing gym class, and she is still not happy with her father. As a class, brainstorm ideas on what could happen if the story continued. What will Marcy's years in high school be like? Where will her friendship with Joel lead? Will she ever participate in gym class? Will she continue to be active in student affairs? What outcome do you foresee with Marcy and her father?

Recognizing Feelings One of Ms. Finney's biggest contributions to the students is the creation of "Smedley." Create a Smedley group in the classroom using some of Ms. Finney's exercises such as one-on-one interviewing (chapter four) and group sharing (chapter five). Be sure to give extensive ground rules to prevent unnecessary or hurtful comments and to make it a positive experience.

Understanding the Main Idea Marcy reminds Joel of the incident in the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* in which Atticus tells Jem that "you can't understand someone until you've walked around in his or her shoes for a while." Have students prepare a collage of footprint pictures that follows Marcy's journey through the story. For example, they might begin the collage with a picture (cut in the pattern of a footprint) from a magazine of someone they think looks like Marcy or of gym uniforms. Each picture (footprint) should represent a significant point in the story.