

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Chicago Blues

by

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Book Information

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Lissa, a seventeen-year-old art student living on her own in Chicago, must raise her eleven-year-old sister when their alcoholic mother becomes incapable of caring for her.

Topics: Arts, Misc./Other; Diseases/Disorders, Alcohol Abuse/Addiction; Family Life, Illness; Family Life, Sisters; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - High School (Theme: Tough Decisions)

Main Characters

Bobbie Ann Dad's second wife; she is very young

Charles Marnie's polite boyfriend

Dad Lissa and Marnie's irresponsible father, who travels the country playing in a band in nightclubs

Daniel Shute the playful young man and fellow artist who befriends Lissa

Dr. Galloway Lissa's supportive and easygoing mentor

Marnie Hastings Lissa's impetuous eleven-year-old sister, who struggles to deal with her feelings of abandonment

Melissa Hastings (Lissa) a talented seventeen-year-old girl who has a deep sense of responsibility; she takes in her younger sister, Marnie

Peggy a friend of Lissa's mother; she allows Mom to stay with her for a few weeks

Sarah Hastings Lissa's alcoholic mother, whose drinking makes her unable to continue her singing or take care of Marnie

Vocabulary

blunders mistakes or errors

gallery a place to show artwork

mentor a teacher who personally guides a younger or less knowledgeable person; a person who serves as a model for another

miniature smaller than usual size

publicity widespread information that brings attention to a person, event or cause

scribbles writes quickly in a sloppy fashion

Synopsis

After her alcoholic mother asks Lissa to take care of her younger sister Marnie, Lissa finds herself struggling to maintain her studies in art school while attending to Marnie's needs. Marnie is distraught that she has to live in Lissa's tiny apartment in the city, but she tries to make the best of it. Lissa is able to make extra money selling miniature dollhouse-like rooms, but she is also trying to maintain a high enough grade-point average to keep her scholarship in art school. She receives little assistance from her parents, but her mentor, Dr. Galloway, and her friend Daniel offer some moral support.

Marnie gradually begins to like her new home better. She becomes friends with a boy in her school, attends her first dance and wins a certificate for her high math grades. When Lissa and Marnie's father arrives unexpectedly, Marnie is overjoyed. Unfortunately, Dad undermines Lissa's attempts to give Marnie a stable home by taking Marnie to the club where he is performing. Then he ignores Lissa's request that he bring Marnie home at a reasonable hour, and finally, he tries to persuade Lissa to let Marnie come with him to sing in clubs. Lissa refuses; she is determined to protect Marnie.

After several months of taking care of Marnie, Lissa receives a letter from Mom. Marnie claims she does not want to leave Lissa, but then Mom comes to visit them and shows that she is now sober. Marnie decides she wants to go back with Mom, and she attempts to run away from Lissa. Recognizing that

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Marnie still needs her mother, Lissa finally agrees to allow Marnie to return to Mom. She also decides to spend a couple of days with Mom herself. Both sisters appreciate their new closeness while looking forward to future events in their own lives.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How does Dr. Galloway help Lissa when she fails a test?

First, he talks the teacher into letting Lissa take the test again. Then he bolsters her self-esteem by telling her that she will be a successful miniaturist. Finally, he reminds her to keep focused on her work.

Literary Analysis

How does Marnie deal with difficult situations?

Marnie usually blows up and cries or throws a fit when she does not like a situation. Sometimes she calms down and is willing to listen to reason, but on other occasions she tries to punish Lissa by giving her the silent treatment or by running away.

Inferential Comprehension

Mom comes to take Marnie back after she sobers up, but she yields to Lissa's desire to keep Marnie. What reasons might Mom have for allowing Lissa to continue taking care of Marnie?

Lissa could report Mom's negligence to the authorities. Mom does not want to further disrupt Marnie's life, and she knows that it upsets Marnie to see them fighting. Also, Mom knows that there is truth in Lissa's accusations, and she may not be completely confident that she will stay sober.

Constructing Meaning

Do you think Lissa tries too hard to control Marnie's life? Support your position using details from the book.

Answers will vary. Some students will feel that Lissa is too young to take care of her sister and does not do a good job guiding her. Others may feel that Lissa is wise and responsible beyond her years; she is the only person who keeps her promises to Marnie.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Lissa struggles to concentrate on making her miniature rooms while she deals with Marnie. Have the students use a shoe box to create their own little room. Have them make a brief list of the challenges they encounter while making the miniature.

Understanding the Author's Craft This story is told from Lissa's point of view. Have the students consider how the story might be different if it is told from Marnie's point of view. Have them rewrite one of the events in Marnie's voice.

Identifying Persuasive Language Lissa feels overburdened by her responsibilities, but she does not think her parents are able to help her. Have students write a letter from Lissa persuading her mother or her father to become more responsible.

Comparing and Contrasting Lissa and Marnie's relationship changes throughout the course of this story. Have the students make a chart of events that affect their relationship. Ask students to explain the significance of each event.