

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Crazy Lady!

by  
Jane Leslie Conly

### Book Information

Jane Leslie Conly, Crazy Lady!  
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180 Pages  
Book Level: 3.8  
Interest Level: MG

Although Vernon joins his friends in ridiculing the neighborhood outcasts, he develops a social conscience after all.

**Award:** Newbery Honor

**Topics:** Community Life, Mental Illness; Community Life, Prejudice; Diseases/Disorders, Alcohol Abuse/Addiction; Family Life, Death; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

### Main Characters

Daddy Dibbs Vernon's gentle and grief-stricken father, who never learned to read

Jerry Vernon's classmate who has a brother with a mental handicap

Maxine Flooter a neighbor whom the neighborhood kids call "Crazy Lady"; Vernon befriends her and her son

Miss Annie the arthritic and motherly neighbor who agrees to tutor Vernon

Miss Marlow Ronald's attractive teacher, who tries to police the quality of care Ronald receives at home

Ronald Maxine's son, who is mentally disabled

Steph Dibbs Vernon's older sister, who has assumed most of the household responsibilities since their mother's death

Tony Dibbs Vernon's older brother, who prides himself on his intelligence and maintains an antagonistic relationship with Vernon

Vernon Dibbs the insecure and sensitive seventh-grade boy who narrates the story

### Vocabulary

**alcoholic** someone who cannot stop drinking liquor

**gawky** having an awkward appearance

**shortchange** to give someone less than is rightfully due them

**Social Services** an agency that helps make sure children are properly cared for

**tutor** to individually help someone learn something

**twitch** to make sudden, uncontrolled small movements

### Synopsis

*Crazy Lady* begins with Vernon Dibbs telling his friend and tutor, Miss Annie, about a dream he had. Miss Annie encourages him to write about the past events related to the dream, and the remainder of the book is a flashback to two years earlier.

Vernon, a poor city boy from Tenley Heights, is dealing with the loss of his mother and his academic failure in seventh grade when he strikes up an unlikely friendship with Maxine Flooter and her mentally handicapped son, Ronald. Maxine has a drinking problem and tends to wear very strange clothing. Vernon enters the relationship reluctantly, since he and his peers have spent many afternoons teasing the eccentric Maxine to see her throw one of her famous temper tantrums. Vernon is thrown into the association when he offers to help Maxine with her groceries and ends up asking her to find him a tutor to help him pass his English class.

When Maxine's elderly neighbor, Miss Annie, agrees to tutor him, she asks that he assist Maxine in return for the lessons. Vernon helps Maxine clear the garbage from her yard, cashes her checks when she is in jail, and baby-sits Ronald when Maxine needs to get food stamps. Vernon's grades improve, and he starts to feel better about himself.

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When Ronald's teacher, Miss Marlow, comes to visit, Vernon feels compelled to volunteer to take Ronald to the Special Olympics. He decides to organize a carnival in order to raise the money for the athletic shoes Ronald needs for the games. Vernon's self-confidence receives a huge boost when the carnival is a success, but his happiness is short-lived. Maxine arrives drunk and begins yelling at everyone. Her drunken behavior jeopardizes her custody of Ronald, and Vernon worries that Miss Marlow saw Maxine and has reported her to Protective Services.

He asks his emotionally distant father to give him advice and becomes upset when his father does not know what to do. Vernon reveals how much he misses his mother by shouting at his father that his mother would have been able to help him.

Vernon's attempts to help Maxine are thwarted by Maxine's numerous drinking binges, one of which includes a trip to Vernon's church, where she announces to the congregation that Vernon is stupid. Vernon is very sensitive about this subject; he recently battled his brother Tony because Tony merely implied that Vernon was not smart. His relationship with Maxine is permanently damaged, but he still struggles to help Ronald.

In the last chapters of the story, Vernon and Ronald have a successful trip to the Special Olympics, but on the way home Vernon finds out from Miss Marlow that Maxine has decided to give custody of Ronald to his aunt in North Carolina. Miss Annie tries to reassure him that this is for the best, but Vernon does not want to believe her. He chases the car as it takes Ronald away, stopping only after he trips and injures himself. Fortunately, Vernon finds that his father is there to comfort him.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

When Vernon asks his father for advice about how to help Maxine keep Ronald, his father tells him he does not know what to do. Why does this make Vernon miss his mother?

*Vernon's mother was always trying to help people. She and Vernon seemed to have had a special bond, and Vernon feels that she always knew how to make things better. When Vernon comes to his father, he is hoping that his father can help him the same way his mother did. When he cannot, Vernon realizes once again that his mother's death has changed his family forever.*

### Literary Analysis

In *Crazy Lady*, Vernon Dibbs eventually learns to appreciate the neighborhood he lives in as a rather special place. What makes Tenley Heights a better neighborhood than Vernon originally thought?

*Vernon realizes that his neighbors are much kinder than he thought at the beginning of the story. Even though many of the people in his community are poor and suffer their own hardships, they are willing to help one another. Vernon finds himself helping Maxine bring home her groceries, Miss Annie and Mrs. Moore help Maxine take care of Ronald, and the whole neighborhood comes together to help Vernon create the carnival.*

### Inferential Comprehension

After the carnival, Tony tells Vernon he should have known that Maxine would do something. When Vernon wants to know why Tony did not mention this before the carnival, Tony shrugs and says, "It was your show, Vern." Why does this make Vernon so angry that he attacks his brother?

*When Vernon begins planning the carnival, Tony implies that Vernon is not able to do the work. Vernon takes this as a personal challenge and is determined to do things right. Most of his neighbors and family do everything they can to help him make the carnival a success, but Tony does not. Instead he seems to want to see Vernon make mistakes. Vernon believes this shows Tony thinks he is stupid and wants to see him fail.*

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### Constructing Meaning

How does the reader know that Vernon is not stupid even though he has a hard time in school?

*Vernon spends a lot of time thinking about how to solve his problems. When Maxine is in jail, he thinks to buy Ronald a soda so he will not feel so bad about his mother being gone. He even thinks to ask Maxine what kind of soda Ronald likes instead of just buying anything. He carefully organizes the carnival, makes sure he gets his proper change when he buys Ronald's clothes, and puts a great deal of thought into his letter to Miss Marlow. All of this shows that Vernon can be very successful when he has the time to think about what needs to be done.*

something nice and it did not go the way they had planned. What went wrong for them and how did it make them feel?

## Teachable Skills

**Describing Actions or Events** Vernon spends a lot of time planning for the carnival. So students can get a better understanding of how much work this involves, have them plan their own small carnival. Have them decide the best way to use each student's special talents, what might be most appealing to their peers, and how they might get the materials to create the carnival. If time and materials allow, have the students hold a carnival and donate the proceeds to a charity.

**Comparing and Contrasting** *Crazy Lady* has a wide assortment of unique characters. In order for the students to fully visualize just how different these people are, have them choose four or five characters and draw them based on their description in the book. Students may share their drawings to enjoy the variety of character interpretations.

**Making Predictions** Have the students imagine that Ronald has come back to visit Vernon. He has learned to talk and he has some things he wants to tell Vernon. Have the students write a dialogue between the two friends.

**Responding to Literature** Vernon is very upset when Maxine disrupts the carnival. Have the students write about a time when they tried to do