

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Face on the Milk Carton by Caroline B. Cooney

Book Information

Caroline B. Cooney, The Face on the Milk Carton
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Book Level: 4.8
Interest Level: UG

A photograph of a missing girl on a milk carton leads Janie on a search for her real identity.

Award: Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

Topics: Family Life, Misc./Other; Mysteries, Kidnappings; Mysteries, Missing Persons; READNOW - Perfection Learning Corporation, Perfection Learning - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - High School (Theme: Tough Decisions)

Main Characters

Adair O'Dell Janie's friend

Daddy (Frank) the man Janie has known as her father for twelve years

Janie Johnson a fifteen-year-old girl who discovers she was kidnapped as a young child

Jason Janie's friend

Katrina Janie's friend

Lizzie Reeve's sister who is studying to be a lawyer

Mom (Mommy, Miranda) the lady Janie has known as her mother for twelve years

Pete Janie's friend

Reeve Shields Janie's boyfriend and confidant

Sarah-Charlotte Janie's best friend

Vocabulary

clinically in a manner which is purely scientific, dispassionately curious

extricate to set free

grotesque ridiculous, absurd

inequity injustice or unfairness

Synopsis

While eating lunch at school one day, fifteen-year-old Janie discovers her face on a milk carton. Though she finds it difficult to imagine that her parents are bad people who would be part of a kidnapping, she does remember the dress worn by the little girl in the picture. She becomes suspicious of her true identity when she starts putting certain pieces of information together. Her parents have no pictures of her before age five, they make excuses when she asks for her birth certificate, and she has little family resemblance to her parents.

Little by little, Janie remembers events that took place in a mall twelve years earlier. Her suspicions grow when she finds a trunk in the attic containing memorabilia of someone named Hannah, and the polka dot dress worn by the little girl in the picture. When Janie confronts her parents with this find, they tell her she is Hannah's child and they are her grandparents. Janie was five when Hannah brought her to their house. When Hannah returned to the Hare Krishna cult she had joined, the family changed its name and moved so the cult members couldn't find Janie.

While this eases Janie's feelings about her parents, it still doesn't explain her memories or why her face is currently on the milk carton. She convinces her boyfriend, Reeve, to drive her to the area in New Jersey that is home to the family that is looking for the lost Jennie Spring. Even though she doesn't want to admit it, the people she sees at the house all bear a strong resemblance to her.

She vows to forget all about the connection to the family in New Jersey. To help her sort out her thoughts, she writes down her feelings in a notebook. Later she puts these papers into an envelope addressed to New Jersey. When she discovers that the envelope is missing and may have been mailed, she tells her parents about the milk carton. It is her mother who finally pushes her into making contact with the family.

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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

Why do the other students think Janie is just kidding when she says she is the little girl on the milk carton?

It is common to see missing children's faces posted in different places. It is not common for one of those missing children to be found. Like many of us, they probably think that was something that happened to "other" people rather than to someone they knew.

Literary Analysis

Why does Sarah-Charlotte say toward the end of the book that Janie is no fun to be with?

There are several likely factors that contribute to Sarah-Charlotte's feelings. Sarah-Charlotte is jealous of the fact that Janie has a boyfriend. There are several instances in which the reader senses that having a boyfriend is a high priority for Sarah-Charlotte. A second factor is that Janie has confided in Reeve rather than Sarah-Charlotte, and she has no idea what is happening in Janie's life at the time.

Inferential Comprehension

Why don't Janie's parents tell her about Hannah?

They have cut all ties with Hannah. They might have been afraid that Janie would try to find Hannah. Talking about Hannah might be too painful for them. They want to spare Janie's feelings.

Constructing Meaning

What do you think will happen after Janie (Jennie) talks to her real mother?

It seems likely that they will set up a time for Janie to meet the family from which she was kidnapped. It is doubtful she would go to live with that family because of the strong feelings she expresses for Frank and Miranda. Miranda will probably encourage Janie to develop a relationship with her "real" family because of her feelings related to Hannah.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Throughout the book, Janie struggles to understand how her parents could be involved with a kidnapping. This is a major reason Janie cannot believe that she was actually kidnapped. At different times, she vows to put everything related to the milk carton out of her mind. But things are too coincidental to ignore. Finally, she brings her suspicions to her parents. Have the students relate a time when they tried to ignore what seemed to be the unbelievable truth. What finally convinced them to accept the truth? How did they feel about their discoveries? How did the people around them react? Was there anyone who was particularly supportive?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In the book, Janie's parents tell her about their daughter, Hannah. They were heartbroken when Hannah left them at age sixteen to join Hare Krishna. During the sixties and seventies, Hare Krishna followers were visible in many public places such as airports. Many families experienced the same things Frank described when he talked about trying to get Hannah out of the cult. Have the students research Hare Krishna. Find out what attracted people to the cult, what its beliefs were, and how many followers it had at its high point. Does the cult still exist? Has its focus changed since it began?

Drawing Conclusions The story doesn't explain why Hannah kidnapped Janie. Have students

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write a short chapter describing this scenario. Have them include Hannah's motivation, Janie's mother's distraction and Janie's thoughts. Use dialogue as well as description.

Responding to Literature After Janie remembers the prayer recited by her birth father in her nightmare, she decides to herself she wants to be Janie Johnson and not Jennie Spring. She finds it difficult to concentrate on her homework. To sort her thoughts and feelings out she writes letter entries to Mr. and Mrs. Spring in her silver notebook. Have the students reread those entries and imagine they are the Springs reading these letters for the first time. How would they react? Let the students write a letter of response to Janie from Mr. or Mrs. Spring.