

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Fig Pudding

by

### Ralph Fletcher

### Book Information

Ralph Fletcher, Fig Pudding  
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The Abernathys, who do everything in a big way, have an eventful year.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Society of School Libr. International Best/Honor; State Award

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### Main Characters

Brad Abernathy the fifth Abernathy child, who is known for his gullibility; he dies after colliding with an ambulance while riding his bike

Clifford Allyn Abernathy II Cliff's kind and fair-minded father

Clifford Allyn Abernathy III (Cliff) the fifth-grade boy who narrates this story; he is the eldest Abernathy child and is frequently put in charge of the other children

Cynthia Abernathy (Cyn) the third Abernathy child, who loves animals and resents being the only girl in the family

Dr. Wentworth the Abernathys' sympathetic family doctor

Grandma Annie Lisa Abernathy's strong and humorous mother; she loves the company of her grandchildren and bakes with them and tells them stories

Joshua Abernathy (Josh) the youngest Abernathy child, who is hospitalized over Christmas with a severe infection

Lisa Abernathy the sensitive and compassionate mother of the Abernathy children

Nathan Abernathy (Nate) the second Abernathy child, who enjoys playing pranks on Brad because of his gullibility; he shares a room with Cliff

Sharon Wynn Cyn's friend, who becomes like a sister to her

Teddy Abernathy the fourth Abernathy child, who is known for his wild and naughty behavior

Uncle Billy Lisa Abernathy's playful older brother, who frequently plays games with his nephews and niece

### Vocabulary

**boycotted** refused to participate in an activity or refused to use a product as a means of protest

**gullible** tending to believe everything, especially things that others would question

**lecture** a speech intended to educate or reform

**pulverize** to pound into tiny pieces

**quaver** to shake, usually with the voice when something sad or frightening is happening

**yeast** a tiny fungus that creates the fermentation needed to make bread and other baked goods rise

### Synopsis

The Christmas fun begins in Cliff Abernathy's house with the arrival of his beloved Grandma Annie. But then Cliff, the oldest of the six children, discovers that his toddler brother Josh is burning up with fever. Josh has to be rushed to the hospital. Grandma Annie tries to cheer them up by having them prepare a batch of sweet bread called stollen, but the children become upset when they realize that Josh is not there to crush the walnuts. Grandma solves the problem by leaving the walnuts out.

Josh's condition improves, but he is not well enough to come home. For weeks he has been asking for a "yidda yadda" for Christmas. When he points to a ladder in the hospital, the children realize he has been asking for a little ladder. The family stays up on Christmas Eve and builds Josh a ladder to take to him in the hospital.

The family's trials continue with the misbehavior of Cliff's wild little brother, Teddy. Cliff's mother tries to solve the behavior problem by having Teddy stay under the kitchen table, where she can watch him, but he does not stop misbehaving. When Mom gives

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up this punishment, Teddy confesses to Cliff that this is his favorite spot in the house.

In April, Cliff gets a tackle box for his birthday, but he is upset when his father asks to borrow the tackle box to take the younger children fishing. Cliff hides the fishing gear and fills the box with rags. He feels especially guilty for doing this when his father gives him a five-dollar bill to thank him for sharing. Mom takes Cliff, Nate, and Josh to the beach, where Cliff finally confesses what he has done. When Dad gets home, he punishes Cliff by having him keep the five-dollar bill as a reminder of his actions.

Later that summer, Cyn decides she would rather spend all her time with her friend Sharon. An animal lover, Cyn boycotts blueberry picking with Grandma Annie because she refuses to take food from the wild animals. She asks for a kitten, even though she knows her father really does not want any pets in the house. Surprisingly, her father allows her to have one. Cyn is overjoyed and picks out a white kitten that she insists on naming Snow. But Teddy frightens the kitten into hiding soon after it is brought into the house. After hours of searching for the kitten, they finally find it hiding in the chimney covered in soot.

In September, Cliff's brother Nate pulls a cruel joke on his brother Brad. Nate tells him Uncle Billy died from a heart attack and shows him his uncle lying on the ground. Just as Brad is about to burst into tears, Uncle Billy yells. While Brad is recovering from this, Teddy cries out that Josh has eaten a whole stick of butter. The children are greatly relieved to find out that Josh does not have to have his stomach pumped, and Uncle Billy celebrates this by putting a marshmallow peep on each dinner plate. When the family comes to dinner, they discover that Brad has gotten even with Nate by biting the head off each marshmallow chick. The family laughs at his joke.

In October Brad has a bicycle accident that severs his brain stem. He dies in the hospital. At the funeral, Cliff worries about his inability to cry. Uncle Billy tells him that people grieve in their own way.

When Christmas comes, most of the children do not feel like celebrating. Mom and Dad take them all to an inn in Vermont. The children honor Brad by placing gifts in his stocking, and a few days after coming home, Cliff dreams of playing with Brad and awakens in tears.

After Christmas the Abernathys prepare to attend a holiday feast in which each family is required to bring a special dish to supper. The Abernathys' contribution is always a fig pudding that Dad alone makes, but this year he invites the children to help him.

When the family arrives at the feast, Josh steps in the pudding as he hurriedly tries to get out of the car. Dad insists on cleaning up Josh and serving the pudding as if it never happened. When the relatives comment on the excellence of the pudding, the Abernathys escape to the kitchen. There they laugh heartily for the first time since Brad died.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Why does Nate like to play tricks on Brad?

*First, Brad almost always believes Nate when he tells Brad lies. When Uncle Billy pretends to be dead, Brad is the one who gets upset -- the rest of the children are just trying to figure out the trick. Second, Brad is not a very aggressive child, and he rarely retaliates when Nate does pull a trick on him. When he does get even by biting the head off Nate's marshmallow chick, it is in the form of a light-hearted joke that takes everyone by surprise because they do not expect it of him.*

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#### Literary Analysis

The Abernathy family has many traditions that are special to them. What are some of the ways in which the Abernathys create a world of their own in this story?

*In the first place, the Abernathys not only have a large family, but they are very close to their extended family and enjoy their traditions together. On Christmas, Grandma Annie comes to their house, and they each have a hand in preparing the stollen. One of the rules is that the youngest child must be the one to crack the nuts. Another tradition is the celebration of the holiday feast. Every year when Dad receives a parcel of figs from California, he ceremoniously retreats to the kitchen to make the fig pudding. The pudding is then served as his specialty dish at the feast along with specialty dishes from each branch of the extended family. Besides these traditions, the Abernathys have a strong emphasis on the family as community, which is shown by the large number of children and the ways in which the children are treated and encouraged to interact with one another.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Why is it hard for Cliff to share the tackle box?

*Because he has so many siblings, Cliff is probably expected to share things quite often. When he gets the tackle box, he feels it is something special that belongs only to him. He takes great care to make sure that the box is kept clean and tidy, and he worries that his siblings might break or ruin his gear or the box. He also is still getting used to the idea of having such a wonderful thing, and he does not feel ready to share the box with his siblings yet.*

#### Constructing Meaning

How can the reader tell that the Abernathys are a close family?

*First, there are several instances in which the family is confronted with a challenge that it meets together. When Josh is ill, all the children are worried and want to help take care of him. Second, the family feels deeply when one of their members is not happy. When Cyn wants a new family, they are all hurt and try to find a way to make Cyn feel more at home in the household. When Brad dies, all the children say that they do not want to celebrate Christmas, with the sole exception of Josh, who is too little to understand. Finally, the family seems to do a lot of activities together, from cooking Christmas goods to playing with their Uncle Billy.*

#### Teachable Skills

**Responding to Literature** This story focuses on how the Abernathys operate as a community. One community activity they enjoy is baking with Grandma Annie. Break the children up into groups and have them attempt to make stollen or possibly a simpler recipe in the classroom. Allow them time to enjoy their dish after they have finished preparing it.

**Understanding Dialogue** One of the things Cliff seems to truly enjoy about his family is their sense of humor. Have the students find amusing statements in the story and discuss why they think these moments may be funny. For instance, when Brad bites the heads off the chicks, he says to Nate, "Yeah, I started with yours ... and it tasted so good I just kept on going." The moment is funny partly because Brad has finally gotten back at Nate for all the pranks he pulled.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** When Brad dies, Uncle Billy says, "When someone you love dies, you get a big bowl of sadness put down in front of you, steaming hot. You can start eating now, or you can let it cool and eat it bit by bit later on." Have the students explain the different ways the characters in this story "eat their bowl of sadness" after Brad dies.

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**Describing Actions or Events** Cliff says that his family is always overdoing things, and that the year described in this story is "like five years crammed into one." Because of this, the story is full of colorful and exciting events, as well as a few very sad moments. Have the students pick a favorite event and draw a picture of it. Have them include captions that describe what is happening in their picture.