

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Flour Babies

by  
Anne Fine

### Book Information

Anne Fine, Flour Babies  
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Book Level: 4.9  
Interest Level: UG

A boy becomes attached to the "baby" he's carried around in school as a class experiment.

**Award:** Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Carnegie Medal/Honors; Children's Book Award; Costa/Whitbread Children's Award

**Topics:** Community Life, School; Family Life, Babies; Family Life, Fathers; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+

### Main Characters

Dr. Devoy the director of the school's Science Fair who gives Simon a boost in self-confidence with praise for his flour baby project

Miss Arnott the nervous teacher whom Simon loves to tease in detention

Mr. Cassidy Simon's teacher, who is forced to amend his less-than-flattering opinion of Simon as the story unfolds

Mrs. Martin Simon's mother, who raised him admirably as a single parent

Robin Delaney Simon's friend and fellow "Room 8 loser"

Simon Martin the young student who embraces his science project and finds a new peace in his troubled life as a result

Simon's Father the man who never appears as a real character, but who, nevertheless, has an impact on his son's life

the Room 8 Boys Simon's fellow students, who look to him for leadership, then oppose his view of the flour-baby experiment

### Vocabulary

**bellow** to shout in a deep voice

**earhole** nerd

**inoculation** treatment using bacteria intended to make a person immune from a disease

**kilos** a unit of measure

**mayhem** causing needless damage

**stool pigeon** an informant

**tack** a strategy

### Synopsis

St. Boniface School is an all-boys' school attended by Simon Martin. He lives with his mother because his father walked out when he was a baby.

Simon is in Mr. Cassidy's infamous Room 8 with the other boys who can't or won't take school seriously. Mr. Cassidy must help the boys choose a project for the annual Science Fair. The better students are allowed to choose projects that are fun and challenging. The room 8 students are not. They end up with the "flour baby" experiment.

The experiment requires each of them to carry around a six-pound burlap sack filled with flour, which represents a baby. The purpose of the experiment is to teach the boys the responsibilities of parenthood. The rules state that the babies cannot be left unattended, and snoopers are on the alert to watch for any mistreatment of the babies.

Simon, who is in the detention room daily, becomes enamored of his baby. She's cute and even has a little skirt, and according to Simon, "she's the best of the babies."

At first, Simon finds flour baby-sitting tedious. But, much to his and everyone else's amazement, he becomes attached to his flour baby and goes to great lengths to protect her.

This taste of parenthood rekindles Simon's interest in his own long-departed father. Simon embarks on an inner quest to find peace concerning the man who ran out on him.

Through the course of the experiment, Simon sees things through his father's eyes. But he finally

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realizes his father doesn't matter because he didn't stick around long enough to see how great Simon was.

Along the way, he also understands how difficult being a parent and a teacher can be. As a result, he has a new respect for his mother and teachers. In the end, Simon decides that enjoying the freedoms of childhood is paramount for the time being. Later in life, and only when he is ready, he will tackle the responsibilities of parenthood. But for now, Simon will just enjoy being Simon.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

What did Mr. Cassidy mean when he told Simon he "sold himself short"?

*The flour baby experiment showed Mr. Cassidy a new side of Simon--a boy who was unselfish and showed potential when he acted appropriately.*

#### Literary Analysis

Why do you think knowing the song his father was whistling when he left was a source of comfort for Simon?

*Although the song's title wasn't accurate, it gave Simon something "tangible" to analyze in order to understand his father better. The song's words did in fact help Simon to free himself of the burden of his father's act of abandonment.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

How do you think Simon will view fatherhood later--as a life sentence or as a blessing? Why?

*The end of the story foreshadows to some extent that he will probably see it as a blessing--if he waits until he is really ready to take on the commitment. During the experiment, however, Simon views parenthood from both sides of the fence.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Sir Galahad was a knight who set out to find the Holy Grail. Martin Simon likened Simon to this brave character. Compare Simon and Sir Galahad.

*Both went on a quest--Simon entered his somewhat unwittingly. Simon was seeking a "Glorious Explosion" of used-up flour babies. Instead, he found freedom from his father's legacy. Both were brave. Galahad faced death by the sword, while Simon faced the "ghost" of his father.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Who taught Simon more about life--his mother who took care of him or his father who left him when he was very young? Support your answer with reasons.

*Although his father was absent, he did actually help Simon realize he shouldn't get trapped into fatherhood as his father had been. His mother took care of him through thick and thin and showed him what being a parent required. She probably had the greater influence on Simon.*

### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Plot** One of the minor conflicts in this story occurred between the Room 8 boys and their school. You are now the spokesperson for all of the students in your school who don't like the way their school operates. Your principal is giving you a one-time opportunity to suggest changes to your school. She is hoping you will come up with ideas that will spark the interest of these kids in learning. Write a list of thoughtful changes that would make school better for the "Room 8" students in your school.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Part of Simon's assignment with the flour babies experiment required him to keep a diary telling of his experiences. Choose one of your courses, e.g. science, and keep a diary for a week in which you record what you are doing in the course and how you feel about it, what you learned, etc.

**Recognizing Details** In this story, Simon Martin

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spends a considerable amount of time questioning his non-existent relationship with his absent father. He relies on his mother's recollections to learn a little about the man who chose not to raise him. Imagine you are Simon but, unlike Simon, you actively pursue your father with the intention of someday meeting him face-to-face. Make a list of agencies and people you could contact to learn of your absent father. Then, compose an ad for the "Personals" column of your local newspaper in which you "advertise" for information on your father or his whereabouts.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** In *Flour Babies*, Simon develops an affection for his little sack of flour, even going so far as to talk of "her" as if she were real. Choose one of your favorite toys or possessions and give it a personality as if it were real. You should give it a name and describe some aspects of its life.