

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Getting near to Baby

by

### Audrey Couloubis

### Book Information

Audrey Couloubis, Getting near to Baby  
Quiz Number: 32742  
Putnam, 1999  
ISBN 0-399-23389-X; LCCN  
211 Pages  
Book Level: 5.1  
Interest Level: UG

Thirteen-year-old Willa Jo and her younger sister come to terms with the death of their family's baby while staying with their Aunt Patty and Uncle Hob.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Newbery Honor; SLJ Best Book; State Award; VOYA Award/Honor

**Topics:** Family Life, Aunts; Family Life, Death; Family Life, Sisters; Power Lessons AR, Grade 5; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice

### Main Characters

Aunt Patty Noreen's sister, who takes the girls into her home

Cynthia Wainwright a selfish young girl who is forced to play with Little Sister and Willa Jo

Daddy Willa Jo and Little Sister's father, who left the family

Elizabeth Fingers a young neighbor girl who befriends Willa Jo

JoAnn Dean (Little Sister) Willa Jo's little sister, who has not spoken since Baby died

Joy Ellen Dean (Baby) Noreen's infant, who dies during a fever

Milly Noreen's friend and neighbor, who helps her with Baby's death

Miss Pettibone a Bible school teacher who gets dismissed for making her students sit in grass that is full of ticks

Mrs. Biddle, Mrs. Potts, Mrs. Garber Aunt Patty's nosy neighbors

Noreen Dean the girls' mother, who allows them to stay with Aunt Patty while she works through her grief over losing Baby

Uncle Hobart (Hob) Aunt Patty's husband, who helps the girls understand their situation

Willa Jo Dean a thirteen-year-old girl who is trying to understand her sister's death

### Vocabulary

**adamant** unyielding

**horizon** the line where the earth and sky meet

**jacks** a game played with a ball and small pieces of metal

**lavender** a fragrant plant that produces purple flowers

**stegosaurus** a type of dinosaur

### Synopsis

Willa Jo Dean and Little Sister are visiting their Aunt Patty because their little sister, Baby, has died. As the story begins, they sit together on the roof of Aunt Patty's house to watch the sunrise. When Aunt Patty learns the girls are on the roof, she is humiliated and annoyed. As the sisters sit on the roof, Willa Jo describes many scenes that happened earlier, while Little Sister continues her silence which began when Baby died.

Several scenes are from when the girls are first taken to Aunt Patty's. Their aunt buys them new clothes and shoes, and though they are grateful for the clothing, they hate their brown sandals. One day, when Willa Jo and Little Sister walk to town to get ice cream, they meet Liz Fingers, a member of a family that Aunt Patty has already deemed undesirable. Liz takes the girls to the "excavation," a hole that she and her siblings have dug. When Willa Jo and Little Sister return home, Aunt Patty is upset.

The next day, Liz and her little brother Robby come over to Aunt Patty's to visit with the girls. Aunt Patty is annoyed and invites Cynthia Wainwright and her mother over in order to get the girls some "acceptable" friends. But when the adults leave the room, Cynthia acts selfish and rude. Not long after

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her arrival, Cynthia demands her mother to take her home. After several other mishaps and misunderstandings, the girls and Aunt Patty are at odds with one another.

Another flashback occurs when Willa Jo thinks about the time before Baby died. She remembers how their Daddy lost his job. When he left to look for a new job, he never returned. In his absence, their mother, Noreen, and her friend Milly take the girls to the carnival. At the carnival, the girls have a wonderful time until they get tired and thirsty. Noreen, who does not want Baby to drink Coca-Cola yet, gets Baby some water from a stranger. That night Baby has a terrible fever. The next morning Baby dies in Noreen's arms.

After Baby's death, Noreen does nothing but paint pictures of Baby. Soon, Aunt Patty comes to visit and she cleans the house that Noreen has neglected. After the cleaning is done, Aunt Patty suggests that the girls come to her house while Noreen works through her grief.

Still sitting in the hot sun on Aunt Patty's roof, Willa Jo remembers the scenes at the dinner table the night before. Aunt Patty, who had been so intent on finding decent friends for the girls, sets up another play date. When Willa Jo acts as if she does not want to go, Aunt Patty flies into a tirade about how no one appreciates her.

Eventually, Uncle Hob joins Willa Jo and Little Sister on the roof. Surprisingly, Aunt Patty also comes to join them on the roof. She tells the girls that their mother called and is on her way to pick them up. After a discussion filled with apologies and explanations, Little Sister talks for the first time since Baby died. She explains that she could not talk because her voice was lost in sadness. Shortly after, Noreen and Milly arrive. When the two notice the family on the roof, Aunt Patty tells them they will be down after the sun sets.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Though Aunt Patty has her rules, she truly cares about her nieces. Describe one of the events that causes Aunt Patty to become embarrassed and angry with the girls. Then describe how you might have felt in that situation if you were in Aunt Patty's place.

*When the girls refuse to sit under the tree loaded with ticks at Bible school, Aunt Patty is embarrassed. Though she realizes the girls are right, she hates the idea that others could be talking about her in a negative way. Most students will sympathize with the girls. Yet, many will understand what it feels like to be embarrassed by someone else's actions.*

### Literary Analysis

Though the location of Aunt Patty's town is never stated, the reader has many clues to where it occurs. Where do you think this story takes place? Why?

*It seems as if this story is set somewhere in a Southern region of the United States. There are several clues that lead the reader to this area. First, many of the characters of the book use Southern phrases such as "stars and garters." Characters also say such things as, "dumplin" and "don't they look like new pennies?" Also, the climate described in the book is always warm. The characters never refer to a cold winter day.*

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#### **Inferential Comprehension**

Willa Jo and Little Sister go to live with their Aunt Patty when Noreen is too overwhelmed to take good care of them. How do you think the story might have been different if they had not gone to live with Aunt Patty?

*If the girls had not gone to live with their aunt, their mother may not have been able to put her life back together as quickly. Also, the girls would not have learned to understand their aunt as well as they did by the end of the novel. Their visit with Aunt Patty helps the girls deal with their grief and allows Little Sister a chance to get her voice back.*

#### **Constructing Meaning**

Noreen tells Willa Jo that she and Aunt Patty are like "two peas in a pod." Though Willa Jo is not pleased by this at the time, the reader can see why this comparison is made. How do you think the aunt and niece were like "two peas in a pod"?

*Both Aunt Patty and Willa Jo are strong people who care deeply about their family. The two struggle with their emotions and failings, and sometimes blame themselves for problems they do not cause. Both people enjoy having someone to follow them; Aunt Patty enjoys "taking care" of Hob, and Willa Jo likes when Little Sister depends on her. Though the two have many different qualities, they are more similar than they realize.*

### **Teachable Skills**

#### **Understanding Hist/Cultural Factors**

While the Dean family is attending the carnival, Willa Jo and Little Sister see several sideshow acts. Ask your students to research the history of sideshows. Then in class, discuss these shows. Ask your students to write a short response on their opinions about these attractions.

#### **Extending Meaning**

During the course of the novel, the reader learns why Little Sister does not speak. Ask your students to make a list of reasons of why they feel some people might lose the ability to speak. Then, ask your students to perform an experiment. Ask them to spend one

full period without speaking. After they have accomplished this feat, they could write a short response on how they felt during the experience.

**Recognizing Feelings** Willa Jo and Little Sister are trying to work through their grief over the loss of Baby. Ask your students to consider how these girls felt. Then, ask your students to make a list of the character's different emotions they detected as they read the book such as anger, confusion, and sadness. Next, ask the students to think about what made them feel these ways. They should write a sentence next to each word that describes the reasons for each particular emotion.

**Responding to Literature** Throughout the novel, Willa Jo describes her fascination with many natural occurrences such as sunrises, gravity, and eclipses. Ask your students to consider a natural occurrence that they might normally take for granted. Then ask them to reflect on what they know about the occurrence and write an anecdote in which they describe it as though they have just realized its importance for the first time.