

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Harriet the Spy

by
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Book Information

Louise Fitzhugh, Harriet the Spy
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Harriet's notebook of her feelings about classmates and neighbors is found by her classmates.

Award: SLJ Best Book

Topics: Community Life, School; Interpersonal Relationships, Neighbors; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, NY Times Editor's Choice; Series, Harriet the Spy; Spy/Espionage, Spy/Espionage (All)

Main Characters

Harriet Welsch a sixth-grade girl who spends much of her time spying and writing in a notebook

Janie Gibbs Harriet's friend, who loves chemistry and plans to blow up the world one day

Marion, Pinky, Carrie, Beth Ellen, Rachel, and Laura various students in Harriet's class

Mr. and Mrs. Welsch Harriet's parents

Mr. Waldenstein the man who wants to marry Ole Golly

Mrs. Plumber, the Dei Santis, Little Joe, Harrison Withers, the Robinsons people on whom Harriet spies

Ole Golly Harriet's nurse, who leaves to get married

Sport (Simon Rocque) Harriet's friend, who lives with his father

Vocabulary

discreet showing reserve in one's speech or behavior

eccentric strange

enigma something that is puzzling

martyr a person who endures great suffering

profuse plentiful

surreptitiously secretly

Synopsis

Harriet is a sixth-grade girl who has been writing and keeping a notebook since she was eight years old. She hopes to be a famous writer when she grows up. Along with writing, Harriet loves to spy on people. Most days after school, she ventures on her spy route. On her route, she encounters people with unusual habits: Mrs. Plumber lies in bed all day, Little Joe gives away food to four skinny kids outside the Dei Santi's grocery store, Harrison Withers has a house full of cats, and the Robinsons never talk to each other.

Harriet's best friends are Janie and Sport. Janie's mother thinks her daughter and Harriet should take dance lessons. When Harriet refuses, Ole Golly convinces her all spies need to know how to dance. During a conversation, Ole Golly mentions having a boyfriend. Being very curious, Harriet decides to find out who her boyfriend is. She spies Ole Golly with a delivery man on her Thursday night out and guesses he is her boyfriend. Mr. Waldenstein, Ole Golly's boyfriend, comes over to the house one night and takes Harriet and Ole Golly to the movies. When they return, trouble is waiting. Mrs. Welsch is furious that Harriet was out so late and fires Ole Golly. Ole Golly tells everyone it was time for her to leave anyway, as she and Mr. Waldenstein are getting married.

After Ole Golly leaves the house, Harriet feels lost and sad at times. She continues her spying missions and notices the Robinsons have purchased a sculpture of a fat baby. Harrison Withers has been forced to get rid of his cats, and the Dei Santis are not happy when their son, Fabio, smashes their truck. To make life worse for Harriet, Mrs. Plumber catches her while hiding in a dumbwaiter and gets

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roped into playing an onion for the Christmas pageant.

The worst is yet to come when Harriet loses her notebook. She is horrified to see Janie reading from it to their schoolmates. There is something written about everyone in the notebook, and Harriet is very afraid. It becomes obvious her classmates are out for revenge when no one talks with Harriet at school the next day. Mean things continue to happen to Harriet. Notes are passed around the class, students bump into her, and someone takes her tomato sandwich. While spying on them one afternoon, Harriet learns they have formed The Spy Catcher Club.

Harriet's parents are worried about her and take her to see Dr. Wagner, a psychiatrist. They also go to school and talk with her principal. In the meantime, a letter from Ole Golly cheers Harriet up. Finally, she is made editor of the Sixth Grade Page. Things go back to normal when she apologizes to her friends in the paper, and she makes another attempt to reconcile with Janie and Sport.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Ole Golly writes Harriet a letter and in it she states, "... I want you to know I'm not missing you." Do you think Ole Golly really feels this way? Why do you think she writes that to Harriet?

Ole Golly probably does miss Harriet. She understands, however, that Harriet is going through a difficult phase and needs her no nonsense attitude to get things back to normal. She knows pampering Harriet will not do her any good.

Literary Analysis

The reader sees the action of the story primarily through Harriet's eyes. She believes her friends are unfair to her after they discover her notebook. Ask the students to choose one of Harriet's friends and explain how telling the story through that character's eyes would change the story.

A student may, for example, choose Sport. If Sport were to tell his version of the story, he would probably emphasize Harriet's self-centered and uncaring attitude toward other people. He would probably point out that he and Harriet's friends felt deeply hurt and betrayed by her cruel comments and that they did not deserve such treatment.

Inferential Comprehension

Why is Ole Golly so important to Harriet?

While Harriet's parents provide Harriet with the physical necessities of life, they do not seem to give Harriet the attention she needs. Her parents are usually too busy to be closely involved with Harriet's life, whereas Ole Golly takes on many of the parental roles, such as comforter and disciplinarian.

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Constructing Meaning

When Harriet discovers Janie reading her notebook out loud to her friends, she is very upset. Later, when her mother questions her about how Harriet thought the others felt when they found out she was writing terrible things about them, she misses the point and exclaims, "Yes, but they shouldn't have looked. It's private...." Do you think Harriet realizes she was doing something wrong? How would you feel if someone read something you held private? Have you ever written terrible things about someone and been caught?

Harriet shows little or no remorse at being caught by her friends. She does not seem to understand how hurt the others are by her actions. Harriet is immature and has a difficult time finding sympathy for her friends. Students might be angry if others read their private words. They should carefully consider possible consequences before putting their thoughts in writing because any time unkind things are written down, there is always the possibility they will be found.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Harriet attends The Gregory School in New York City, a girl's school that allows boys to attend only through the sixth grade. Have students prepare a brochure advertising a girl's or boy's school. Brainstorm the advantages of attending a school in which everyone is the same gender. The brochures should list these advantages. Create a name for the school, along with a list of academics, extracurricular activities, and other items that would draw students to the school. When all brochures are complete, you might want to display them for the entire school body to view. Hold a mock registration and see which school attracts the most students.

Making Predictions Harriet has dreams of becoming a writer when she grows up. Hold a discussion on what is found on book jackets. Then have students imagine Harriet's first book and create a title and a book jacket for it. Show several examples before students begin their

design. When all projects are complete, place student work on a bulletin board designed like a bookstore display.

Recognizing Feelings Harriet is a very vocal young lady. She says what she thinks and feels and has no trouble writing her thoughts down. Have students write one entry for Harriet's notebook. The entry must relate to her feelings regarding one of the events following the public reading of her notebook. The entry should be from Harriet's viewpoint.

Differentiating Fact and Opinion Have students reread Harriet's notebook entries. On a large piece of paper, create two columns--one entitled "fact" and the other "opinion." In small groups, students should identify whether Harriet's comments and observations are fact or opinion.