

Junebug by Alice Mead

Book Information

Alice Mead, Junebug
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This year Reeves McClain, Jr., has decided to skip his birthday. Since ten is the age when boys in the projects are forced to join gangs or are snared by drug dealers, Junebug would rather remain nine.

Topics: Community Life, Violence; Family Life, Single Parents; People, African American; Places, Cities; Power Lessons AR, Grade 3; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 4-6 (Theme: Friends and Family); Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5

Main Characters

Aunt Jolita Mama's younger sister who lives with Mama, Junebug, and Tasha; she does little to help, hangs out with dangerous company, and has little loyalty to Mama and the children

Darnell a fifteen-year-old boy who watches out for Junebug before he escapes from the projects

Georgina Jolita's girlfriend for whom Jolita will do almost anything

Harriet Ames Mama's friend; a kind lady living in the projects

Junebug (Reeve McClain, Jr.) the main character of the story, a boy of ten who wants to avoid the gangs of the projects and dreams of sailing

Miss Robinson a reading teacher who comes to the project's library and who has a special affection for Tasha and Junebug

Mrs. Swanson a skittish woman who runs the project's library

Robert Junebug's school buddy who wants Junebug to start hanging out with him and other boys his age

Tasha McClain Junebug's five-year-old sister; a sweet child, of whom Junebug is very protective
the "radar man" a sleek drug dealer who pays kids to run his errands

Trevor an eleven-year-old, sixth-grade boy who bought a gun and is beginning to run errands for older boys

Vocabulary

flotilla a group of small vessels on the water

impress to affect in a favorable way

lanyard a rope or line used to hold something in place on a ship

Mercedes an expensive make of car

Synopsis

The Auburn Street housing projects are a wasteland. But it is here, on the ninth floor, where Junebug, his sister, Tasha, Mama, and his Aunt Jolita live. Junebug's tenth birthday is quickly approaching, and Junebug wishes he could shrink himself and stay young. He dreams of someday being a sailor. In fact, he is collecting bottles. He wants to put a note stating his dream inside each one and then float them out to sea. But it is unlikely his dream will come true. The gangs snare the boys in the projects once they turn ten. Mama works hard to raise Junebug and Tasha correctly, stressing hard work in school and respect for property. She gets an opportunity for the family to move out of the projects, but it means living with old people, and Junebug is reluctant. Aunt Jolita is supposed to watch Junebug and Tasha when they return from school, but she is always out with her friends. The children's only ray of hope is the after-school reading program run in the projects by a Baptist church group. It is here that they meet Miss Robinson, who teaches the shy Tasha to read. But the library is soon closed after a violent incident occurs, and with it, a hope for something better.

Darnell, a fifteen-year-old boy who always protected Junebug, is beginning to change. Junebug has seen him acting sad and once saw him wearing a gold necklace and talking to a drug dealer in a Mercedes.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Junebug

by

Alice Mead

Not long afterward, Darnell tells Junebug he is giving him an early birthday present. He leads Junebug away from the projects and shows him a secret hiding spot. He takes out a wad of bills and tells Junebug he is leaving. The hiding spot is Junebug's present. Darnell tells him to keep their meeting secret. He also tells Junebug that Jolita is hanging with a bad crowd.

Junebug returns home in tears. He knows that he can't count on Darnell anymore. The man in the Mercedes, whom he dubs the "radar man," comes around to question him about Darnell. But Junebug is tight-lipped. Another time, the "radar man" comes to take Jolita out. Mama tries to stop her and in the process falls down the stairs and is knocked unconscious. She is taken by ambulance to the hospital.

Junebug and Tasha are now being cared for by their Aunt Jolita. She encourages Junebug to play with the boys his own age, all the while knowing they are going to snitch on him. Junebug goes outside and is led to the "radar man," who again questions him about Darnell. After talking his way out of the situation, he runs to the hiding spot and knows then that his family must move out of the projects. When he visits his mother in the hospital, he finds that she has come to the same conclusion.

Mama is healthy enough when Junebug's birthday arrives to come along on the trip he has planned. They board a ferry, carrying all his bottles with notes inside, and float them out to sea. A few days later, Junebug receives a call from the ferry captain offering him an opportunity to learn to sail in exchange for chores. Junebug is thrilled. Shortly thereafter the family moves, although Jolita stays behind with her friends. The future looks much brighter for Junebug.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Mama invite Jolita to visit at the new apartment?

Even though Jolita abandons Mama on the stairs when she falls and does not protect the children from the bad crowd she hangs with, she is Mama's younger sister. Mama realizes she cannot change Jolita and is not doing her any favors by supporting her lifestyle. However, Mama is a good and generous person and wants Jolita to know that she still has a tether to family and something better than what she is choosing for herself at the moment.

Literary Analysis

From the tone of the writing, what do you think the author's attitude is toward housing projects?

The author most likely thinks that the original idea for building the projects may have been well intentioned, but that the projects themselves have failed. The reality is much different from the original plan. There was supposed to be a playground, a running elevator, and so on, but these do not exist. The author is able to see that there are good people living in the projects -- Mama, Junebug, Tasha, Darnell and Gabe and their mother, and Harriet Ames -- but even they are not enough to change the despair and violence that surround the area. She implies that children can't avoid the "war" that rages around them. Their only hope for a better life is to escape.

Inferential Comprehension

When Junebug doesn't answer when the "radar man" asks if he was with Darnell, the man smiles "as if he likes what he sees." What does he like about Junebug?

Junebug doesn't snitch, as Robert and Trevor did. The "radar man" is probably a drug dealer, and in his business, it is important to find people to work for him who do not snitch when questioned by the police. He can see that Junebug is a brave and tight-lipped kid. He would make an excellent errand boy. Fortunately, Junebug does not want to become involved.

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Constructing Meaning

Junebug is a boy of nearly ten. What do you think of the amount of responsibility and independence he has for a boy his age?

Junebug's mother thinks he and Tasha are being cared for by Aunt Jolita after school. Prior to Jolita's moving in, they know they should contact Harriet Ames or Darnell's mother if there are problems. However, because of Jolita's lack of care, Junebug has a lot of responsibility on his shoulders. He watches over and protects Tasha. He takes a cross-town bus all by himself to the hospital. He tries to problem-solve the best he can in difficult situations. Students will feel differently about the amount of responsibilities and independence Junebug has at this age. They will most likely reflect on their own lives and compare the responsibilities they have or had at age ten to what Junebug has.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Darnell tells Junebug that "no Harriet Tubman's gonna come down and lead you by the hand" to get out of the projects. Ask the students to find out who Harriet Tubman was, how the Underground Railroad worked, and the risks involved in traveling via it. The students can write a paper or give an oral report on their findings.

Describing Actions or Events Junebug celebrated his birthday by launching a flotilla of bottles with a message inside, stating his dream and the place where he could be reached. The students may wish to launch a flotilla of bottles into a nearby harbor, lake or stream with a message stating the school's address and classroom number, asking the finder to write back, stating where the bottle was found. Students could pinpoint these areas on a local map. A discussion might follow about the paths the bottles took, currents, wind conditions, and so on. If the students live far from water, perhaps they could launch message-filled balloons into the air and see where they end up.

Recognizing Setting Junebug looks to the water for an escape from his stressful environment. Have the students think about where they would like to go for a sense of peace. Ask them to draw the place and describe it to the class.

Making Predictions Darnell never reappears in the story after showing Junebug his hiding place. Ask the students to write a short story or essay about what they think Darnell is doing now, where he is living, and how he is feeling about leaving.