

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Killing Mr. Griffin

by  
Lois Duncan

### Book Information

Lois Duncan, Killing Mr. Griffin  
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Interest Level: UG

A group of high school students plans to scare their tough, demanding English teacher into being more lenient. Their attempt brings on Mr. Griffin's fatal heart attack.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Margaret A. Edwards Award; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

**Topics:** Adventure, Crime; Community Life, School; Family Life, Death

### Main Characters

Betsy Cline a popular cheerleader who is secretly attracted to Mark

Brian Griffin a tough but dedicated high school English teacher who seeks to help his students by setting high, rigid standards

David Ruggles the handsome president of the senior class, who feels burdened by his responsibilities at home

Irma Ruggles David's grandmother, who finds Mr. Griffin's ring and is murdered by Mark Kinney

Jeff Garrett a friendly, athletic senior and Mark Kinney's best friend

Kathy Griffin Brian's pregnant wife, who tries to persuade her husband to be more flexible with his students

Mark Kinney an outwardly unemotional boy, possibly a psychopath, who influences others to participate in his scheme of revenge against Mr. Griffin

Susan McConnell a timid, self-conscious high school student who becomes involved in Mark's scheme as a means of getting close to David

### Vocabulary

**alibi** the proof of having been elsewhere when a crime was committed

**angina** a heart disease characterized by painful chest spasms

**autopsy** a medical analysis performed on a body to determine the cause of death

**cloistered** isolated or confined

**psychopath** a person who suffers from a disorder characterized by aggressive, anti-social behavior

### Synopsis

*Killing Mr. Griffin* is the story of a high school prank gone awry. Rigid, demanding English teacher Brian Griffin accepts no excuses for missing assignments. He demands a certain level of effort from his students and is not afraid to let them fail his class, even if it means not being able to graduate. Mark Kinney was the "victim" of Mr. Griffin's exacting standards. He still feels the sting of a humiliating episode during which he was forced to beg to be let back into the class. One typical day in Mr. Griffin's classroom, Jeff Garrett remarks that Griffin is the kind of guy he would "like to kill." Later that day, Mark picks up on that thought and suggests a scheme whereby he, Jeff, and Betsy Cline, would give Griffin a scare by kidnapping him and making him think they might kill him. Jeff and Betsy reluctantly agree, and Mark pressures David Ruggles to join them. They still need a decoy, and Mark decides that the studious Susan McConnell would be perfect. Against her better judgment, she agrees.

The next day, Susan keeps the appointment she has made with Mr. Griffin to go over a test. Her job is to keep Mr. Griffin after school. In the meantime, Betsy creates an alibi by calling her mother and implying that the three boys are with her. Mark, David, and Jeff wait for Griffin in the school parking lot.

Not everything goes according to plan. When Griffin comes out of the school building, Susan is with him. Betsy, who was to have been back with Jeff's car, has been detained by a police officer for speeding. The boys proceed with the plan anyway, tie up and

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blindfold Mr. Griffin, and take him in his own car to a remote location known to Mark.

They lead Mr. Griffin to a waterfall, where they taunt him, smash his nitroglycerin pills, and tell him he must beg to be let go. When he refuses, Mark, obviously in control of all the proceedings, decides they will leave him there and come back later. Everyone is hesitant, but no one dares defy Mark, so the group leaves Mr. Griffin behind.

In the meantime, David and Susan get together and decide they must return to the waterfall and let Mr. Griffin go. When they arrive at the scene, they are horrified to realize that Mr. Griffin is dead! When Mark is told, he coolly advises them to wait until after school the next day when they will bury Mr. Griffin and get rid of his car.

Things go from bad to worse as news reaches the group that the body has been discovered. Furthermore, David reveals to Susan that he took a college ring from Mr. Griffin's hand -- one that could link him to the death. To make things worse, his grandmother finds the ring and, thinking it belongs to Mark's father, refuses to give it back. Susan takes the problem to Mark, and within hours, word arrives that David's grandmother is dead.

All this is more than Susan can take. She resolves to tell all, no matter what the consequences. When Mark hears about her plan, he arrives at her house, ties her up with curtain cords and sets the drapes on fire. As the flames rise, the reader is given a clue that Mark may have done the same thing to his father years ago. As Susan accepts her death, she suddenly sees Kathy Griffin standing before her.

Later, she learns that Kathy and a police detective had come to the house to question her when Kathy recognized her husband's car, driven there by Mark. Susan's mother tells her that Mark fits the clinical description of a psychopath and that she will be put on trial separately from the others.

As Susan contemplates all that has happened, she reads a note written to her by Mr. Griffin on the day

he died. He was uncharacteristically encouraging and told her he looked forward to teaching her next year. Susan is touched but finds she has no tears to cry.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

The plot of *Killing Mr. Griffin* consists of a chain of events that moves things along from bad to worse. How does a single plot incident like David's removal of Mr. Griffin's class ring affect the entire plot sequence following it?

*Mark's removal of the ring causes Susan to contact Mark, which then drives Mark to kill Irma Ruggles. Susan's horror over that realization causes her to tell Jeff and Betsy that she is going to the police. Susan's actions then lead to the climax of the story, when Mark attempts to set fire to her home.*

#### Literary Analysis

How does the author develop the character of Mark? What clues are given throughout the book that Mark may be seriously disturbed?

*The character of Mark is developed in several ways. During the main story, the author shows how Mark is truly in charge of everything that goes on, how his friends go to him when things go wrong, and how everyone avoids defying him. Several characters, including David and Jeff, recall earlier times with Mark, including one incident in which Mark set fire to a cat. The reader is privy to a discussion between Mark's aunt and uncle in which they worry that Mark is "weird." When Mark kills Irma Ruggles, the reader is probably not surprised.*

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### Inferential Comprehension

At the end of the story, the narrator mentions that the "new" Susan is unable to cry over the compassionate message Mr. Griffin had written on her paper about Ophelia. In what way had Susan changed over the course of this story?

*The self-conscious girl who fiddles with her purse in class because she has no one to talk to has been through a lot in a short period of time. She has dealt with issues of life and death, Mr. Griffin's as well as her own. It is she who decides to defy Mark and would have confessed to the police if Mark had not tried to kill her. By the time she reads Mr. Griffin's words, she has experienced so much that she can no longer cry over praise from a teacher.*

### Constructing Meaning

Mr. Griffin is a teacher with exacting standards. What is your opinion of the way he conducts himself with his students?

*Answers will vary. Mr. Griffin was fairly rigid and sarcastic in his dealings with the students. However, the author makes it clear that Mr. Griffin cared deeply about teaching and even made career sacrifices to be able to reach students on the high school level. In answering this question, students may agree with Kathy Griffin's comment that students need "something besides criticism."*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** The author takes pains to develop the characters of Mark, Jeff, David, Betsy, and Susan, and gives each of them plausible reasons for becoming involved in the scheme to kidnap Mr. Griffin. As part of a class discussion, ask students to list each character on the blackboard and supply five adjectives for each. As they brainstorm for different descriptive words, they should recall how the author presented details that reveal the personalities of the various characters. Note the logical connections between the author's details and the students' adjectives.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** At the end

of the story, Mrs. McConnell tells Susan she believes that Mark Kinney is a psychopath, and she also tells her that such people often have "tremendous charismatic power over others." Some great tragedies of history have happened because of the charismatic power of certain individuals. Initiate a classroom discussion in which one such example is analyzed.

**Recognizing Cause and Effect** In *Killing Mr. Griffin*, a planned "joke" has unexpected and tragic consequences. Ask students to consider a time when something they planned or were involved with went wrong or had an unexpected outcome. Ask students to write an essay entitled "The Best Laid Plans...."

**Responding to Literature** Mr. Griffin is not a popular teacher with his students, but he is highly motivated to help them. It may be instructive to the students for the teacher to discuss his or her own teaching philosophy with the class. Set aside a class session in which you explain your rationale for making comments on student papers, calling on them in class, and assigning grades. What made you decide to become a teacher? What would you like them to have learned when they leave your classroom? Encourage questions from the students on the subject of your goals and techniques.