

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Missing May

by

Cynthia Rylant

Book Information

Cynthia Rylant, Missing May
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Book Level: 5.3
Interest Level: MG

After the death of the beloved aunt who has raised her, twelve-year-old Summer and her Uncle Ob leave their West Virginia trailer in search of the strength to go on living.

Award: BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Newbery Medal

Topics: Emotions, Sadness; Family Life, Aunts; Family Life, Death; Power Lessons AR, Grade 5; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; U.S. States/Regions, West Virginia

Main Characters

Cletus Underwood a boy who rides Summer's bus and becomes her friend

May Summer's aunt; Ob's wife

Ob May's husband; Summer's uncle

Summer a twelve-year-old girl who was shuffled among relatives after her mother died until Ob and May took her home to live with them

Vocabulary

collaborate to work together
denouement the final outcome
stupefaction astonishment

Synopsis

Summer is a young girl who is shuffled among relatives after her mother's death. When Summer's Aunt May and Uncle Ob come to Ohio to visit relatives, they meet Summer and decide to take her to live with them in West Virginia. Summer loves May, Ob, and her new home, and thrives under their

loving care. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, May dies. Ob and Summer just want to hold each other and wail, but they manage to arrange for the funeral, greet the relatives and "grieve proper."

Knowing it will take them time to adjust to life without May, Summer is not surprised when things are different at home. For instance, Ob gives her cereal and toast for breakfast instead of the big hot breakfasts May used to make. But when Ob begins to become more withdrawn, Summer becomes more and more concerned.

Ob holds a memorial service in May's garden, hoping to "flood the garden with the vibrations needed" to draw May to them. When that doesn't work, he drives to a town in a neighboring county to see if the Reverend of the Spiritualist Church of Glen Meadows can help. After arriving in Glen Meadows, Ob, Summer, and Cletus discover that the Reverend has died. Disappointed and discouraged, Ob starts for home, not even stopping to see the state capitol as he had promised to do.

Suddenly, Ob decides to double back to visit the state capitol, and the three of them have a good time seeing the sights. After returning home, Summer sees an owl, which triggers memories of May. Summer begins to cry over her loss, Ob wipes away her tears and tells her that "people don't ever leave us for good." The next day, Ob, Cletus, and Summer take the whirligigs that May liked so much and put them in her garden, where they have a place to "spin and fly and live."

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What made Summer realize that Ob was "finished"?

He did not get up, wake her for school, get dressed, or take an interest in things he used to like to do.

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Literary Analysis

Why was Summer unhappy when she saw Cletus by Ob's old car?

She didn't like Cletus; she thought Cletus was odd; she didn't want to share Ob with Cletus.

Inferential Comprehension

What made Ob think they were not supposed to go to Sissonville?

He was disappointed that contacting May through Cletus had not worked and was further disappointed to learn that the reverend had died. He decided that contacting May was not going to work.

Constructing Meaning

What was one indication that Ob had begun to deal with his grief?

He took Summer and Cletus to the capitol; he took care of Summer when she was crying; he made bacon and eggs for breakfast; he put the whirligigs in the garden.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft This story is told from Summer's point of view. The reader views the events through her eyes and learns how she feels about the events. The story would be different if it were told from another character's point of view. Have the students select one scene from the book and describe the scene from another character's point of view. For instance, in the scene where Ob asks Cletus if he believes in an afterlife and Cletus tells Ob about his drowning experience, we are aware of Summer's feelings of anxiety, anger, hurt, rejection, and fear. Have the students describe the scene from either Cletus's or Ob's point of view. They should include the actual dialogue used in the book.

Recognizing Cause and Effect In the book, May has a large garden and enjoys gardening. Discuss with the students the many steps necessary to having a productive garden. If possible, have the class plant a garden, tend it,

and enjoy the produce from it. If they wish, they can even plant some of the things May had in her garden (pole beans, green cabbages, carrots, broccoli, tomatoes). If planting a garden is not possible, perhaps the students could plant some seeds in pots right in the classroom. There are many types of herbs that grow well in pots, as well as some flowers and vegetables. For further study in cause and effect, have the students plant some of the seeds in soil with fertilizer, some in soil without fertilizer; give some, but not all, of the plants plant food, etc. Have the students record which plants grow fastest and biggest.

Understanding Sequence At the end of this story, Ob has started to deal with May's death and get on with his life, while Summer has learned quite a few things about Cletus that she didn't know before, and Cletus has a new friend in Ob. Together they place Ob's whirligigs in May's garden to give them "a place to spin and fly and live." Have the students write an outline for a sequel to this book. Does Ob ever build more whirligigs? Do Cletus and Summer become better friends, or is their relationship threatened by their desires not to share Ob? What happens to May's garden? Does Summer ever try to "fix" Cletus's parents? Does Summer stay with Ob, or is she forced to return to her relatives in Ohio? What would they title their sequel?

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Although there are not a lot of similes in this book, there are some interesting (and perhaps unusual) phrases, such as "in a pickle." The English language is filled with such phrases (i.e. "under the weather" and "easy as pie"). Very often the meaning of the phrase has changed over the years. Have the students make a list of some of these phrases and research their origins. There are several books which trace the origins of these sayings. A librarian should be able to help the students locate the information they need.