

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Not-Just-Anybody Family by Betsy Byars

Book Information

Betsy Byars, The Not-Just-Anybody Family
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A warm comedy demonstrates how both good and bad times help to unite a family, even one as strange as the unforgettable Blossom family. Book #1

Topics: Family Life, Misc./Other; Humor/Funny, Funny; Series, Blossom Family

Main Characters

Alexander Blossom, Sr. (Pap) Junior's grandfather; he cares for the children while their mother travels with the rodeo

Junior Blossom the youngest member of the Blossom family; he wants to be a stunt man when he grows up

Maggie Blossom Junior's older sister; she wants to be a trick rider like her mother when she grows up

Mr. Henry Ward Bowman Pap's lawyer; he takes the case without charge to get himself some publicity

Mud Pap's loyal dog; he is considered a member of the family

Ralphie Junior's roommate in the hospital; he tells many lies

Vernon Blossom (Vern) Junior's older brother; he tries to unite the family after Pap is put in jail while Mom is on the rodeo circuit

Vicki Blossom (Mom) Junior's mother; she is a stunt rider on the rodeo circuit

Vocabulary

bliss happiness

circuit tour

drone a continuous humming sound

gavel a mallet

ingenious intelligent or clever

rabid having rabies, an infectious disease of the nervous system transmitted by animals

Synopsis

Seven-year-old Junior Blossom and his two older siblings, Vern and Maggie, live with their seventy-two-year-old grandfather, Pap. Their mother, Vicki Blossom, is a trick rider who travels with the rodeo all summer. Their father died four years ago, but Vern still remembers the happy days when the family would travel the rodeo circuit in a camper. Junior dreams of becoming a stunt man, and Maggie hopes to become a trick rider like her mother.

One July day, Pap leaves the children at home while he goes into town to cash in the cans he has collected. When he stops his truck suddenly, the load of cans spills into the street. He is arrested and put into jail for disturbing the peace. His loyal dog, Mud, who travels everywhere with Pap, is left to fend for himself.

The children see police approach the house and fear Pap has been arrested for making booze in the basement or for having an expired license plate on the truck. Vern and Maggie elude the police by hiding in the woods. Junior, who was just about to try flying off the barn roof with homemade wings, tries to hide from the police, but slips and falls, breaking both legs. The police take him to the hospital, and after the police have gone, Vern and Maggie emerge from the woods to find the house empty. They decide to walk to town to find out what happened to Pap and Junior.

Vern and Maggie arrive in front of the city jail at one o'clock in the morning. Vern whistles the family's secret birdcall in hopes that Pap will hear it. When Pap answers with the same birdcall, Vern and Maggie know that he is inside. Vern determines to break into the jail to be with Pap and find out what to do. With Maggie's help, Vern enters the jail through a vent and reunites with Pap. Before he completely disappears inside, Vern is able to tell Maggie that Junior is in the hospital. Maggie then takes a bus to the hospital and learns that Junior has broken both

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legs.

Meanwhile, Mud is trying to find his way home. He rests at a Dairy Queen where some friendly people try to feed him, but he is too upset to eat. Eventually he finds himself at the Interstate. He knows he must get across the dangerous highway, but he does not know how to do it safely. He enters a drain pipe in search of water and follows it through to the other end, where it is covered with fencing. By digging under the fencing, he emerges on the other side of the Interstate, ready to continue on his homeward journey.

The next morning, Maggie reads an article in the newspaper to Junior and his roommate, Ralphie, about Vern's break-in at the jail. The article notes that Pap's hearing will be that afternoon. So that the family can be together, Ralphie and Maggie escape from the hospital pushing Junior in a wheelchair. They take a taxi to the courthouse and arrive just as Pap's case begins. The judge hears the case and finds Pap guilty of disturbing the peace. But because of Vern's obvious devotion to Pap and Pap's clean record, the judge suspends the sentence. The family is reunited in the judge's chambers.

The story of the Blossom family is carried in national newspapers. Vicki Blossom, now in Texas with the rodeo, reads of her family and leaves for home immediately. After Junior is released from the hospital, the family is together once again. Mud suddenly arrives on the scene, once again making the family complete. The story ends with Pap and Vern planning to go out to collect more cans.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

As Ralphie plays his harmonica, Junior starts to cry, realizing he does not know where Maggie and Vern are. Why does he wish he had told the policemen they were hiding in the woods behind the house?

Junior is feeling very much alone in the hospital. Ralphie's brothers come to see Ralphie and bring him a small harmonica. Junior realizes that he will not have any visitors or any gifts. If he had told the policemen where to find Vern and Maggie, Junior thinks they would be able to visit him in the hospital and ease his loneliness.

Literary Analysis

Junior admires Ralphie because he seems to know so much more than Junior does. But Ralphie tells many lies, and he refuses to tell Junior why he is in the hospital. Why does Ralphie refuse to tell Junior the truth?

Ralphie has had one leg cut off and now wears an artificial leg. He is embarrassed to tell Junior about having only one leg and makes up stories in the hope that Junior will not learn about the leg. Once Junior finds out about Ralphie's leg, Ralphie continues to tell lies probably because he feels inadequate. Ralphie has two little brothers whom he likes to control by acting superior even though he often feels inferior because of his leg accident. Junior acts like a gullible little brother, making Ralphie feel better about himself.

Inferential Comprehension

After Vern gives Maggie all his money, she feels much better; things seem to be going her way. What can the reader infer from Maggie's reaction to having money?

Although she only has nineteen dollars and forty-nine cents, Maggie feels like she is rich. This implies that Maggie and her family have always had money problems and have had trouble making ends meet. Maggie does not understand that the money Vern has given her will not go far in meeting her immediate needs. It is probably more money than Maggie has ever had at any one time, however, and her life suddenly seems much easier.

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Constructing Meaning

The members of the Blossom family do not have many of life's comforts, yet each one, including the dog, goes to extraordinary means to help one another and to be together. Name some specific actions that support the idea that they focus on being together.

When Pap is arrested, Vern and Maggie know that they must get to him. They endure a long walk just trying to find him. Once they determine he is in jail, Vern takes the risk of breaking into jail just so that Pap will not be alone. Maggie travels alone to the hospital late at night to find Junior and let him know what happened to Vern and Pap. All three children are present for Pap's court hearing. Once their mother finds out what has happened, she leaves the rodeo to be with her family. Even the dog is driven by the single goal of reuniting with Pap and the family.

Teachable Skills

Describing Actions or Events When Ralphie's brothers ask Junior what is wrong with him, Ralphie responds with a short poem describing why Junior is in the hospital. Have each student select an event of the story and describe it in a poem that rhymes. The poems can be displayed in the room.

Responding to Literature Pap collected cans to exchange for money. He had 2,147 cans with a value of \$107.35. Have the students determine the current exchange rate for cans in their area and estimate the number of cans they would need to collect to earn \$107.35. Then have them participate in a recycling program by collecting cans from their homes and neighbors. Any money earned can be donated to a charity of their choice or used to purchase books for the classroom.

Understanding Sequence The story unfolds out of sequence, as many events occur simultaneously and the characters recall memories of earlier years. Have the students

write the major events on index cards. Then the class can work together or in groups to put the cards in the sequence in which they occur in the story. The chronological events should be placed in a line representing time. If several events occur at the same time, those cards should be placed next to each other at the same location on the timeline. During the placement of the cards, discussion of and reference to the book should be encouraged.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Maggie enjoys playing Hiawatha while in the forest among the pine trees. Obtain a copy of Longfellow's famous poem, "The Song of Hiawatha," and read it aloud to the class. After hearing the poem, the students should write a short story describing how Maggie might have played Hiawatha with Mud.