

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Nothing but Trouble

by

### Betty Ren Wright

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### Book Information

Betty Ren Wright, Nothing but Trouble  
Quiz Number: 11431  
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119 Pages  
Book Level: 4.2  
Interest Level: MG

Vannie tries to solve the mystery of who is vandalizing her aunt's farm.

**Topics:** Animals, Dogs; Family Life, Aunts; Mysteries, Misc./Other; Places, Countryside/Rural; Places, Farms; U.S. States/Regions, California; U.S. States/Regions, Ohio

### Main Characters

April Johnson a girl who lives on a farm near Aunt Bert and becomes Vannie's friend

Aunt Bert Vannie's elderly and grouchy great-aunt, who lives alone on a farm

Jeff Engel Matt Engel's father

Matt Engel a boy whose father leases and farms some of Aunt Bert's land

Muffy Vannie's little dog

Sarah Corman an elderly, hearing-impaired friend of Aunt Bert's

Vannie (Evangeline) Kirkland a girl whose parents leave her with a relative for the summer while they search for jobs and a home in California

### Vocabulary

**crammed** filled very full  
**doilies** small lacy covers for the arms of a chair  
**hooted** laughed loudly  
**lurking** hiding and waiting to attack  
**ruckus** a noisy disturbance  
**teetered** wobbled; almost fell

### Synopsis

Vannie's parents had some hard times in Cleveland, so they decide to start over in California. They will

have to live in the car until they find jobs and a place to live. Mr. Kirkland has decided to ask Aunt Bert if Vannie can stay with her until they are settled. Vannie is unhappy about the move and unsure about staying with someone she does not know. When they get to Aunt Bert's farm, she agrees to allow Vannie to stay with her, but at first does not want Vannie's dog, Muffy. It is finally agreed that both Muffy and Vannie will stay with the loud and gruff Aunt Bert.

The first morning Vannie wakes to hear Aunt Bert arguing with Mr. Engel. He leases her farmland and wants to buy part of it. Aunt Bert wants to keep the farm as it has been since her parents owned it.

When Vannie says she thinks someone was prowling around one night, Aunt Bert thinks she imagined it. Later, slashed tires and drawings of witches on her windows confirm what Vannie said.

One morning Muffy disappears. Vannie is very upset and feels that Aunt Bert is glad Muffy is gone. During the search for Muffy, Vannie and her friend, April, encounter two boys by the creek. One boy is Matt Engel, who says some mean things about Aunt Bert.

Vannie receives a letter from her mother saying she and Vannie's father have found jobs and a very small apartment. Vannie becomes angry when Aunt Bert tells her it might be just as well that Muffy is gone because there would not be room for him in the small apartment.

On the afternoon of Aunt Bert's monthly ladies' meeting, Vannie stays with April, and when Vannie returns to Aunt Bert's, her aunt is not home. Aunt Bert calls to tell her she has been delayed, but will be home as soon as her tire is replaced and that she has some news to share when she gets home.

While Vannie is waiting for Aunt Bert's return, she hears a familiar voice and laugh outside. Vannie sneaks out of the house and jumps on one of the prowlers, who is holding a ladder for the other prowler. As both boys fall and shout, Vannie recognizes Matt Engel's voice. The boys run away

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when Aunt Bert drives into the yard and Vannie shouts that the sheriff has arrived.

Aunt Bert is upset because Vannie took a risk by attacking the prowlers. She is furious to find that the boys have ruined the painting that decorated the side of her barn. She calls Mr. Engel, who apologizes and tells her that his son has just said he is afraid the sheriff is after him. The boy thought he was helping his father by scaring Aunt Bert into selling her land. The next morning, Mr. Engel makes Matt apologize in person, and he promises that everything will be replaced or repaired.

Aunt Bert remembers that she learned that an elderly neighbor, Sarah Corman, has found a dog who could be Muffy. She and Vannie go over to see Mrs. Corman, and Vannie is happy to see Muffy as soon as they arrive. Mrs. Corman has very poor hearing and has enjoyed having the dog stay with her. She praised the noisy, little dog for helping her hear the telephone, letting her know when visitors come, and alerting her of smoke in the kitchen caused by the toaster. Vannie decides then that Mrs. Corman needs Muffy and that there would be no room for the dog in the small apartment in California. Aunt Bert is surprised, but very proud of Vannie, as she gives the dog to Mrs. Corman.

Aunt Bert decides to sell part of her farm to Mr. Engel and buy a puppy and a car. She wants Vannie to help her train the puppy before she leaves for California. Vannie feels better about losing Muffy and about staying with Aunt Bert as she anticipates training the new puppy.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

What things about living with Aunt Bert does Vannie like?

*Vannie likes sleeping on the day bed on the screened porch. She is learning what Aunt Bert likes and dislikes, so they are getting to know each other. A good part about the summer is meeting April Johnson. Vannie has fun with April and they start to be good friends. April shares her pony and her bike with Vannie. When Muffy is missing, Vannie goes to April for help in finding him. Even when Vannie is very sad, spending time with April can make her forget her troubles for a little while.*

### Literary Analysis

How are Aunt Bert, Muffy, Elvis, and Vannie alike?

*They are all small, but do not let anyone bully them. Aunt Bert is a small, old woman who lives alone. When Mr. Engel asks to buy some of her land, she yells at him and carries on a lot like Muffy. Muffy is a small dog that makes a lot of noise. He barks at the tractor trailer in the story and acts as if he were going to eat it. Elvis, the cat, is small and lazy until he feels that he is in danger. Then he puffs up and acts mean. Vannie is just a young girl who tries to do the right thing, even if she does not like it. When Aunt Bert says bad things about Muffy, however, she fights back. She scares the prowlers by yelling about the sheriff. Her yelling is like Aunt Bert's yelling and Muffy's barking.*

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## Constructing Meaning

What does Aunt Bert mean when she says Vannie is as tough as she is, but that Vannie knows which way the wind blows and makes the best of it?

*Vannie does not complain when her parents leave her with Aunt Bert. She does not want to stay with a stranger, but she knows that complaining or arguing about it will not help the situation and will probably make things harder for everyone. She realizes that Mrs. Corman needs Muffy more than she does. It is very hard for her to give away her dog, but she knows it is the right thing to do. She jumps on one of the prowlers even though she is afraid. When Aunt Bert does not want Muffy to stay with her, Vannie becomes angry and "sends" Aunt Bert's glare right back to her. Vannie is a lot like her Aunt Bert.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The story is set in a rural area, but the author does not say exactly where. Have the students look at road maps and see if they can decide on a setting for the story. There are some clues in the story: Vannie and her family were traveling from Cleveland to California; Aunt Bert's farm is fifty miles from an interstate highway; and Vannie's parents were hoping to drop off Vannie and make it to the Mississippi River before dark. Using the maps, and assuming that the Cleveland in the story is in Ohio, have them plot a travel route to where they think Aunt Bert's farm is located and then to California.

**Understanding Literary Features** Have the class brainstorm possible themes from the book. Vannie accepts her parents' decision to stay with Aunt Bert even though she does not like it. Vannie gives her dog away to someone whom she believes needs it more. Vannie is learning that doing the right thing is not always easy. Matt does bad things because he believes he is helping his father get what he really wants. Matt learns the hard way that terrorizing and bullying is not the right way to get what you want. Aunt Bert sees Vannie cope with being left with a stranger. She knows how hard it is for Vannie to give her dog away. This seems to make Aunt Bert decide

to sell part of her farm and use the money to do something nice for herself and for Vannie.

**Understanding Characterization** Vannie is named after a character in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, "Evangeline." This famous poem is included in most volumes of Longfellow's poetry and has been rewritten as children's literature. Read some or all of the poem to the class. Ask them to list ways that Vannie is like Evangeline. Have them write a poem about Vannie. Both are brave, but how are they brave?

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Aunt Bert is a grumpy, elderly person. Discuss why she might be that way. Do the students know anyone like her? Can they think of other stories with a similar character? Some examples are Aunt Em in *The Wizard of Oz*, Mr. Wilson in the Dennis the Menace movies, and Cruella de Vil in *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*. Ask the students what the grumpy character adds to these stories. Does he or she make the story more interesting? How would the story have been different if Aunt Bert had been more like Sarah Corman? The author's description of Aunt Bert is vivid. Have the students draw their own portrait of Aunt Bert. Tell them to be sure to follow the descriptions in the book and then use their own thoughts to fill in the other details. Make a gallery in the room so the students can compare their work.