

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for A Ring of Endless Light by Madeleine L'Engle

Book Information

Madeleine L'Engle, A Ring of Endless Light

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Interest Level: UG

Life is changing on Seven Bay Island for Vicky Austin, with Commander Rodney dead, her grandfather dying, and three boys who devote their attention to her.

Award: Margaret A. Edwards Award; Misc./Other; Newbery Honor

Topics: English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 2, Chapter 6, 90%; Family Life, Death; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Natural Environments, Islands; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; Series, Austin Family

Main Characters

Adam Eddington a young man who secretly grieves for a lost friend; Adam is studying how dolphins communicate

Art Zachary's flight instructor, who is outraged when Zachary plays a dangerous trick

Basil a playful dolphin who befriends Adam and then Vicky

Commander Jack Rodney a brave Coast Guard commander who died of a heart attack after saving Zachary: he was the father of Leo and Jacky

Dr. Austin the Austin children's father, a physician who is writing a book

Dr. Jeb Nutteley a sensitive scientist who studies dolphins: he is Adam's supervisor

Jacky Rodney Leo's younger brother, who is close friends with Suzy

John Austin Vicky's scientific older brother, who is Adam's friend

Leo Rodney a young neighbor of Grandfather's who vies for Vicky's love; he helps the Austin family take care of Grandfather

Mr. Eaton (Grandfather) Vicky's philosophical grandfather, who is dying of leukemia

Mrs. Nancy Rodney Commander Rodney's widow, a nurse, who helps take care of Grandfather

Norberta and Njord the wise and nurturing mother dolphin and her baby, who come when Vicky calls

Rob Austin Vicky's younger brother, who tries to comfort his mother when Grandfather becomes sicker

Robin (Binnie) a sick little girl who dies in Vicky's arms

Suzy Austin Vicky's scientific and beautiful thirteen-year-old sister, who loves animals and hopes to become a doctor

Vicky Austin (Victoria) a poetic fifteen-year-old girl who learns that she can communicate with dolphins while she is in the middle of a struggle to understand love and death

Victoria Austin (the mother) the Austin children's mother, who comforts the family by singing and reading stories

Ynid the mother dolphin whose baby dies

Zachary Gray a reckless, wealthy, and sometimes self-destructive young man who tries to court Vicky

Vocabulary

archaic belonging to an early or primitive state of development

capsized turned over

colleague one who is in the same line of work as another

communal tending to form groups whose members live together and cooperate; shared, or used by everyone in a group

degenerate in a state of decline

hemorrhage a rapid and uncontrollable loss of blood from the blood vessels

humiliating very hurtful to one's pride

incinerator furnace used for burning waste material

luminous softly glowing

meditate to calm one's mind and focus on one's spirit

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moderately in a way that is careful and reasonable; reasonably

relapse to slide back into ill health after a temporary improvement

resilient supple or not rigid

sophisticated well-developed and advanced; very refined because of wide experience

unpredictable tending to act in a way that is neither expected nor anticipated

Synopsis

Fifteen-year-old Vicky Austin and her family are attending the funeral of their dear friend, Commander Rodney, who died after rescuing an unidentified rich boy whose boat capsized. Vicky's grandfather conducts the funeral. Vicky is thinking that his funeral likely will be next, since he is dying of leukemia. The Austins are spending the summer with Grandfather on Seven Bay Island to take care of him. When the family returns home from the funeral, the wealthy and unpredictable Zachary Gray is waiting for Vicky. She has not seen him in a year, and despite her family's dislike of him, she agrees to see him. Zachary tells Vicky of his mother's recent death and confesses that he indirectly caused Commander Rodney's death when he capsized his boat in attempting suicide. Vicky cannot understand Zachary's reckless attitude, but she feels attracted to him and believes he needs her help.

The commander's son, Leo, has not expressed his grief for his father, but he does express his romantic interest in Vicky. She does not reciprocate his feelings. But when she and Leo cry together on the beach the day after the commander's funeral, Vicky, at least, feels that the groundwork is laid for friendship.

Adam Eddington, a college student who works at the Marine Biology Station with Vicky's brother John, comes to dinner and invites Vicky to meet the dolphins he is studying under Dr. Jeb Nutteley. The next day Vicky visits the station, and Adam and Vicky swim out into the sea to meet a dolphin called Basil. Vicky and Basil like each other at once and communicate intuitively, prompting Adam to ask for

Vicky's participation in his study. Vicky returns home to learn that Grandfather is in the hospital because he began hemorrhaging. Mrs. Rodney, a nurse, offers to care for Grandfather and give him blood transfusions at home. Vicky's beautiful younger sister, Suzy, becomes envious when Vicky is needed to help care for Grandfather.

On Saturday Zachary is uncharacteristically considerate, taking Vicky to hear music only she enjoys and inviting her to one of his flying lessons. Vicky is very attracted to Zachary, although she questions his maturity and feels more natural during her time with Adam. One day Basil brings another dolphin to meet Vicky and Adam, and Vicky senses that it is to comfort Adam. He is upset that Jeb's dolphin, Ynid, has a dying newborn baby. After the baby dolphin dies, Vicky sees Jeb sob as he restrains Ynid from hurting herself. Later that night, Adam tells Vicky that Jeb lost his wife and baby in a car accident. Adam and Vicky have an intimate conversation, and Vicky senses that Adam might kiss her, but he does not.

The following morning Adam tells Vicky that he has realized the dolphins communicate telepathically. Vicky is frustrated at Adam's belief that Vicky understands the dolphins because she is still a child. That day she succeeds in telepathically asking Basil to perform several tricks. Following her breakthrough with Basil, Vicky does not hear from Adam for days.

Vicky and Leo go to the hospital to donate blood and to get blood for Grandfather, with Vicky still emphasizing later that day she wants only friendship with Leo. Adam tells Vicky that he considers a childlike nature to be a positive attribute, but he is still distancing himself by saying she is a child. Although their relationship warms as they work with the dolphins, Adam maintains some reserve. Several days pass before Adam admits that he hesitates to get close to girls because someone he cared about died when he was distracted by a relationship with a young woman. Suzy has become jealous of Vicky's gift with the dolphins and of Vicky's becoming increasingly close to Adam.

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The next time Vicky and Leo wait in the emergency room, this time only to get blood for Grandfather, she meets a child named Binnie, who visits the hospital often because she has a rare blood disease. Vicky bonds with Binnie, particularly because the child reminds her of her younger brother. Vicky is further upset because there is a blood shortage and no blood is available. Disturbing news continues: Vicky learns that Jeb is in a coma after being hit by a motorcycle. Vicky's stress level builds even higher when Zachary takes her up in a plane and terrifies her by deliberately flying too close to a jet. When Zachary takes her back to the launch, Vicky is told that Grandfather has been rushed to the hospital. Zachary drives Vicky to the emergency room and leaves. While Vicky is waiting, Binnie's mother suddenly hands her the unconscious Binnie and goes for help. Binnie has a seizure and dies in Vicky's arms. Overwhelmed, Vicky goes into shock. Even being told that Grandfather and Jeb have both improved does not bring Vicky out of her near-catatonic state. She does not recover until Adam takes her to swim and play with the dolphins, which telepathically console her and restore in her a feeling of life and joy. When she returns to the shore, Adam embraces her.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What is Grandfather's advice when Vicky says that she thinks Zachary needs her?

He warns her that it is a heavy burden to help someone like Zachary, and he says he is not sure Vicky is obligated to help him. He tells her that she is not required to carry the burdens of other people. He also tells her there is a kind of vanity in thinking she can nurse the world.

Literary Analysis

In what ways does Vicky show she is ready to act like an adult?

Vicky continually tries to understand how people are feeling. She shows responsibility by helping Grandfather, other family members, and her friends. She is careful not to express some of her negative perceptions of Suzy and Leo. Vicky tries not to let pressure from others persuade her to do things she does not want to do, and she spends time thinking about complex matters.

Inferential Comprehension

How are Vicky's feelings about Adam different from her feelings about Zachary? How are her feelings about the two boys alike?

Vicky feels much safer with Adam than she does with Zachary. She regards Adam as more mature and trustworthy than Zachary. She feels more natural and confident when she is around Adam. However, Vicky is attracted to both young men and she feels betrayed by both of them when they behave in a way that is inconsiderate of her feelings. She believes that both Adam and Zachary want her help, and that both of them sometimes take her help for granted.

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Constructing Meaning

Would most readers say that Grandfather should stay at home with his family or go to the hospital for care? What reasons do you think these readers would give?

Some students will say readers would believe Grandfather needs the support of his family, and his family should be with him during this difficult time. They may note that a philosophical man like Grandfather may have trouble adjusting to the clinical atmosphere of the hospital. Also, Grandfather may actually receive more personal care at home since he has both Dr. Austin and Mrs. Rodney, as well as several members of his family attending to him, while the hospital on the mainland seems severely understaffed. However, some students may say readers would think that the children are not equipped to deal with seeing someone die and are suffering extensively from the emotional strain of helping care for Grandfather. They may also note that Vicky's breakdown is due in part to her feeling overwhelmed by her responsibilities to Grandfather. There are several factors out of Dr. Austin's and Mrs. Rodney's control, such as the supply of blood and the medical resources to meet crises. Finally, it is difficult for Grandfather to see his family suffer along with him.

Teachable Skills

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning The title of the book is derived from a seventeenth-century poem by Henry Vaughan that Grandfather reads to Vicky early in the book. Light and its opposite, darkness, are mentioned at crucial points throughout the story, including the two poems that Vicky herself writes. Ask students to make two lists, one labeled "light," the other "darkness." In each list, instruct students to write down events or characters they can find in the book that are associated with that quality. When their lists are complete, ask students to consider their list and write a paragraph concluding what meanings they think the author intended to ascribe to the two qualities.

Comparing and Contrasting Several of the

characters in this book have contrasting sets of beliefs about the rights and purposes of animals. For instance, Suzy feels animals should be free from all human intervention, while Zachary jokes about running over animals, as well as people. Have students make a chart showing both the differing attitudes of the main characters toward animals and how their actions reflect these attitudes.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Through his study, Adam is trying to understand the culture of the dolphins. Ask students to read stories or studies about dolphin behavior. Ask them to consider whether the information they gather corroborates or contradicts the behavior of the dolphins in this story. Finally, have the students write a paper discussing whether they conclude the depiction of the dolphins in this story is believable or not.

Responding to Literature Vicky is trying very hard to get Leo and Zachary to respect her personal boundaries. Ask students to recall a time when they wanted to get someone to respect their feelings. Have them write about this, explaining how they handled the situation. Do they feel they were able to effectively resolve the situation, or do they feel they were unsuccessful in getting the other person to respect their wishes?