

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Skellig

by

David Almond

Book Information

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An unusual being called Skellig enters the life of Michael, a boy whose family has moved into a new house and whose baby sister is gravely ill. Michael's sadness and isolation lead to a special friendship with Skellig and with a neighbor girl.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Booklist Editors' Choice; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Carnegie Medal/Honors; Costa/Whitbread Children's Award; Horn Book Fanfare; Michael Printz Award/Honor Book; Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Children's Literature; Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book; Publishers Weekly Best Book; SLJ Best Book; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

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Main Characters

Coot Michael's friend from Kenny Street School

Dr. Dan (Dr. Death) a doctor who makes house calls to check on the baby

Dr. MacNabola an egotistical surgeon who works with arthritis patients

Leakey Michael's friend from Kenny Street School

Michael the main character in the story; a ten-year-old boy who struggles with adjusting to a new home and having a sickly baby sister; he discovers and cares for a man-creature named Skellig

Mina an assertive and unusual girl who befriends Michael and helps him care for Skellig

Skellig a man-creature with wings who is crippled with arthritis and who allows Michael and Mina to care for him

the baby Michael's sister, who is born prematurely and struggles to live

Vocabulary

bluebottles flies that have blue bodies and feed on decaying matter

fledglings baby birds with flight feathers

flogged whipped; beaten as punishment

muddled confused; mixed-up; muddied

Synopsis

Michael and his mother and father have just moved into a dilapidated old house. Michael explores the garage that is about to fall down while his parents and the doctor are inside the house, worrying about the baby who was born prematurely and seems to be just hanging on to life. Michael discovers a man in the garage, alive but nearly starved. Over the course of the next days, he sneaks into the garage to visit the ill-tempered man, bringing him aspirin for his arthritis and leftover food from his dinners. He asks the man to think about his sick sister. He notices the stench of the man's breath and that he eats bugs and retches. When Michael touches the man's back, he feels large, mysterious bumps on his shoulder blades. When Michael later asks Mum what shoulder blades are for, she responds that they are the place where one's wings were once attached.

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A neighbor girl, Mina, is taught at home. She introduces herself to Michael one day as he is leaving the garage. Mina opens a whole new world of poetry, observation and art to Michael. When Michael's baby sister is rehospitalized, there are days when he feels that he cannot handle going to school or facing his friends Leakey and Coot and playing football with them. Instead, he helps his father with the house and spends time with Mina. Mina shows Michael her secret place, an empty house with owls living in the attic. He, in turn, takes Mina into the garage, hoping that she will be able to see the man. Michael hopes together they can help him, for he fears the man will die if the garage collapses. Mina does see the man, and together she and Michael move him under the cover of night to the empty house. He tells them his name is Skellig.

Michael is having a difficult time. His baby sister is still in the hospital, now connected to tubes and wires; he visits her there and listens until he can feel her heart beating along with his. His friends Leakey and Coot come to Michael's house for a visit and begin teasing him about his relationship with Mina. Michael and Mina have an argument, but then they reconcile and go to see Skellig. He is not where they left him. They find him in the attic near the window, eating the food the owls are bringing him. He is much stronger. Skellig, Mina and Michael join hands and dance in a circle. As they dance, ghostly wings appear on their backs, and they leave the ground. When they finish, Skellig tells them to remember this night.

Michael goes to school the next day, and his father calls to say he has to go to the hospital. Michael goes to Mina's house after school to wait for his father's return and there receives the news that his baby sister must have a heart operation.

Michael has a restless night after hearing this. He spends a day with Mina, protecting fledgling blackbirds from cats and other predators. Midmorning, they head to the empty house, where they find that Skellig is gone. Michael feels as though his heart has stopped, and he blacks out. When he regains consciousness, he can feel only

his own heartbeat, not his sister's. He believes that his sister is dead, but he later learns that his sister is not dead, just sleeping from the anesthetic. Mum tells them that, on the night before the operation, a filthy man came into the room and lifted the baby, and she saw ghostly wings on the baby's back. She said that she knew then that everything would be okay. Michael knows that the visitor was Skellig.

While his sister grows stronger, Michael returns to school and continues to adjust to his new home. Mina and Michael go to the attic one more time and find a gift from Skellig -- a heart scratched into the floorboards and three feathers. Some builders demolish the garage that Michael had been so worried would fall down on Skellig. Soon after, the baby and Mum come home.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

At the beginning of the story, Michael says some ugly things about the baby and the move to a new home. What do you think he feels about the baby and the house at the end of the story?

At the beginning of the story, everything in Michael's life has become topsy-turvy, so he is angry and frustrated. However, he really cares about his sister and is very worried about her. By the end of the story, he is happy that she is going to be healthy and he waits expectantly for her arrival home. He is proud of the work he has helped to do on the house to get it ready for Mum and his sister.

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Literary Analysis

Besides Dr. Dan's gray face and lack of humor, what else might have led Michael to call him Dr. Death?

Dr. Dan was treating Michael's sister, who was just barely holding on to life. It seemed to Michael that she would die soon. Dr. Dan was also Ernie Myers's doctor, and Ernie was dead. Dr. Dan seemed like a very matter-of-fact man, one who lacked compassion and imagination. He believed that things like angels are figments of the imagination. His appearance and the fact that he smoked probably added to the impression that he was an omen of death.

Inferential Comprehension

Why are Leakey, Coot and Mina good friends for Michael?

They provide a healthy balance for Michael. Michael enjoys the physical activity and joking around with his school friends. Mina, on the other hand, opens up Michael's mind and spirit to things he never knew existed. Michael is a sensitive child, and he is able to appreciate poetry and art. Leakey and Coot could not nurture that side of his personality as Mina did.

Constructing Meaning

In Chapter 34, while Michael is at Mina's house, Mina's mother sings lines from a William Blake poem. The poem mentions that age might affect how someone sees the world. What does the poem suggest would be different if Michael and Mina were older?

The poem suggests that "gray hairs" are a type of armor that keeps people from seeing and responding to things that are extraordinary. Michael and Mina might have been less able to see, understand, accept and help Skellig if they were older. They might have been more like Dr. Dan, who would explain away anything so extraordinary, or like Mum, who believed Skellig's visit was a dream.

students to go through the book and find the passages where Skellig appears. Then have them note any words or behaviors that are used to describe him. Do these words or behaviors describe him more as a man, an angel or a bird-like creature? From these words and descriptions, ask the students to sketch some drawings of him at various times throughout the story.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Mrs. McKee and Mina seem to have great respect for William Blake and his ideas. Who was William Blake? Ask the students to research his life, ideas, poems and paintings and write a paper on their findings.

Recognizing Cause and Effect Michael was an excellent football (soccer) player. Yet there were times when he either did not want to join the game or, if he did play, he played poorly. Attitude has a lot to do with performance. Athletes and other performers have off days and days when they seem to be "in the zone." Suggest the students watch a live sporting event or fine arts performance. Have them list the players or performers and make an assessment of their performances. Then, based on the performance, have them speculate as to the players' or performers' mental attitude during that time.

Recognizing Detail When Mina became interested in a particular organism or subject, she delved into it completely. She read about it, observed it, drew it, sculpted it, etc. Ask the students to pick a subject they are interested in and have them immerse themselves in the subject area and study it. The students can then give an oral report of their experience to the class, explaining the things they learned and showing any drawings, models, etc., they made of the subject. A class discussion can follow as to how the students feel about this mode of learning.

Teachable Skills

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Ask the