

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

A Taste of Blackberries

by

Doris Buchanan Smith

Book Information

Doris Buchanan Smith, [A Taste of Blackberries](#)
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Interest Level: MG

A little boy confronts grief and wrestles with the pain of loss when his best friend dies.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Misc./Other; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

Topics: Emotions, Loneliness; Emotions, Sadness; Family Life, Death; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5

Main Characters

Heather Jamie and the narrator's friend

Jamie a fun-loving and daring boy who enjoys being the center of attention

Jamie's friend the main character and narrator of the story; a sensitive boy who struggles with his feelings and the reasons for the death of his best friend, Jamie

Jamie's mother a woman who mourns her son's death

Martha Jamie's four-year-old sister

Mom and Dad the narrator's parents, who try to comfort their son after Jamie's death

Mrs. Houser Jamie's grouchy neighbor, who does not like her yard touched by the neighborhood children

Mrs. Mullins the narrator's neighbor who has a beautiful garden; she welcomes Jamie into her garden

Vocabulary

allergic having a physical reaction caused by high sensitivity to a substance

Morse code a way to transmit messages by using a series of dots and dashes to represent letters of the alphabet

paradiddles patterns of drumbeats

uncanny eerily perceptive, strange

writhing twisting and squirming

Synopsis

Jamie is a boy who is always getting into mischief, challenging boundaries, and exaggerating. It is summer vacation, and he and his friend are picking blackberries. Determining them not ripe, they leave the brambles and race to a creek where across a fence a farmer's apple tree tempts Jamie. He asks his friend to join him in grabbing an apple, but Jamie's friend refuses. Jamie climbs the fence and runs for the apples. His friend follows, fearing for Jamie's life, because he knows the farmer has been rumored to have a shotgun. They exit the field safely and walk towards their homes.

Jamie's friend hears his name being called by Jamie's grouchy neighbor, Mrs. Houser. She asks him to round up some neighborhood children to pick Japanese beetles off her grapevine leaves. Jamie agrees to help, and as Jamie's friend, Jamie, and Jamie's little sister, Martha, walk door-to-door asking for help, they find the kids are easily recruited since they are now allowed to walk on Mrs. Houser's grass. Getting to the top of the hill, little Martha asks to see where Jamie goes to school. As they head toward the school, a fierce storm breaks and they hitchhike to avoid the heavy rain. The storm quickly passes and the kids arrive home safely. Jamie's friend's mother, however, admonishes them for hitchhiking.

When the children arrive at Mrs. Houser's yard, they begin collecting the beetles. That is, all but Jamie. Up to his usual mischief, he sticks a willow branch down a bee's nest in the ground. The angry bees emerge and sting the children. Jamie begins writhing on the ground while the other kids run. Jamie's friend watches Jamie. He leaves for home

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disgusted, thinking Jamie is just putting on an act to get attention.

A short time later an ambulance arrives at Jamie's house. All the neighborhood children have gathered at the sound of the siren. Jamie is carried out on a stretcher and the children are concerned. Jamie's friend still thinks Jamie is putting on one good show for everyone. He goes back to Mrs. Houser's to finish picking beetles.

His mother calls him over to ask him to take Martha to their house where they can babysit her. When his mother comes home carrying Martha's baby brother, she tells him that Jamie is dead from an allergic reaction to the bee stings. She asks her son if he ran away with the others. He tells her he stood still but did not help Jamie because he thought Jamie was faking. His mother understands.

Jamie's friend now refuses to eat, hoping he can somehow end this bad dream and bring Jamie back. He attends the wake but runs out when he sees Jamie in the casket. That night he cries in bed and longs to be held. His father comes in and rocks him.

The next day Jamie's friend sneaks into the garden of his neighbor, Mrs. Mullins. He seeks the comfort of the privacy and beautiful colors there. Mrs. Mullins comes outside and helps him with his difficult questions. Jamie's friend and his family then attend the funeral, after which Jamie's friend allows himself to eat. The next morning he is inspired to gather blackberries and picks an extra basket for Jamie's mother. On the way to her house to deliver the berries, he sees other children playing and wonders how they can be having fun so soon after Jamie's death. When he brings the berries to Jamie's mother, she tells him to stop by often. He promises he will. When he gets home, he realizes Jamie would want him to be happy and decides to join the other children playing.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What impact does Mrs. Mullins have on Jamie's friend?

Mrs. Mullins's kindness, concern, and wisdom allow Jamie's friend the room to think and come to his own conclusions. She gives him freedom to arrive at his own way of coping when she says there are some questions that have no answers. In a way, she prompts Jamie's friend to change his questions from "why" questions, to "how" questions. Instead of asking why Jamie had to die, he is able to ask himself how to go on with life without Jamie. The answers to this question come slowly, but Jamie's friend eventually finds some resolution.

Literary Analysis

Why does the author never give a name to Jamie's friend?

Answers may vary. The author may intend to make it easier for readers to step into that role themselves. Readers may feel they are Jamie's unnamed friend and more closely identify with the feelings he is experiencing, especially after Jamie's death.

Inferential Comprehension

In what ways might this experience change Mrs. Houser?

Mrs. Houser may become even more finicky and isolated from her neighbors, hoping to avoid any more accidents on her property. On the other hand, this incident may soften her heart and make her realize that children are much more important than perfect grass, and she may become more welcoming to the children.

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Constructing Meaning

Jamie's friend tries to understand the reasons for Jamie's death. Have you ever lost a relative, a dear pet, or felt close to someone who has died? How did you deal with the loss? What questions did you ask, and how did you come to accept the reality of the death?

Students' experiences with death will differ. Some may not have experienced the loss of someone close to them. Others may have experienced a devastating loss. If they feel comfortable, have them share their experience and how they came to cope with the loss.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Details Jamie, Martha, and Jamie's friend get caught outside in a sudden storm and there is some debate as to what to do to be safe. This would be an excellent time to review some emergency safety procedures for weather-related emergencies. Have the students detail the protocol of safety in storms. The following are common but potentially life-threatening situations: spotting an approaching tornado, seeing lightning while hiking on a mountain peak, or driving in a car and seeing a severe storm in the distance. Assign scenarios to groups of students and ask each to research and report on the proper precautions that should be taken to prevent injury or death.

Extending Meaning Assign the students to read the story, "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." Have them draw analogies between *A Taste of Blackberries* and "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." The students can indicate how the lesson in the fable can be applied to Jamie's situation.

Describing Actions or Events Jamie loses his life because he has a severe reaction to a bee sting. Assign the students to do some library research to learn more about allergic reactions and how they manifest themselves. They can learn about the most common allergens and medical treatments. Have them present their findings to the class in a speech with visual aids

or in a paper.

Understanding Sequence Since berries must have been a favorite of Jamie and his friend, the students may wish to follow the steps in a recipe and make a pie for themselves at home. If possible, they should pick the berries themselves or buy fresh berries in season or frozen if fresh are not available. They should also buy the other necessary ingredients if they are not available in their homes. The students can then make a pie at home, starting with the pie crust. Pie can be brought to the classroom and shared among the students.