

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

They Cage the Animals at Night

by

Jennings Michael Burch

Book Information

Jennings Michael Burch, They Cage the Animals at Night
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Jennings Michael Burch spent much of his childhood in dreadful orphanages and foster homes when his mother became ill and was unable to care for him and his brothers. This is the true story of how he grew up and gained the courage to reach out for love.

Topics: Emotions, Courage; Family Life, Foster Children; Family Life, Growing Up;
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Main Characters

Donald Frazier Mr. Frazier's son, who often speaks rudely to others

Gene Burch Jennings's youngest brother, who is unable to take care of himself

George Burch Jennings's oldest brother, who struggles to support the family; he has inherited his father's drinking problem

Jennings Michael Burch a sensitive young boy who longs for a stable home; he is the narrator of the story

Jerome Burch Jennings's loving older brother who suffers from a heart condition

Larry Burch Jennings's brother; he resents being expected to help Mom and finally develops a drinking habit

Mark a kindhearted orphan who befriends Jennings

Martha the sensible and friendly cook at the Fraziers' house; she is loving and kind to Jennings

Mr. Frazier the wealthy man who allows Jennings to stay with his family for a brief time; he is well intentioned but has to be reminded of Jennings's needs

Mrs. Carpenter a cruel woman who takes Jennings from the children's home in order to make money as a foster parent

Officer Daily the soft-hearted policeman who takes Jennings into his home after Jennings runs away; he ensures that Jennings is put into a stable home

Rita Burch (Mom) Jennings's sickly mother, who struggles to take care of her numerous children

Sal the compassionate bus driver who eventually gives Jennings a permanent home

Sergeant Pierce Meagher (Sarge) the gruff-voiced policeman who scolds Sister Barbara for abusing Jennings

Sister Barbara the abusive nun who attacks Jennings because she believes he spilled his cocoa

Sister Clair the sympathetic nun at Home of the Angels who gives Doggie to Jennings

Sister Frances the harsh nun who supervises children at the Home of the Angels

Walter Burch Jennings's intelligent older brother who is determined to educate himself; he tries to help Jennings when he can

Vocabulary

cot a small folding bed

fibbed told a small lie

frankfurter a hot dog

mumbled spoke softly and unclearly; said under one's breath

splinters thin pieces of wood or other solid materials

Synopsis

At the age of eight, Jennings finds himself in a children's home while his mother recuperates from an illness. Jennings is devastated by this unexpected abandonment, but Mark, an orphan at the home, helps Jennings learn the rules. Jennings is briefly taken from the orphanage by Mrs.

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Carpenter, but her husband makes her return him after he witnesses her abusing Jennings. Most of the nuns are not considerate of the feelings of the children, but Sister Clair is kind. She gives Jennings a stuffed dog that becomes his only constant companion in the difficult years that follow.

Jennings is eventually allowed to go home, but his mother is clearly overwhelmed by the task of caring for her six sons. Jennings and his brother Larry are informed that they must repeat a grade, and soon afterward, Mom's health fails again, and Jennings is taken to St. Teresa's, where he is brutally punished for spilling a cup of cocoa.

When he is finally taken home, Jennings meets his terminally ill brother, Jerome, for the first time. Jerome helps him deal with the oldest brother, George, who is an alcoholic. George attempts to earn money to support the family and arranges for the family to move. Shortly before the move, Jerome has to be hospitalized again.

After the move, Jennings's older brother Walter helps establish Jennings in a good school. The bus that Jennings has to take to the school is driven by Sal, a friendly man who soon becomes Jennings's confidant. When Mom becomes ill again, Jennings is allowed to stay with the Fraziers, a wealthy family who mainly treats him with kindness. Jennings's relationship with Sal is reinforced when Sal saves him from a band of mean schoolboys who beat Jennings.

After Jennings returns to his family, Sal is transferred. Jennings tries to track him down, and Sal arranges with Mom to spend time with Jennings and his family. When Mom falls off a roof and breaks her back, Jennings must return to an institutional home. There he is reunited with Mark, but Mark dies suddenly. Soon afterward, Jennings goes home once more, but the boys accidentally overmedicate Mom, and Jennings goes to another home. When he is humiliated for wetting the bed, Jennings runs away. The officer who picks him up is expected to take him to a juvenile hall, but he feels compassion for Jennings and takes him in.

Unfortunately, Jennings learns that the officer must return him to a home if he cannot find Sal. Jennings runs away again, but Sal and the officer track him down. Jennings's sufferings conclude with Sal giving him and his younger brother Gene a permanent home.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

When Mark collapses, he tells Jennings that he had tried to wait for Sal. What does Mark mean?

Mark means that he has been avoiding asking for medical attention because he knows that he will be removed from the home before Sal comes for Jennings. Mark has been dreaming of belonging to someone for years, and he believes that he is on the verge of realizing those dreams.

Literary Analysis

What makes it difficult for Jennings to learn the rules in the homes?

Most of the rules are not stated by anyone. Jennings is often punished without knowing exactly what rule he has broken. The adults often react to questions with animosity, but they expect the children to know the rules even if the rules have not been explained.

Inferential Comprehension

How are Jerome and Mark alike?

They are very ill, live in institutions for long periods of time, try to help Jennings with his problems and help Jennings decide the meaning of the word "brother."

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Constructing Meaning

Jennings encounters many homes, some of which are very appealing to him. Which home do you think Jennings would have been happiest in if Sal had not been able to take him in? Use details from the book to explain your position.

Answers will vary, but the three best homes Jennings stays in are the Fraziers', the Dailys' and his mother's home. Each has its advantages and disadvantages.

Teachable Skills

Identifying Persuasive Language Readers of this book likely will feel a tremendous sense of injustice about the way the children are treated in many of the homes depicted. Have students write a letter to the editor expressing their feelings and recommending changes that might improve the lives of these children. Remind students to use examples from the book to support their opinions.

Comparing and Contrasting This story takes place in the middle of the twentieth century. Have the students research the current child welfare system. Have them consider whether the system has improved, deteriorated or stayed the same. Have them use details from the book and their research to support their conclusions.

Recognizing Feelings Jennings often has difficulty expressing his feelings. Have the students choose one moment where Jennings is clearly not sharing his emotions. Have them create a dialogue in which Jennings tells someone how he feels about him or her or about what is happening to him.

Recognizing Setting Jennings lives in many institutional homes. Have the students choose one of these places and draw a picture of it. Have them include the people who are a part of that setting in their drawing, since the people are strongly connected to specific places for Jennings in many instances.