

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Book of Ruth

by
Jane Hamilton

Book Information

Jane Hamilton, The Book of Ruth
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Young Ruth grows up in poverty and in the shadow of her brilliant brother. With few options of her own, she clings to her semi-crazy mother and marries and supports one of Honey Creek's losers.

Award: Misc./Other

Topics: Recommended Reading, Oprah's Book Club

Main Characters

Aunt Sid May's younger sister who lives in Decatur and becomes Ruth's pen pal

Daisy Foote Dee Dee's wild daughter who often runs off and gets in trouble with the law

Dee Dee Foote a friend of May whose daughters often get in trouble

Elmer Ruth's father, who left the family when Ruth was a child

Justin (Justy) Ruth and Ruby's young son

Matt Ruth's younger brother, who is academically advanced

May Ruth's mother, who is unhappy with her life since her first husband died in World War II

Miss Finch Ruth's elderly, blind neighbor whom Ruth visits and helps play her books on tape

Ruby the man Ruth marries who has trouble with alcohol, drugs, and the law

Ruth a young woman who grows up in a poor, dysfunctional family in northern Illinois

Vocabulary

aloof distant from others in social situations

dupe to trick another into doing or believing something

gumption the ability to take initiative

prodigy a child who is exceptionally talented
stymied frustrated

Synopsis

Ruth is a young woman who tells the story of her life growing up in a poor, dysfunctional family outside the small northern Illinois town of Honey Creek. Her mother, May, is a sullen woman who was the oldest child in a large family. May had to care for her younger siblings and do the laundry for her large family. May experienced a short period of happiness when she met and married Willard Jenson but her happiness ended when he was killed in World War II. May was single for ten years before she met and married Elmer Grey. She had two children with Elmer -- Ruth and Matt. Eventually Elmer left the family and never came back.

Ruth does not consider herself a very intelligent girl. Ruth's younger brother, Matt, however, is a very intelligent boy and is popular in school. Ruth and Matt have difficulty getting along since they are so different. Ruth begins to correspond with May's sister, Sid, as a pen pal assignment in third grade. Aunt Sid continues to write to Ruth long after Ruth is out of third grade. Ruth looks forward to her letters because Aunt Sid makes Ruth feel good about herself.

As a teenager, Ruth meets a blind elderly neighbor named Miss Finch when she receives the job of helping Miss Finch play her book tapes of classic literary works. Ruth finds that she enjoys listening to the tapes, and her knowledge is expanded. Ruth begins to share her letters from Aunt Sid with Miss Finch. Ruth's friendship with Miss Finch helps Ruth feel valuable and worthwhile. At one point Miss Finch helps Ruth study for a spelling contest. Ruth shocks her classmates when she wins and advances to the city competition. Ruth manages to stay in the contest until the fire alarm goes off. While everyone is hurried outside, Ruth stumbles and falls and loses the lucky brooch her mother had given her. When everyone returns to the building to finish the contest, Ruth misspells the first word she receives and is out of the contest.

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The rest of Ruth's academic career is fairly uneventful. She graduates at the same time as her advanced brother and begins working at the Trim 'N Tidy dry cleaners with her mother. Ruth also begins bowling on the Trim 'N Tidy bowling team. She turns out to be a naturally talented bowler. Ruth's life changes one day when she goes to the lake with her friend, Daisy. Ruth and Daisy meet Ruby, an unemployed drug user. Ruth is immediately intrigued by and drawn to Ruby. Ruby is also drawn to Ruth and the two begin dating. They get married after only a few months.

Since Ruby has a hard time getting and keeping a job and Ruth makes a low salary, the two decide to live with May for a while. This arrangement is not ideal since Ruby and May do not get along very well. Eventually, Ruth becomes pregnant. Her pregnancy brings the three together temporarily. Once Ruth gives birth to her boy, Justin, problems slowly creep back into the household. May does not trust Ruby around the baby and this frustrates him. Ruby adores his son, but since he still drinks often and uses drugs, May feels he should not be left home alone with Justin. Ruth finds herself trying to keep the peace and wanting to take her baby away from all the trouble.

At one point Ruth plans a vacation for herself and Ruby, but before they can take the vacation Ruby is hit and injured by a car during one of his drug-induced hallucinations. Daisy persuades Ruth to take the trip to see Aunt Sid by herself. Ruth agrees and enjoys two days with Aunt Sid. After she returns, Ruth finds Ruby and May's relationship is worse than ever. Ruth dreads the approaching winter because she knows it will bring increased tensions in the house. After Halloween, Ruth and Ruby make plans to move out of May's house at the end of the year.

Ruth tells Ruby she is pregnant again but before Ruby, Ruth and Justin can move out, Ruby explodes and attacks May and Ruth, hitting them with a fireplace poker. Ruby beats May to death and leaves Ruth terribly injured. Ruby is taken to jail, and

Ruth spends months in the hospital. Aunt Sid comes to care for her and help with baby Justin. Ruth is transferred to a hospital near Aunt Sid's house so her unborn baby can be monitored and delivered if necessary. When Ruth gains physical strength, she finds herself in a hateful mood. She hollers and swears at nearly everyone who comes into her room, including her brother Matt, who had come to see her.

Eventually Ruth is released from the hospital and goes to stay with Aunt Sid. Here she begins to heal emotionally. Ruth asks about her mother and Ruby. She discovers and comes to terms with the reality that May is dead and the likelihood that Ruby will remain in prison. Ruth gains her strength enough to know that she will go on with her life but that she must first return to Honey Creek to say goodbye to her former self.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

There seem to be numerous warning signs that May is pushing Ruby to his limit and that he may snap at some point. Looking back over the course of events the reader can identify some things Ruby does that may be clues that he might lose control some day. What are some of the things he does that serve as warning signs to May and Ruth?

Ruby throws a bottle of juice against the wall. Ruby also strangles May's favorite hen. Ruby purposely does things with Justin that he knows upset May, such as feeding him sweets and roughhousing with him. The situation becomes even more dangerous as Ruby becomes more dependent on drugs and is having more hallucinations. Finally, Ruby paces nervously and is red-faced the day he attacks and kills May.

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Literary Analysis

When Ruth looks up the meaning of her name, she finds out it means pity and compassion. Do you think these are accurate descriptions of Ruth? Support your answer.

These descriptions do seem to be fitting for Ruth. One cannot help but feel pity for Ruth since she is born into such a dysfunctional family and has little support at home. Also, one can see how compassionate she is towards others. Ruth tries to understand Ruby and May despite their shortcomings and faults.

Inferential Comprehension

There are numerous points in this story where the reader can see an opportunity for someone to affect Ruth's life for the better and perhaps even to prevent Ruby from killing May. Cite examples of times others could have intervened or made a different decision that would have altered Ruth's life for the better.

Ruth's father, Elmer, might have helped if he had taken the children with him when he left May. Aunt Sid might have helped if she had sent more money to Ruth or bought Ruth a ticket to come visit her. Aunt Sid could possibly have invited Ruth to spend the summer(s) with her. Sherry might have helped Ruth by warning her about Ruby's violent side before she married him. A school counselor might have been able to help Ruth by steering her into classes where she would have learned some skills or trades. Sid also could have helped if she would have confronted Ruth about the lies in her letters.

Constructing Meaning

When Ruth needs some time to herself to think, she goes outside and up the hill near her home in Honey Creek. It is here that she thinks of pleasant things and tries to forget about her troubles. Many people have a place like this to go and get away from others. Where do you go for solitude? Why is this location special or important to you?

Students will likely have a variety of places they seek out when they need to think and be by themselves. Some common locations include places in the house, treehouses, treeswings, a favorite ice cream or coffee shop, or the library. Some students may favor isolated spots, some may enjoy the sounds of nature, and still others may enjoy observing people. Places to find quiet, comfort, or inspiration vary greatly.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization In order to help the reader better understand May, Ruby and Ruth, the author includes details about their lives as children and early adults. Have your students choose one of these characters and list the events of his or her earlier years that had a significant impact on his or her behavior as an adult. Ask the students to identify how each event influenced the character or what effect it had on him or her.

Making Predictions As the story ends, the reader gets the sense that Ruth will be able to recover from the trauma that Ruby put her through. She seems to have learned some things about herself and is hopeful that she will find the courage and initiative to restart her life. Have the students write what they hope will be the next chapter of Ruth's story.

Understanding Dialogue The counselors ask Ruth and Ruby to talk about their previous life experiences, and the counselors mostly just listen. Invite the guidance counselor to the classroom to explain why it is important for people receiving psychological counseling to discuss their background.

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Responding to Literature There are some lessons that can be learned from reading a story like this: no person is hopeless, hateful words and actions can destroy other people, and drugs are destructive. Many of these lessons, if recognized, can help young people make the right decisions in their own lives. Have the students list and discuss or write some of the lessons they learned through this story and how they could apply them to their own lives.