

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Coffin on a Case

by

### Eve Bunting

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### Book Information

Eve Bunting, Coffin on a Case  
Quiz Number: 7665  
HarperTrophy, 1993  
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105 Pages  
Book Level: 3.7  
Interest Level: MG

Twelve-year-old Henry Coffin, the son of a private investigator, helps a gorgeous high school girl in her dangerous attempt to find her kidnapped mother.

**Award:** Edgar Award/Honor Book

**Topics:** Adventure, Rescue/Save; Mysteries, Kidnappings; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 4-6

### Main Characters

Henry Coffin the main character; a boy who wants to be a detective like his father

Lily Larson a sixteen-year-old girl who wants to hire Mr. Coffin to find her mother

Mr. Coffin Henry's father; a private detective

Mrs. Larson Lily's mother, who makes and sells plywood stork yard signs

Mrs. Sypes the Coffins' housekeeper

### Vocabulary

**Hubbard Glacier** a large glacier in Alaska; one of the longest alpine glaciers in the world

**jacaranda tree** a Brazilian tree that produces flowers and bean-like fruit pods

**Sam Spade** a private detective character created by Dashiell Hammett

**statue** a likeness of a person or thing made out of wood, stone, or metal

### Synopsis

When Henry is visiting his dad's office, a pretty blond teenage girl arrives. She wants to hire a

detective to find her mother, who had disappeared the day before. Lily does not want to call the police because she had called them several times before and was afraid she would appear foolish. Mr. Coffin has to travel to San Diego on another case and cannot take Lily's case. He recommends that she contact the police.

That night Lily calls Henry and asks for his help. Her mother is still missing and Lily is determined to find her. Henry agrees to meet her the next day. Lily takes Henry home to show him the clues she has found so far. Her mother had left to sell some signs, buy plywood, and get groceries. Lily found her mother's car in the driveway with the keys and groceries in it, but no sign of Mrs. Larson. Henry finds some tire tracks and makes a diagram. He speculates that someone else drove the car to the Larson's house.

While he and Lily search Mrs. Larson's studio, someone comes to the house and searches for the mileage book that Mrs. Larson keeps in the car. Lily had taken it into the house. Henry and Lily decide to retrace Mrs. Larson's steps. They talk to the two families who bought storks and also to the man at the lumber yard, but turn up no clues. Then, at the grocery store the checker tells them he had told Mrs. Larson about some houses on Chaparral Road. The road is on the way home from the grocery store. Henry and Lily decide to check it out.

Henry finds some clues, but is seen by a woman who forces him into her house. She pushes him down into the basement where he finds Mrs. Larson. Mrs. Larson tells him she had seen a young couple with a baby and was going to try to sell them a stork. Then she realizes the baby was actually a jade statue. The couple forced her inside and locked her in the basement.

Henry comes up with a plan to escape. He succeeds and hides the statue, hoping Lily has gone for the police. He hides from the couple in a dirty swimming pool. The police arrive to rescue Henry and Mrs. Larson. The couple is arrested. Henry is a hero.

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### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

Why does Henry take Lily's case when his father could not?

*He feels sorry for her and wants to help her. His mother walked out when he was a baby, and he can sympathize with Lily. He feels lucky to have Mrs. Sypes to take care of him when his father is out of town. Also, Lily would not go to the police, and he thinks he would be a help to her. He wants to be a detective like his father, and solving this case will impress his father. Lily is also the image of his dream client, like Sam Spade's when he helps the beautiful woman in trouble.*

#### Literary Analysis

What has Henry done recently that actually prepares him to hide in the swimming pool?

*He had been helping his friend Paul practice holding his breath. Paul is determined to win an underwater swimming race. Henry had gotten a stopwatch for Christmas, so Paul has Henry time him. Henry would actually hold his breath along with Paul, and knew that he could hold his breath longer than Paul. So when he is running away from the man who had stolen the statue, he hides in the swimming pool.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

What were some of the things Henry did that shows he is a good detective?

*He knows the motive was not robbery because he sees a dollar in the glove compartment. He knows someone else had driven the car because the radio station is changed. He sees the tire tracks and oil spots. He figures out how to get out of the basement. He throws the dust in the man's eyes. He hides the statue in the pool. He makes plans to have Lily go to the police if he gets into trouble.*

### Constructing Meaning

Why doesn't Lily want to go to the police about her missing mother?

*She had contacted them before when she thought her mother was missing. She thinks they would not take her seriously. The last time the police asked about whether her mother had any boyfriends, they acted as if she were not a good mother. She is also afraid they will put her in a foster home since she is too young to live alone. She thinks she could find her mother with Henry's help.*

### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The story is set in Pasadena. The students can research the city in the encyclopedia and travel guides. It is a town rich in tourist attractions. They could plan a trip to the area including the sites they would visit, where they would stay, and how long they would stay. Have them map out their route to the city and possible stops of interest along the way. How long would it take to drive? Where is the nearest train station and airport? How much would it cost to fly or take a train?

**Understanding Literary Features** Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade stories were private-eye tales. This genre focuses on the action in the story rather than the puzzle that is to be solved like stories in the whodunit genre. The *Coffin on a Case* book also focuses on the action and not on putting clues together to figure out who the criminals were. As a comparison, have a classroom discussion comparing the two genres. The students may be familiar with Sherlock Holmes stories or one of the series of detective fiction such as Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys, or Encyclopedia Brown, in which the reader gets clues along the way and figures out the case along with the young detectives. The Milton Bradley game called *Clue* is a simplistic example of how a detective eliminates possible suspects to figure out who committed the crime.

**Understanding Characterization** This is a story

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about a boy wanting to be a private detective. The boy models his detective work after his father. Henry investigates the case as his father would. He uses his detective notebook to write down clues. Have the students construct a notebook like Henry's. They should start at the beginning of the story and map out the clues. They can include drawings of the jade statue, the flower, the car, etc. Encourage them to use their imaginations and be creative.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The author used Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade private-eye stories as a model for this story. The students can write their own Henry Coffin story using this one as a model. Have them map out their stories and include such things as the client's name, the type of crime, and the steps Henry took to solve it. They could all begin the same starting sentence such as: Henry had been watching his neighbor's house for hours wondering if he had really seen the masked man or had imagined it, or Henry's father had not been home for a couple of nights and Henry was worried that he might be in some kind of trouble, or Mrs. Sypes was not acting like herself. She seemed to have her mind on something important.