

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Cousins

by

Virginia Hamilton

Book Information

Virginia Hamilton, Cousins
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Concerned that her grandmother may die, Cammy is overwhelmed by the accidental death of another relative.

Award: BCCB Blue Ribbon Book

Topics: Family Life, Cousins; Family Life, Death; Family Life, Grandparents; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 4-6 (Theme: Friends and Family)

Main Characters

Andrew Cammy's older brother, who is responsible for watching over Cammy while their mother works

Aunt Effie Maylene's sister and Patricia Ann's mother, whom Cammy dislikes

Cammy a young girl who loves to visit her elderly grandmother but does not get along well with her cousin, Patricia Ann

Cammy's father Cammy's estranged father, who helps support Cammy and Richie but rarely comes to see Cammy

Elodie Cammy's third cousin with whom Cammy generally enjoys spending time

Gram Tut Cammy's elderly grandmother, who lives in a nursing home and is visited regularly by Cammy

Maylene Cammy's mother, who is divorced and raising her children alone

Patricia Ann Cammy's "perfect" cousin to whom Cammy has difficulty relating

Richie Cammy's cousin, Patricia Ann's brother, and Effie's son, who has a hard time keeping a job and drinks alcohol without his mother's knowledge

Vocabulary

calisthenics physical exercises performed in order to keep the body fit

hysterical emotionally upset and out of control

migrant a person who travels from place to place performing manual labor in the fields

sober not drunk or intoxicated

sympathy a feeling of sorrow for another person who has suffered difficult or tragic circumstances

upchuck a slang word meaning to vomit

Synopsis

Cammy loves her grandmother very much and frequently visits her at the Care. One summer day, she goes to Gram Tut's room without an adult, even though this is against the rules. Gram Tut is elderly and weak, but she saves her strength to talk to her energetic granddaughter. Cammy speaks to Gram and another resident, Otha Vance, until Otha creates a ruckus by falling over in his wheelchair. As workers at the Care come to his aid, Lilac Rose, an attendant, encourages Cammy to leave before she is caught in Gram Tut's room. Cammy reluctantly says goodbye to Gram Tut and sneaks out.

As Cammy is heading home, a summer thunderstorm moves in. Afraid of the lightning, Cammy hastily decides to stop at Aunt Effie's house. Aunt Effie has her strip off her street clothes, and she throws them into the dryer. She sends Cammy to the room where Cammy's cousin, Patricia Ann, is practicing piano. Cammy does not get along with Patty Ann very well because Patty Ann is good at everything, and Aunt Effie thinks she is perfect. After Patty Ann finishes practicing, she and Cammy begin to talk and eventually get into an argument. Cammy blurts out that she knows how Patty Ann secretly vomits in order to stay thin. She also hurtfully describes how Patty Ann will look in the casket when she dies. As Patty Ann calls for her mother, Cammy grabs her clothes from the dryer and runs off into the rain again.

As Cammy walks home, her brother, Andrew, picks

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her up in his truck. Richie, their cousin, is also in the truck. Richie and Andrew often spend time together without their mothers' knowledge. Richie's mother, Effie, would not approve because she thinks Andrew is irresponsible and a drinker. Andrew's mother, Maylene, would not approve because she feels Richie is lazy and a bad influence on Andrew. Andrew eventually stops at a factory outside of town. He wants Richie to get in line to sign up for a job at the factory. Richie is reluctant to go and takes a bottle of liquor out of Andrew's glove compartment. Cammy then realizes that Richie, not Andrew, is the drinker. Andrew eventually talks Richie into getting in line. Cammy and Andrew then go home. They speak with their mother for a while. Thinking that she is sticking up for Andrew, Cammy reveals to their mother that Richie is the drinker not Andrew. Andrew gets mad at her and leaves the house.

A few days later, Cammy goes to day camp with Patty Ann and another cousin, Elodie. Cammy likes Elodie better than Patty Ann but she is a bit ashamed of how poor Elodie is. Elodie and Cammy usually spend a great deal of time together at camp. On this day, Patty Ann pretends to be friends with Elodie in order to get revenge on Cammy for the hurtful things she said at her house on the day of the thunderstorm. Once Patty Ann has made her point, she no longer plays with Elodie who then comes back to be with Cammy. After morning crafts and calisthenics, a counselor takes the children on a nature hike before swimming. She agrees to let the children take the trail down to the river to play. Elodie runs ahead of the others and jumps into the water. The river is swollen and raging from the recent rains, and Elodie gets caught in the current as she tries to recover a sneaker that has come off in the water. Patty Ann jumps into the river to save her. She manages to get Elodie safely to shore but gets sucked into the current herself and drowns.

After Patty Ann's funeral, the children begin a new school year. Patty Ann's classmates seem to be recovering until their teacher has them decorate Patty Ann's desk in streamers. Many children become ill and are absent from school. Elodie is blamed for Patty Ann's death, and she moves away

to live with her mother in a migrant camp. Cammy becomes overwhelmed by her emotions and has visions of Patty Ann. Andrew, Maylene, and Cammy's father take turns staying with Cammy because she has nightmares. Eventually, Cammy's parents fear she will not get better. They decide to take Cammy to see Elodie. The girls talk, and Elodie tells her that Patty Ann has forgiven them for not being able to save her. This helps Cammy, but it takes a visit from Gram Tut to really make Cammy feel better. Gram Tut tells Cammy that she needs to go on living in the present instead of living in the past and that everyone dies at some point. Though not totally cured, Cammy is able to return to school and to her normal life. As a result of this incident, Cammy begins to have a meaningful relationship with her father, whom she previously did not see very often.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Cammy says that she knows Patty Ann "upchucked" her food on purpose. What disorder is this a symptom of and what other symptoms does Patty Ann have?

Patty Ann has symptoms of bulimia. Bulimia is an eating disorder that people, generally young girls, have in which they overeat and then force themselves to vomit afterward. They do this to stay thin. Bulimia can cause a number of physical problems for those who suffer. Patty Ann shows a few of these other problems. She is very thin, does not stand up straight, and becomes tired quickly when doing physical activity.

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Literary Analysis

What are some of the signs of growing old that Gram Tut and other people living at the Care show?

Gram Tut is too weak to speak or walk most of the time. She sleeps most of the day in an attempt to build up her energy just to visit with Cammy. She also lies in a fetal or curled up position most of the time. Gram Tut also has periods of time when her "mind would take a wrong turn," causing her to think she is somewhere other than where she really is. Otha Vance has trouble sitting up on his own and needs to be strapped into his wheelchair. He also has trouble remembering what's going on, where he is, or what he is doing. He speaks of activities and people from years past.

Inferential Comprehension

Why do Patty Ann and Cammy have so much trouble getting along and being friends?

Patty Ann and Cammy's relationship reflects the relationships of their elders. Their mothers are sisters who do not get along very well. Effie makes many comments that indicate she feels superior to Maylene. She believes her children are better behaved, more intelligent, and less troublesome. Effie appears to look down on Maylene because Maylene is divorced. Maylene seems as though she would like to have a better relationship with Effie but does not appreciate the way Effie treats her. In addition, Effie does not appear to get along with Gram Tut as well as Maylene does. Maylene and her children visit Gram more often and think more fondly of Gram than do Effie and her family.

Constructing Meaning

Who was at fault in Patty Ann's death?

There are a number of people who are blamed by various members of the community. Elodie is blamed because she was the reason Patty Ann went into the water. Patty Ann had jumped into the river in order to save Elodie. Ms. Devine is blamed because she did not attempt to save Patty Ann from the river. People say she is a coward and was too fat to help. Cammy blames herself. She thinks Patty Ann drowned because she wanted Cammy to feel bad. Effie blames everyone for not trying to save Patty Ann. Ultimately, no one was at fault. Accidents are by definition events that are not planned or expected. No one expected that Patty Ann would not be able to pull herself out of the water because she had already been able to help Elodie out. Ms. Devine was unaware that the river was raging so high and fast. She probably would not have allowed the children to go down the path to the river if she suspected it was so dangerous. Elodie did not expect the water was so dangerous or she would not have jumped in. If Ms. Devine or another child had also jumped in to help, there may have been more drowning victims. The river was running so fast that most people would have been helpless against its forces. The whole incident was a tragic accident.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Elodie's mother earns money by working in a migrant camp. While she is at work, Elodie lives at the Christian Shelter so that she can attend school. After Patty Ann's death Elodie goes to live with her mother and sometimes works in the fields with her mother. Have the students investigate the life of migrant workers. Have them find out why people do migrant work, where migrant workers come from, why migrant work is used in this country, and how the children of migrant workers are affected. Discuss with the students the benefits and drawbacks of migrant work. Discuss, or have the students debate, whether migrant work camps should exist and/or what alternatives exist to migrant labor.

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Recognizing Cause and Effect After Patty Ann's death Cammy suffers from post-traumatic stress. The shock of what she witnessed causes her to suffer physical ailments. This syndrome is often associated with individuals who have fought in a war, but it is more and more often being identified in individuals who have experienced some other traumatic event. Invite a professional therapist to discuss this syndrome with the class.

Recognizing Setting The author did a good job of describing the settings of the different scenes in this story. Have the students choose a scene and draw or paint it. Set up a gallery to display the pictures so students can see how each person envisioned the scenes.

Understanding the Author's Craft In this book the narrator tells the story from Cammy's perspective. The narrator knows what Cammy is thinking and feeling and describes the details and events of her life. In particular, the book deals with how Patty Ann's death affects Cammy. Patty Ann's death deeply affects many characters in this book. Discuss the effects on the other characters and then have the students write a chapter, occurring after Patty Ann's death, from another character's perspective.