

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Cracker Jackson by Betsy Byars

Book Information

Betsy Byars, Cracker Jackson
Quiz Number: 215
Viking Penguin, 1985
ISBN 0-14-031881-X; LCCN
146 Pages
Book Level: 4.2
Interest Level: MG

After attempting to save his ex-babysitter from wife abuse, Cracker Jackson gains an adult insight into the sadness of failed heroics.

Award: Horn Book Fanfare; Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book; SLJ Best Book; State Award

Topics: Community Life, Domestic Abuse; Family Life, Growing Up; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Work it Out: Conflicts; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies

Main Characters

Alma Alton Jackson's former babysitter; her husband beats her

Billy Ray Alton Alma's abusive husband

Bubba Riley Jackson's classmate; he sent Jackson an anonymous letter in first grade

Jackson Hunter (Cracker) the main character of the story; he fears that his beloved former babysitter is being abused

Kay Hunter (Mom) Jackson's divorced mother; she helps Alma escape from her abusive husband

Mr. Fellini Jackson's teacher

Mr. Hunter (Dad) Jackson's father; Jackson's mother divorced him because he could never be serious

Nicole Alton Alma and Billy Ray's six-month-old baby daughter

Percy Gill Jackson's classmate; he does whale imitations

Rachel McMillan Goat's sister; she suspects Goat pretended to collect for UNICEF to keep the money for himself

Ralph McMillan (Goat) Jackson's best friend; he is frequently in trouble at home and at school

Sister Rose a palm reader; she tells Alma she will marry Billy Ray but will be sorry

Vocabulary

frivolity of little importance, trivial, worthless

infirmary a room or facility where ill people are treated

panhandler a person who stops people on the streets to ask for money

reproach blame or disapproval

undaunted unafraid, fearless

Synopsis

Eleven-year-old Jackson Hunter lives with his divorced mother. One day, he receives a letter from his former babysitter, Alma Alton, who affectionately nicknamed him "Cracker." Jackson suspects that Alma's husband, Billy Ray, is beating her. Alma's letter tells Jackson, "Keep away, Cracker, or he'll hurt you." Jackson realizes she means her husband, Billy Ray, will hurt him if he goes to see Alma. Jackson's best friend, Goat, goes to Alma's house, pretending to collect for UNICEF, to see if she is all right. Goat sees that Alma looks awful, but she tells him she was in a car wreck. Jackson is very worried. He and Alma have been very close since her babysitting days, and Alma has always been so nice to him.

Ten days later, Alma calls Jackson, and confesses to him that Billy Ray hit her and her baby, Nicole. Jackson knows of a place for abused women in Avondale. Since his mother is in Chicago, Jackson offers to borrow his mother's other car and drive Alma to Avondale. Jackson and Goat get the car out of the garage and, barely knowing how to drive, pick up Alma and Nicole and start on their way to Avondale. Halfway there, Alma changes her mind and demands that Jackson take her back home. Jackson complies but feels he is a failure. He and

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Goat carefully return the car to the garage and hope Jackson's mother will not realize it has been moved. When Jackson's mother returns, he tells her his fears about Alma. She assures him she will talk to Alma and orders him not to interfere in the situation anymore.

Alma does not come to see Mrs. Hunter as planned, so Mrs. Hunter goes to her house. Jackson immediately follows his mother on his bike. When he arrives at Alma's house, he finds out from a neighbor that Mrs. Hunter has taken them to the hospital. When he goes to visit Alma in the hospital, the shock of seeing her makes him feel he has lost his childhood innocence and gained the burdens of an adult. Alma tells him she realizes she should have let him take her to Avondale. She agrees to go there just as soon as she and her daughter get better.

Four days later, Alma calls to tell Jackson that Nicole is finally improving. Jackson is greatly relieved and feels he can be a boy once again. The next weekend, Jackson and his parents drive Alma and Nicole to Avondale. It is difficult for Alma to say good-bye to the life she has known, but she knows she is doing the right thing. Two weeks later, Jackson receives another letter from Alma. This one tells him that she and Nicole are doing fine and that she will never be sorry about her marriage because she has Nicole. Jackson puts her letter with his most valued possessions, and his life returns to normal.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

When Jackson first goes to see Alma, he tells her he is worried about her because she always has bruises. Alma claims it is because she has delicate skin. Jackson replies, "I never used to see bruises on you, not until you got married." What does he mean?

Jackson has just received the letter from Alma telling him to stay away. Billy Ray also threatens to kill Jackson over the phone. Jackson suspects that Billy Ray is hitting Alma and causing her to bruise. Because he cares so much for Alma, Jackson does not want to offend her by outright accusing her husband; he knows she will just deny it. By mentioning that she has only bruised since marrying Billy Ray, Jackson is letting her know his suspicions.

Literary Analysis

The author utilizes flashbacks many times throughout the story. Several flashbacks occur when Jackson recalls the days when Alma was his babysitter. Explain why using a flashback in this manner is an effective way to reveal this relationship to the reader.

Flashbacks are a quick and easy way to tell readers about characters or events without leaving the context of the story and without having the story take place over a period of many years. The flashback reveals the depth of Jackson and Alma's relationship so the reader can immediately understand why Alma and Jackson care so much for each other.

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Inferential Comprehension

The first time Billy Ray hits both Alma and Nicole, Alma knows she is in danger and accepts Jackson's offer to take her to Avondale. Why does Alma change her mind and order Jackson to take her home?

Although she and Nicole are in danger, Alma loves the Billy Ray she married and wants to make a life with him. It is difficult for her to leave her home and friends and all the familiar places she has known. Perhaps she is overtaken by a feeling of helplessness and fear of not being able to survive on her own. She likely is hoping that Billy Ray will change his ways.

Constructing Meaning

When Jackson and his parents pick up Alma to take her to Avondale, Alma shows Jackson that she has removed all of her rings. What is the main idea in this scene?

Alma states that rings are for remembering. By removing the rings, she is indicating that she wants to forget her husband and the life she is leaving behind. She also does not want to remember the sadness she feels in going away and trying to start a new life.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Sequence The story can be divided into a series of events that take place over a short period of time in Jackson's life. Have students review the story. Then, in a class discussion, have them recall and summarize the major events of the book, omitting flashbacks. Ask a student volunteer to write each summary in large handwriting or a poster-size sheet of paper. Then, have the class work together to place the events in the correct order.

Making Inferences Jackson remembers the first anonymous letter he received in first grade. He devised a way to determine which student had written the letter. Have each of the students write an anonymous letter to someone within the class. All letters should contain positive messages.

Then have each student try to determine who sent the anonymous letter. Encourage them to be creative in determining a method to discover the author.

Responding to Literature Avondale is a place where abused women can seek safety from their abusers. Invite a representative of a women's shelter, or similar organization, to speak to the class on issues of abuse and personal safety. Ask students to create questions ahead of time for the guest to answer. After the presentation, have each student write a short report summarizing the information.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In order to check on Alma, Goat offers to pretend to be collecting money for UNICEF. Have the students work in groups of three or four to research UNICEF. They should determine the meaning of the acronym, what the organization does, when it was established, and some of its achievements.