

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

A Family Apart

by

Joan Lowery Nixon

Book Information

Joan Lowery Nixon, A Family Apart

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162 Pages

Book Level: 5.4

Interest Level: MG

When their mother can no longer support them, six siblings are sent by the Children's Aid Society of New York City to live with farm families in Missouri in 1860.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books

Topics: Family Life, Orphans; History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; Places, Farms; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies; Series, Orphan Train Quartet; U.S. States/Regions, Missouri

Main Characters

Danny, Mike, Peg, Megan, and Petey Kelly the brothers and sisters of Frances, who all look to her for guidance and love

Frances Mary Kelly the main character; a young Irish girl who helps care for her family after her father's untimely death

Grandma Briley the woman who introduces Jeff and Jennifer to the story of the Orphan Train through the writings of their great-great-great-grandmother

Jake and Margaret Cummings the couple who adopts Frances and Petey; also helps with the Underground Railroad

Janus and Odette escaped slaves who are running from two bounty hunters, and who obtain help from Frances

Jennifer and Jeff the young children to whom the story of Frances Mary Kelly is told

Katherine Banks and Andrew MacNair the adults who accompany the orphans from New York to Missouri and help match them with adoptive families

Mr. Crandon a passenger on the train who is suspicious of the "orphans," especially Mike, and later spreads negative rumors about Mike

Mrs. Kelly a widow who must raise six children alone and who ends up surrendering them for adoption

Reverend Brace the man who runs an aid society for children and helps to place the Kellys in new homes in the West

the Muellers the best friends of the Cummingses, who are also part of the Underground Railroad

Vocabulary

diphtheria a dangerous infectious disease of the throat

greengrocer a person who sells fresh vegetables and fruit

gum camphor a white substance with a strong odor and bitter taste, used in medicine

homestead to occupy and improve land in return for eventual ownership

tenements buildings divided into sets of rooms occupied by separate families

urchins and ragamuffins poor, ragged children

valise a suitcase

Synopsis

A Family Apart is the story of Frances Mary Kelly and her five brothers and sisters, who must journey to the West when their widowed mother can no longer provide for them. It is an almost unbearable sacrifice for Mrs. Kelly, but she has no choice. Her oldest child, Frances, has been caring for her siblings for years to help her overworked mother.

When Mike, the oldest son, is caught stealing and faces a prison sentence, Mrs. Kelly desperately turns to Reverend Brace and the Children's Aid Society for help. The Reverend arranges for the six children to journey to St. Joseph, Missouri, where pioneer families are waiting to adopt children like the Kellys.

During the journey, Frances looks out for her siblings just as she had promised her mother. She is

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haunted, however, by the possibility that her family will be broken up and taken to live in separate homesteads in the West. She is so desperate to be placed in a home with her littlest brother, Petey, that she disguises herself as a boy and changes her name to Frankie.

The disguise enables the two "boys" to be adopted by a younger couple who want children to raise on their farm. Frankie learns that the Cummingses, her new parents, are involved with the Underground Railroad. Frankie helps a slave couple escape from two bounty hunters. She is almost home free when the bounty hunters and marshal stop her and discover the shawl worn by the escaping wife. Frankie faces the terror of a possible arrest; however, Katherine Banks intercedes on her behalf, and the marshal refuses to arrest a girl.

As the story ends, Frances is accepted by her new parents as a girl, and life looks hopeful for her, Petey, and her other siblings ... except for Mike. But that becomes another story.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Mrs. Kelly makes the ultimate sacrifice by giving up her children in hopes that they will have better lives. For what would you be willing to make a sacrifice? Why?

Answers will vary. Example: a child might give up the chance to go to a good movie in order to baby-sit so his or her parents could go out instead.

Literary Analysis

Discuss how this story would be different if Frances had not disguised herself as a boy.

It's quite possible that Jake and Margaret Cummings would not have adopted her. She and Petey would probably have been separated.

Inferential Comprehension

Compare the way in which families of the late 1800s, like the Kellys, were torn apart to the way divorce tears families apart today. Give three specific ways.

Family members often place blame for the break-up on someone or something. The problem that caused the break-up is often alleviated; unfortunately, other problems often take its place. The lives of those involved are often irrevocably changed.

Constructing Meaning

Frankie took a stand when she volunteered to take Janus and Odette to safety. Have students describe a problem in today's society and what they would do to help solve it.

Answers will vary. Students might choose to help fight hunger in their community by collecting non-perishable food items and donating them to a local soup kitchen.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Through Frances's eyes, Mrs. Kelly is portrayed in a negative way in this story because she gives up her six children for adoption in the West. As always, there are two sides to this story. Ask your students to tell Mrs. Kelly's side of the story in a short, one-page summary.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The backdrop for *A Family Apart* is New York City in a time period when many immigrants had journeyed to America in search of a better life. Unfortunately for many families, their dreams did not come true, and families had to split up as a result. The agency to which Mrs. Kelly turns in this story is the Children's Aid Society, which is portrayed as a reputable organization. Have your students find information on local, state, or national organizations, either public or private, that handle adoptions and give a report to the class on their findings.

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Comparing and Contrasting In *A Family Apart*, the author includes a sub-plot that involves the Underground Railroad. This network was responsible for saving the lives of many Southern slaves. Have your students read about the Underground Railroad. Then have them read about the "Boat People" who are entering the U.S. from Cuba. Students should compare and contrast these two methods of escape in terms of who were involved and how successful they were. Ask them to write a one-page summary.

Identifying Persuasive Language Frances, as the older sister, was put in charge of her siblings. She naturally understood more about the difficulties they would face when they arrived in Missouri. To protect her younger brothers and sisters, she spoke calmly to persuade them to do what they needed to do. Have students recall and write about a time when they had to use the same "persuasive" manner to convince a friend, brother, or sister, etc., to do something.

Responding to Literature Shortly after Frankie arrives at her new home, she finds a doll in the yard and stops to examine it. She finds it unlike any doll she has ever seen, as it is much more simple than those she admired in the stores of New York City. Have your students design and make their own version of a prairie doll like the one Frankie found. They should use simple materials whenever possible. Make a display of the various dolls and invite a class of younger students to view the dolls.