

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Flunking of Joshua T. Bates

by  
Susan Shreve

### Book Information

Susan Shreve, The Flunking of Joshua T. Bates

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Book Level: 5.1

Interest Level: MG

Joshua thinks he will be in the third grade forever, until he meets Mrs. Goodwin, a very surprising teacher.

**Topics:** Community Life, School; Family Life, Growing Up; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Take a Stand: Leadership

### Main Characters

Amanda Bates Joshua's older sister, who usually does well in school; her sympathy for Joshua grows as the story progresses

Andrew Porter Joshua's best friend, who is sympathetic when Joshua fails third grade but does not want to be seen at school with Joshua after Tommy Wilhelm beats him up for playing with Joshua

Billy Nickel a fourth grader who sides with Tommy Wilhelm and trips Joshua during a baseball game

Georgianna Bates Joshua's infant sister, who is fond of Joshua

Joshua T. Bates an emotional young boy who hates school because he cannot read well; he is held back in third grade but gains new confidence with the help of Mrs. Goodwin

Mr. Bates Joshua's father, who walks to class with Joshua on the first day of school

Mr. Goodwin Mrs. Goodwin's husband, who moves out and asks for a divorce; he has a pet boa constrictor

Mrs. Bates Joshua's kind mother, who feels sorry that he is having so much trouble in school

Mrs. Nice Joshua's first third-grade teacher, who is disgusted when Joshua does not do well in her class

Mrs. Priscilla Goodwin Joshua's sympathetic third-grade teacher, who helps him to learn to read as she struggles with the fact that her husband is divorcing her

Paulie Soll one of the third graders who grows to respect and like Joshua after Joshua spends a few weeks helping the third graders with their lessons

Sammy Laser a third grader who lets Joshua bat for him after Joshua is cheated out of a home run in a game against the fourth graders

Tommy Wilhelm a bully who makes fun of Joshua for failing and beats up Andrew for being Joshua's friend; Mrs. Goodwin teaches Tommy a lesson by making him spend a day in her class

### Vocabulary

**combative** angry, ready for a fight

**dolt** idiot, moron

**finch** a type of small bird often kept as a pet

**initiate** to start or introduce

**saunter** to walk slowly

**sheepishly** in an embarrassed, somewhat foolish way

### Synopsis

At the end of summer vacation, Joshua Bates's mother shocks Joshua by announcing that he will have to spend another year in the third grade. Joshua is horrified because last year's third grade teacher often humiliated him when he had trouble learning.

On the first day of school, Joshua is upset when Tommy Wilhelm teases him for going into the third grade classroom. Joshua also feels certain that his new teacher, Mrs. Goodwin, will be mean and unfair like his previous teacher. When Joshua gets permission to go to the bathroom, he pulls his friend Andrew out of the fourth grade class. The boys talk in the bathroom, and Joshua claims he is running away to East Africa. Mrs. Goodwin calls Joshua back to the classroom to help her with the reading lesson.

Later that day, Joshua fights with Tommy Wilhelm

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on the playground when Tommy mocks him. Joshua also fights off three other boys and gets suspended. After school, Mrs. Goodwin invites Joshua over for tea, and they make plans to help Joshua learn to read by working together at her house every day after school. Mrs. Goodwin hints to Joshua that she also is having a difficult time because her husband is leaving her. When Joshua returns home, Andrew is waiting for him and informs him that Tommy Wilhelm has made a rule that fourth graders cannot be friends with third graders. To enforce his new rule, Tommy had beaten up Andrew for being friends with Joshua. The next day Andrew walks only partway to school with Joshua.

By late September, Joshua has become Mrs. Goodwin's assistant and earned the respect of his fellow third graders. In October, Joshua helps the third graders play a baseball game against the fourth graders. Near the end of the game, Sammy Laser gives Joshua his turn at bat after Billy Nickel trips Joshua to keep Joshua from getting a home run. Joshua wins the game with a ground ball, and Andrew helps out by not fielding the ball for his team.

On Joshua's tenth birthday, Joshua tells his family not to celebrate his birthday because he is embarrassed that he is the oldest third grader. He stalls when it is time to come home after school. When he walks in to find a surprise party, however, Joshua is relieved that no one believed he did not want to celebrate his birthday.

When Joshua's first-quarter report card comes in the mail, Joshua hides the unopened report card behind the radiator and goes to see Mrs. Goodwin. Mrs. Goodwin is upset that Mr. Goodwin is moving out. Joshua spends the afternoon with her and then goes home and looks at his report card. He is surprised to find he has gotten very good grades and that Mrs. Goodwin is planning to give him a standardized test in November to see if he is ready to be promoted to the fourth grade.

On Halloween, Tommy Wilhelm visits Joshua's class. When Tommy makes a snide remark to

Joshua, Mrs. Goodwin tells Tommy that he needs to stay in the third grade until he learns to behave like a fourth grader. Tommy nervously stumbles over his reading and gets a 60 on a math test. Paulie Soll tells Tommy he is dumb. Distraught, Tommy promises never to tease Joshua again. That afternoon, Joshua goes to Mrs. Goodwin's house and stays with her while Mr. Goodwin moves his things out.

Just before Thanksgiving, Joshua takes the standardized test. He tells Tommy that he has done well, but he feels sad because he secretly fears that he did not pass the test. His fears grow when Mrs. Goodwin does not volunteer his test results. Finally, Joshua asks her, and she tells him that he passed. She is sad to see Joshua leave her classroom for the fourth grade, and Joshua is sad to leave her. That afternoon, Joshua tells his mother the good news, but then he goes to visit Mrs. Goodwin.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

How does Mrs. Goodwin feel when Joshua passes the standardized test?

*Mrs. Goodwin experiences conflicting feelings. She has grown very fond of Joshua, and Joshua has kept her company during a difficult time in her life. She is sad to see Joshua leave, but she is proud that Joshua is growing and is more secure about his intelligence.*

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## Literary Analysis

Mrs. Goodwin's positive influence on Joshua extends beyond just teaching him to read. Why is her patience and kindness so important to him?

*Joshua's real problem is not lack of intelligence but anger at being humiliated by his previous teacher. Once he realizes that Mrs. Goodwin really cares about him, he is able to let down his defenses and focus on learning. Mrs. Goodwin wisely realizes that earning Joshua's trust is the key to helping Joshua overcome his social and emotional problems as well as his learning problems.*

## Inferential Comprehension

What causes Joshua to have so many problems in school?

*There are many factors that contribute to Joshua's problems in school. In the first place, Mrs. Nice is not helpful when Joshua struggles with his studies. Instead of giving him extra help, she scolds him in front of the class and lets everyone know that she thinks he is lazy. Tommy Wilhelm makes Joshua's problems even worse by teasing him and bullying Joshua's friends. Besides these factors, there is the fact that Joshua is a very sensitive child who is easily upset and has difficulty concentrating when he is upset.*

## Constructing Meaning

When Joshua was in the third grade the first time, how did Joshua's mother get him to return to Mrs. Nice's class?

*Joshua's mother let Joshua know that she did not believe he was sick. However, she did support his opinion that Mrs. Nice did not like him. In return for telling Mrs. Nice that she was not nice to Joshua, Mrs. Bates got Joshua to promise to finish third grade.*

illustrations from the book and provide captions to describe what is happening in the picture. Have the students focus on clues from the text when they are writing their captions.

**Understanding Characterization** Joshua benefits greatly from the guidance of Mrs. Goodwin. Have the students make a list of characteristics they think are important in a good teacher. Instruct the students to circle the traits they believe Mrs. Goodwin possesses. Ask the students to give examples from the book that demonstrate these characteristics.

**Recognizing Feelings** Both Joshua and Mrs. Goodwin face problems and experience intense feelings during the story. Have the students create two brief diaries about Joshua's first day in Mrs. Goodwin's class, one from Joshua's perspective and one from Mrs. Goodwin's perspective. Instruct the students to focus on the characters' feelings.

**Responding to Literature** Joshua has many problems learning how to read. Have the students remember a time they had difficulty learning something. How did they feel when they could not learn? Did someone help them learn? If so, what did their helper do that made learning easier for them? If not, what strategies may have helped them learn better? Have the students discuss their experiences in the classroom. A discussion of learning styles may give students insight into learning more efficiently and effectively.

## Teachable Skills

**Describing Actions or Events** This story has many dramatic and emotionally charged moments. Have the students choose two or three