

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

In My Father's House

by
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Book Information

Ann Rinaldi, In My Father's House
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For two sisters growing up surrounded by the Civil War, there is conflict both outside and inside their house.

Topics: Family Life, Sisters; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Wars, American Civil War

Main Characters

Captain Alexander also called "Alex," he is a married soldier with whom Oscie falls in love
Mama Virginia McLean, a woman who epitomizes a lady of the old South
Maria Oscie's older sister
Mary Ann a slave who Oscie mistrusts, dislikes, and mistreats
Miss Buttonworth also called "Button," she tutors Oscie and her sisters
Oscie Osceola Mason, the main character, who faces many changes in her life
Will McLean Oscie's stepfather, who Oscie at first resents but later learns to accept as her father

Vocabulary

bushwhack to ambush or raid
cockade a knot of ribbon or rosette worn on a hat as a badge
contraband goods imported or exported contrary to law
hack carriage for hire
portmanteau a stiff, oblong traveling bag with two compartments opening like a book
quadrille a square dance for four couples that usually has five parts or movements

speculate to buy or sell when there is a large risk, with the hope of making a profit from future price changes

Synopsis

Oscie Mason is a young girl growing up in the era of the Civil War. When the story opens, she hates that her mother is going to marry a man named Will McLean. After a neighbor, Julia Stratton-Wilcher, tells Oscie that McLean is marrying Mama for her money, Oscie asks McLean if the rumor is true. After their discussion, Mama puts her holdings in trust and they marry. The family then resides at Yorkshire.

McLean tells Oscie he has hired a Yankee tutor, Miss Buttonworth, for her and her sisters. Oscie feels Yankees are coarse and vulgar and thinks McLean hired the tutor to punish her.

Julia warns Oscie about Mary Ann, a slave McLean bought from her family. She says Mary Ann conjures and warns her not to let Mary Ann take a piece of her hair. After this warning, Oscie tries to keep her sister Sarah away from Mary Ann.

After Mary Ann tells Sarah there are dragons in the creek, Sarah refuses to learn how to swim. She does learn to ice skate on the creek. This combination proves fateful, as she drowns after falling through the creek while ice skating.

McLean plans to sell Mary Ann after Sarah's death. He feels Mary Ann's fixation on babies prevents her from looking after Sarah. Oscie, at the urging of Mama, talks McLean out of selling Mary Ann. Instead, Mary Ann is put to work in the fields. Although Oscie knows Mary Ann is pregnant, she does not tell McLean. After Mary Ann loses her baby, Oscie is flooded with guilt.

When the Civil War begins, Button leaves and Oscie gets to know Captain Alexander. She falls in love with him even though she knows he is married. McLean learns of the gossip about Oscie and Alex and forbids her to go riding with him again.

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After McLean moves his family to a safer place in Charlottesville, he goes back to Yorkshire. Mama is upset when she learns McLean is making money by speculating on the war. She feels as if McLean is changing and wants him to do something so she can believe in him again.

Oscie's family once again moves, this time to Appomattox Court House. The people there know Oscie's family is well-supplied because Mary Ann tells them. There is trouble when Oscie goes to pick up a shipment of supplies at the depot. The locals are angry because they can't get needed supplies. Mary Ann has asked her new-found friends to help them. After this episode, Oscie decides to make amends with Mary Ann.

Thomas Tibbs, a local resident, and Oscie fall in love and want to become betrothed. Thomas asks McLean for permission, but McLean says no. He is afraid that Thomas's connections with Mosby will bring about Yankee reprisals on Oscie's family.

So Mama will believe in him again, McLean allows Generals Grant and Lee to talk over the surrender in his parlor. After Grant leaves, the soldiers help themselves to the family's belongings in the parlor. One soldier even goes so far as to take Lula's rag doll.

After the surrender, Oscie asks McLean for permission to see Thomas. During this talk, she realizes she and McLean are responding to each other as father and daughter.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

McLean asks Mary Ann to show Oscie her scars. Why do you think he did this?

Answers might include that he wanted to make Oscie feel sorry for Mary Ann, to show Oscie the truth of slavery, and/or to help Oscie understand why Mary Ann needed her shawl.

Literary Analysis

Throughout this book, we get glimpses of Mama and her interaction with McLean. Do you think Mama was a good wife for McLean? Why or why not?

Students should support their positions. Those responding yes might say that the era in which they lived demanded she accept his protection. Others might see her as weak and needing too much protection.

Inferential Comprehension

McLean states that "nobody could come through this war and not change." What are some ways in which Oscie changed during the war?

She lost faith in the Confederacy. She grew to think of McLean as her father. Her strong-willed nature became even stronger, and she became wiser as well.

Constructing Meaning

Courage is described as "putting on a brave face over our fears." Do you agree with this definition? Why or why not?

Those responding yes might argue that all people have fears they can cover up with a brave face. Others might feel that someone truly courageous has no fear.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization When Mary Ann comes to Oscie's household, she is "rail-thin and dumbstruck." In her talk with Maum Hanna, we learn more about Mary Ann. She hopes to have children and Julia has been mean to her.

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We see Mary Ann through Oscie's eyes. Students could reverse the situation. Have them pretend to be Mary Ann. Then have them write a one-page description of their first meeting with Oscie. What did Oscie look like? Was Oscie nice, or did she show antagonism? Did they feel that life would be better with Oscie than with Julia, or did they think Oscie would be mean, too?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Willie is allowed to miss school so he can view Stonewall Jackson's body in the funeral procession on the train. Willie is excited to go. He recounts how Jackson was shot by his own men by mistake, how his left arm was amputated, and how he died of pneumonia. After viewing the body, he seems to be disappointed that Jackson looked dead and that he was unable to see that Jackson had only one arm. The students might find it interesting to learn if this was a true account of Jackson's death and funeral procession. Have them research Stonewall Jackson. How did he die? Was his arm amputated? Was there really a funeral procession in which his body was taken by train to be viewed? After they research it, have them discuss their findings. How accurate was the book? Could they rewrite a part of the description to make it more authentic?

Making Predictions Julia warns Oscie about Mary Ann, claiming that Mary Ann conjures and has doings with the supernatural. She says that two servants died after Mary Ann took pieces of their hair. Because of this warning, Oscie mistrusts Mary Ann. She tries to keep Sarah from her and even goes so far as to take her shawl. There are bad feelings between Oscie and Mary Ann. The students might find it interesting to rewrite a portion of this story. What might have happened if Julia had not warned Oscie about Mary Ann? Would there have been instant animosity between the two? Would Oscie have told McLean that Mary Ann was pregnant? Would Mary Ann have gossiped about Oscie and Alex? After using these questions for a short discussion, have the students write three ways in which they feel this story would have been different had Oscie not been warned about Mary

Ann.

Describing Actions or Events As the South surrenders to the North, Oscie says she is most impressed by the silence. There seems to have been no animosity between the soldiers. Chamberlain is said to have been compassionate about the surrender. Have the students reread the description of the surrender. Then have them make a list of ten words they would use to describe the surrender. The list might include such words as somber, awe-inspiring, or sad. Then have them read some of their words aloud. At this point, write about twenty of the best words on the board. Have the class vote on the top-ten descriptive words.