

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

A Jar of Dreams

by

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Book Information

Yoshiko Uchida, A Jar of Dreams

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Eleven-year-old Rinko grows up in a close-knit Japanese American family in California during the Depression. A visit from Aunt Waka helps Rinko think about things in a different way.

Topics: Countries/Regions, Japan; History, Depression Era America; Read Now Power Up Recommended Lists, Cherish Freedom; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; U.S. States/Regions, California

Main Characters

Aunt Waka Rinko's self-assured aunt visiting from Japan, who encourages the family to trust their own strength

California (Cal) Tsujimura Rinko's college-age older brother, who is torn between his dream of being an engineer and his desire to help his family

Joji Tsujimura Rinko's younger brother, who dearly loves his dog Maxwell

Mama Tsujimura Rinko's loving mother, who works hard to support the family

Maxwell (Maxie) Joji's beloved basset hound, who dies confronting people who are harassing the family

Mrs. Phillips Mama's former boss, who helps Mama establish her laundry business

Mrs. Sugarman (Mrs. Sugar) the helpful neighbor of the Tsujimuras

Rinko Tsujimura a young American girl of Japanese heritage who struggles to deal with racism

Shintaro (Papa) Tsujimura Rinko's optimistic father, who is determined that his children go to college

Tami Nukaga Rinko's friend, who likes matchmaking

Uncle Manjiro Kanda a devoted friend of the Tsujimura family who helps them resolve difficult problems

Wilbur J. Starr a racist businessman who harasses the Tsujimura family

Vocabulary

bureau a chest of drawers in which clothes are stored

confront stand up to with firmness

incense a substance that releases a pleasing odor when burned

obi a wide strip of fabric worn around the waist, especially with a Japanese kimono

pharmacy a shop that prepares and sells medicines

pier a dock

solemn very formal and serious

threat a warning of danger or an expression of the desire to do harm

tragic very sad and pitiful

tuition a fee for instruction at a formal institution

Synopsis

Rinko Tsujimura asks Papa to translate a letter in Japanese she found on the kitchen table, and she learns that Mama's sister, Aunt Waka, is coming from Japan to visit. Aunt Waka was born with a deformed foot and walked with a crutch as a child. Her husband and son passed away within a year of each other from illnesses. For those reasons, Rinko believes that Aunt Waka will be a melancholy person. When Papa seems preoccupied at dinner that evening, Rinko assumes he is thinking about Aunt Waka's visit until Papa says his barbershop's rent is seriously overdue. Rinko's older brother, Cal, offers the wages he will earn as a fruit picker, but his parents insist the money is for his college tuition. Mama suddenly suggests starting a laundry business at home, and soon the whole family is excited about the idea. Their friendly neighbor, Mrs. Sugarman, gives them an old washing machine.

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While the family is preparing the laundry facilities, Mama shows Rinko mementos from her life in Japan. Rinko's excitement about Aunt Waka's visit builds. Later, she calls her friend Tami, who hatches the idea of setting up a match between Aunt Waka and Papa's longtime friend, Uncle Kanda.

On the day of Aunt Waka's arrival, the family meets her ship at the pier. Although Rinko likes Aunt Waka, she is disappointed when Aunt Waka gives her a kimono. Rinko is embarrassed by her Japanese heritage because she is the target of racism. Rinko is also embarrassed when Tami blatantly tries to start a relationship between Aunt Waka and Uncle Kanda during Aunt Waka's welcoming feast.

The week after Aunt Waka's arrival, the family receives a letter demanding the family quit the laundry business. A few days later, Papa's tires are slashed. The same afternoon, as Rinko and her little brother, Joji, accompany Papa to deliver laundry, Papa realizes someone has already taken the bundles that had been left out for the Tsujimuras. Papa tells a client that he suspects the Starr Laundry is trying to sabotage his business. However, he thinks the problem is solved by having his customers put out their laundry after the Starr Laundry's business hours.

One Saturday, Cal comes home because Rinko has written him about what has been happening. Everyone is happy until Cal suddenly announces he is quitting college to help with the family's problems. He argues that no one would hire a Japanese engineer, even if he did get his degree. The family is insistent that Cal persevere, but Cal notes that Papa gave up his dream of owning a garage. That night Joji puts his dog Maxwell out to guard the house. Later, Rinko is awakened by barking, and the family finds Maxwell dying of a fatal gunshot wound. Mama helps Joji bury him in the backyard. The family stays up and discusses racism against the Japanese. Suddenly, Aunt Waka surprises the family by announcing they are stronger than a coward like Wilbur Starr, and they must go tell Mr. Starr that.

The next day, Papa speaks with Uncle Kanda, and

the two of them decide to confront Wilbur Starr. On Monday, Rinko and Joji follow the men to the Starr Laundry. Papa tells Mr. Starr they have a right to make a living, but Mr. Starr tells them to go back where they came from. Papa and Uncle Kanda refuse to back down. Suddenly, Rinko and Joji fall down because they are leaning too far to hear the conversation. Mr. Starr rushes toward them yelling, and Papa grabs Mr. Starr's arm and demands that he stop bothering Papa's family. Uncle Kanda threatens Mr. Starr as they are leaving.

One Sunday, Papa announces that he is closing his barbershop and starting a garage and repair shop in the family's garage. He wants to set an example for Cal about following dreams. After Mama worries about how they'll finance the new business, Uncle Kanda offers to invest money in the venture. Before Papa can respond, Uncle Kanda goes to the bathroom. He returns with a full money belt and counts out \$500 for Papa. The two become partners, and Papa starts his business, named after both of the men.

Near the end of summer, the family takes Aunt Waka to Golden Gate Park and the zoo. Uncle Kanda does not join them because he has unexpectedly gone out of town. At the zoo, Rinko and Tami are talking to Aunt Waka when Tami suddenly blurts that Aunt Waka could stay in California if she married Uncle Kanda. Aunt Waka patiently explains that she wants to return to Japan where she can be her true self, but she surprises Rinko by saying Mama and Papa have managed to retain their Japanese selves while living in a country that perceives them as foreigners.

That night, Papa receives a phone call that Uncle Kanda is in the hospital because he was hit by a car. Uncle Kanda is unconscious for two days, but when he awakens he insists that Papa find a letter he was carrying when he was hurt. The letter is from Cal to Mama and Papa, saying Uncle Kanda convinced him to stay in college. Uncle Kanda also asks that Rinko come visit him. When she arrives, he tells her that Cal wants her to follow her dream of becoming a teacher. She says she will and returns home.

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There, Aunt Waka tells her she is returning to Japan soon. She asks Rinko to wear the kimono before she goes, and Rinko agrees. On Sunday, she dons the kimono, and Aunt Waka photographs her. After Rinko takes the kimono off, Aunt Waka reminds her that part of her will always be Japanese, even if she never wears the kimono again. Rinko breaks down and admits that she hates being different. Aunt Waka advises her not to be ashamed of herself and asks Rinko to visit her in Japan. Rinko suggests she could start a "going to Japan" jar for saving money, similar to the one she keeps for saving money for school. On the day Aunt Waka boards the boat to Japan, she throws a blue streamer to Rinko. As the ship goes farther and farther away, Rinko holds onto the streamer, her connection to Aunt Waka, for as long as she possibly can.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Rinko expect Aunt Waka to be a sad person?

Rinko knows that Aunt Waka has endured a number of difficulties and sorrows in her life. She lost her son when he was two years old and her husband a year later. She has not remarried, and she lives with her parents, Rinko's grandparents. She does sewing to take in some income. She was born with a deformed foot, and as a girl she had to use a crutch to walk. Distance has kept Rinko from meeting Aunt Waka, and Rinko cannot read Aunt Waka's letters in Japanese, so Rinko has very little sense of who her aunt is. Even though Aunt Waka as a girl holding her crutch is the only one smiling in a group photo, Rinko imagines that these sorrows may have produced a sad person.

Literary Analysis

What are some of the ways Papa has been a good friend to Uncle Kanda?

For many years, Papa has included Uncle Kanda with the Tsujimuras as if he were a part of the family. Uncle Kanda named Papa's first son, eats dinner with the family every Sunday, and is encouraged to participate in many Tsujimura activities. When Uncle Kanda is hit by a car, Papa is the one to be notified. He then spends most of his time at the hospital waiting for Uncle Kanda to wake up. When Uncle Kanda offers to be a partner in Papa's business, Papa does not want to hurt Uncle Kanda's feelings by saying that Uncle Kanda does not have the experience to be a mechanic. However, what Uncle Kanda intends is to give his support to Papa in the form of some of his life savings to help get Papa's business started. Papa shows his appreciation by naming the business the Kanda-Tsujimura Garage and Repair Shop.

Inferential Comprehension

What does it mean when Rinko says, "...from then on I'd think of everything that happened to me as 'Before Aunt Waka' or 'After Aunt Waka,' because she was the one who'd made the difference in our lives, not Wilbur Starr."?

Rinko realizes Aunt Waka has helped her whole family find the strength they needed to follow their dreams. However, Rinko's statement also reflects the change in herself personally. Before Aunt Waka comes to visit, Rinko defines herself in terms of how she is seen by those who hate her or who are prejudiced against her because she is Japanese. Aunt Waka encourages Rinko to value herself despite the hatred of others. Seeing Aunt Waka's entrance, rather than Wilbur Starr's, as a turning point in Rinko's life, Rinko makes a conscious choice to focus on the positive aspects of her life rather than the negative ones. She is choosing to create a positive image of herself.

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Constructing Meaning

How do you feel about Rinko's feelings of embarrassment regarding her family?

Answers will vary. Some students will sympathize with Rinko's anguish over being an outsider. Some students will feel that Rinko needs to be proud of her loving and supportive parents. Other students may think that Rinko is too sensitive to the judgment of others in general.

summer that Aunt Waka comes to visit. Have the students write a letter from Aunt Waka to her parents about her visit. Have the students focus on one or two events in their letters. Students should use details to fully describe the event(s) and Aunt Waka's response to the event(s).

Teachable Skills

Identifying Persuasive Language Papa does not want to go to the police because he does not think they will help him. Have the students write a scene in dialogue, like the scene in a play, in which a member of the Tsujimura family convinces the police that Wilbur Starr is a danger to their family. Which family member will go to the police? How will the police officer respond? What information, strategies, and language will be the most useful to this Japanese American family in persuading the police that they have been threatened by Wilbur Starr?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Rinko learns a little of the history of Japanese immigration from her parents. Have the students read more about this history and write a paper about what life was like for Japanese immigrants to the U.S. in the early part of the last century. Have students include details from both the book and their research in their papers.

Responding to Literature Aunt Waka encourages Rinko to appreciate the things that are part of her Japanese heritage. Invite the students to bring objects or make presentations about their heritage for a show-and-tell day in class. Students may describe traditions; show articles of clothing, or household or art objects; or present recipes, songs, or short stories that have been passed down in their families. Have the students explain why what they brought is important to their family.

Describing Actions or Events The Tsujimura family has many things happen to them the