

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Landry News

by

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Book Information

Andrew Clements, The Landry News

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Interest Level: MG

A fifth-grader starts a newspaper with an editorial that prompts her burnt-out classroom teacher to really begin teaching again, but he is later threatened with disciplinary action as a result.

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Topics: Community Life, School; Family Life, Divorce; People, Teachers; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Power Lessons AR, Grade 6; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice

Main Characters

Barbara Larson Mr. Larson's supportive and honest wife

Cara Landry the main character in the story; a fifth-grade journalist and the editor-in-chief of <I>The Landry News</I> who, by her honest assessment, inspires a burned-out teacher to teach again

Dr. Philip Barnes the school principal, who is looking for a way to fire Mr. Larson

Katherine Steinert the Denton Elementary School librarian

LeeAnn Ennis, Ed Thomson, and Joey DeLucca fifth grade students in Cara's class who help write <I>The Landry News</I>

Michael Morton a fifth grader who writes an article about his parents' divorce and the feelings he has experienced

Mr. Karl Larson a fifth-grade teacher at Denton Elementary School and the subject of Cara's editorial; he initially takes a hands-off approach to teaching

Mrs. Cormier Dr. Barnes's secretary

Mrs. Landry Cara's mother, who advises Cara to soften her honest journalism with mercy

Mrs. Spellman Mr. Larson's fifth-grade teacher, whose classroom demeanor was professional compared to her private life

Vocabulary

dingbats symbols or ornaments on the printed page

editor-in-chief the person having final responsibility for the publication decisions of a newspaper or magazine

outgunned defeated or overwhelmed

superintendent a person given the authority to direct a school district; a principal's supervisor

Synopsis

Angered over her parents' divorce, Cara Landry had lashed out by writing true but biting articles in her own publication, *The Landry News*, while she was in fourth grade. She and her mother had made numerous trips to the principal, counselor, and teachers' offices because of her writing. Now in fifth grade, Cara is at a new school. Mr. Larson, the teacher she has for the last two hours of the day, believes in an open classroom concept in which students learn from each other. The daily result is chaos, as Mr. Larson just sits behind his desk reading a newspaper and drinking coffee. By October, Cara has learned enough about her new school to post the first edition of *The Landry News*. When Mr. Larson reads it, he becomes angry and tears it up because the editorial Cara wrote criticizes him for not teaching.

Later, at their respective homes, Cara and Mr. Larson are each challenged. Cara's mother

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suggests Cara temper her factual writing with kindness and mercy, and Mr. Larson's wife comments that Cara is merely asking for a teacher. By class the following Monday, both Cara and Mr. Larson have taken the advice they heard to heart. Cara tempers her language, and Mr. Larson gives the class their first assignment of the year. Cara begins to work on the next edition of her newspaper when a fellow classmate, Joey, suggests a wider circulation and offers his computer expertise in order to help. Cara agrees to the new arrangement. *The Landry News* now requires the use of school equipment and resources. Dr. Barnes, the school's principal, has never liked Mr. Larson or his teaching methods. After the second edition of the paper is published, Dr. Barnes takes the occasion to call Mr. Larson into his office. He wishes to review the paper before it is published, citing a Supreme Court case that supports his request. Mr. Larson objects, saying it is a classroom newspaper. Dr. Barnes concedes as long as Mr. Larson assumes responsibility for anything printed.

By the time the third edition of the paper appears, the staff of the paper has grown from four students to the entire class. Mr. Larson begins teaching the students with discussions of issues that affect newspapers. Cara soon faces a difficult decision about publishing a personal story about a student's reaction to his parents' divorce. She consults with Mr. Larson, who leaves the final decision up to her, as she is editor-in-chief of the newspaper. He promises to support whatever decision she makes. Dr. Barnes is thrilled to see the controversial article in *The Landry News*, since he hopes this will be what he needs to terminate Mr. Larson's position. Dr. Barnes informs Mr. Larson of a disciplinary hearing because of the article and orders *The Landry News* to cease publication.

Instead of being bitter, Mr. Larson considers the controversy as an opportunity to teach. He talks about the First Amendment and explains the hearing process. Joey and Cara decide to continue publishing a newspaper. Using home equipment and the name the *Guardian*, the students continue their work. Meanwhile, the teachers' union rallies behind

Mr. Larson and issues press releases. As the hearing approaches, the local media become involved in the situation, and the students are engaged in every step of the controversy. When the hearing finally begins, the auditorium is packed, and every student in Mr. Larson's class attends. Dr. Barnes is the chief complainant, and Mr. Larson defends his decisions and plans to read the offending article. The mother of the boy who wrote the article asks that her son be allowed to read it. The crowd is in tears by the end, and Mr. Larson is vindicated of the charges. Cara has planned ahead and has printed a special edition of *The Landry News*. The only article is an editorial complimenting Mr. Landry on his wonderful teaching and good heart.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Michael Morton tell Cara that a friend wrote the article he submitted?

By saying the article was written by a friend and having the article published anonymously, he is avoiding questions and possible embarrassment. Both children and adults use this ploy in order to avoid rejection or to find out what someone might think. Michael was hurting and may have been embarrassed by some of his reactions towards his parents' divorce. He may have felt his friends would judge him negatively.

Literary Analysis

Why is the third-person-objective point of view a good choice for telling this story?

Since the story is about a newspaper, it is written from the same point of view a journalist uses when reporting news. A journalist tries to be objective and attempts to get the perspective of all people involved on each side of an issue. The choice of third person objective helps the reader get a better sense of news journalism.

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Inferential Comprehension

How do the interactions between Cara and Mr. Larson differ from those between her and Dr. Barnes?

Cara is a very bright young lady and can sense where conversations will lead before they get there. Cara is then able to decide for herself whether she will play along as she does with Mr. Larson, or steer the conversation in her favor as she does with Dr. Barnes.

Constructing Meaning

Do all newspapers follow Cara's motto, "Truth with Mercy," in their writing? Should they? Defend your answer.

Students will have a variety of opinions on this. They will probably compare a number of papers. Not all papers adopt this principle. Local and community papers usually work within the motto's framework. However, there are papers such as tabloids that are designed to stretch the truth and are filled with innuendo that is neither truthful nor merciful. Often political papers published with a particular leaning on an issue may speak or reveal the truth but are not merciful in how the truth is told because those papers want to incite people to take action.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Main Idea Much of Cara's day is filled with the search for news items for her newspaper. Her friends and later her entire class become involved in the publication of a classroom newspaper. Have the students plan their own classroom paper. Class discussion should first focus on the format for printed news, including the types of articles appropriate for publication, the journalistic questions to be answered within each article, and the other parts of a newspaper, such as advertisements, editorials, etc. Then divide the class into groups to write articles on local or school subjects. As articles come in, the editor, either a chosen student or a teacher, should evaluate them for

clarity and accuracy and make suggestions and corrections. The articles can then be formatted and printed.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Dr. Barnes and Mr. Larson discuss the 1988 *Hazelwood* case, which ruled that school principals have the right to decide what is printed in school newspapers. Have the students research whether or not there have been any more recent decisions concerning school newspapers or other school-related topics that may have to do with the right of free speech. Students should report their discoveries to the class.

Understanding Characterization In the story Cara explains how parents wrote letters to Dr. Barnes asking that their son or daughter not be placed in Mr. Larson's class. Have the students pretend they are parents and write letters to Dr. Barnes about Mr. Larson and his teaching methods at the beginning of the school year and then again at Christmas time. The letters should reflect the change in teaching that has taken place.

Recognizing Details The author gives a marvelous description of Mr. Larson's room. Using the narrative, have the students make a small model of Mr. Larson's classroom in a shoebox. The sides of the box could be used as bulletin boards. Other small objects could be used as desks and bookcases to mimic the maze-like aisles, reading corner, and other areas of the room. If there are time or material constraints, another option would be to make a picture collage of the room. The boxes and pictures can be displayed in the classroom.