

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Miracles on Maple Hill

by

Virginia Sorensen

Book Information

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After her father returns from the war moody and tired, Marly's family decides to move from the city to Maple Hill Farm in the Pennsylvania countryside where they share many adventures which help restore their spirits and their bond with each other.

Award: Newbery Medal

Topics: Family Life, Misc./Other; Family Life, Moving to a New Area; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Just Connect: Relationships; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8

Main Characters

Chrissie Mr. Chris's friendly wife, who cooks wonderful meals for Daddy while his family is in Pittsburgh; Chrissie worries about Mr. Chris's health

Dale Marly's father, who is struggling to overcome the trauma of being a prisoner of war; on Maple Hill he goes from being a dark and disturbed man to a gentle and peaceful father

Fritz Mr. Chris's hard-working hired hand, who helps Marly's family finish the sugar harvest after Mr. Chris becomes ill

Harry the Hermit a local man who lives by himself and raises goats and bees; he befriends Joe after the children's curiosity drives them to visit his home

Joe Marly's older brother, who is often angry when Marly wants to join him; he loves to explore the woodlands but also misses his life in the city

Lee Marly's mother, who wishes to restore her husband's health and happiness; she dislikes Marly's "tomboy" ways

Marly the little girl who longs for miracles to make her family happy; Marly loves Maple Hill

Miss Annie Nelson the truancy officer, who goes by the name of "Annie-Get-Your-Gun"; she decides harvesting the syrup is educational and enlists the help of Joe's classmates when Mr. Chris is sick

Mr. J. Chris the generous farmer who lives close to Marly's family and was friends with Lee's grandmother; he overworks himself and has a heart attack just as the spring sap starts running

Vocabulary

bedbugs insects that suck human blood and often live in beds, clothing, and houses

damper a valve that controls air flow for a stove or furnace

entitled having a right to something

flabbergasted stunned or surprised

spring beauty a small delicate flower with pink veining on white or pale pink petals that blooms in woodland areas in the spring

springhouse a small storehouse built over a spring so that it and food stored inside will stay cool

Synopsis

It is March, and Marly is praying for a miracle. Her father has been depressed ever since he came back from the war, and Marly's mother hopes that going to live at Maple Hill will help Daddy. Maple Hill was the home of Mother's grandmother, and Mother has fond memories of visiting there every summer. The family is traveling there when the car gets stuck going up a long, steep hill. Marly's older brother, Joe, insists on going for help. Marly sees smoke coming from a small cabin in the woods and persuades her parents to let her investigate. She meets her mother's friend, Mr. Chris, while he is gathering wood for his sugaring, or harvesting of maple syrup. Mr. Chris pulls the car out with his tractor and invites the family to visit the sugar house once they are settled.

The family finally arrives at Maple Hill, but Marly is disturbed when part of the preliminary house cleaning involves destroying some mice. After Daddy gets settled, the rest of the family returns to

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Pittsburgh, where they are living until school lets out. When they come back for a weekend visit, Daddy has already improved. Instead of yelling at Marly when she fills the house with smoke while trying to make pancakes, Daddy helps her. He also does not seem upset as before when he has to talk to other people.

On their weekend visits, Mr. Chris teaches Marly about the local wildflowers and Joe about other woodland life. A heart condition limits how much Mr. Chris can walk, so Marly looks forward to the day when she will be allowed to go exploring with Joe. Sometimes she walks by herself. One day she climbs a fence to look at some flowers and loses her shoe in a swamp trying to escape a herd of curious cows.

When Joe finally invites Marly to join his exploring, the children discover a fox den with five kits. Naively, Marly tells Mr. Chris and Mr. Chris's hired hand, Fritz, about the den. They tell Marly that the foxes must be destroyed. Fritz invites Joe to help hunt the foxes the next morning. Marly is devastated, but she gets her father to sing a song about a boy saving a fox to let Joe know what she wants him to do. That night Joe and Marly sneak out and frighten the foxes to safety.

When summer arrives, Mother and the children join Daddy permanently. One evening Mr. Chris tells them about Harry the Hermit. The children look around Harry's house when they think Harry is gone. But Harry returns, and they run away. That night Harry comes to their house and invites the children to visit him. Joe is enthralled when Harry shows him how to carve a wooden link. However, Harry raises goats, and Mother is offended by Harry's odor.

When the summer ends, Mother and Daddy suggest staying at Maple Hill instead of returning to the city. Marly is delighted, but Joe wants to be able to attend a big city school. A discussion makes the family realize that they cannot overlook how much Daddy has improved on Maple Hill. Fortunately, Joe's problem is remedied when he is sent to the larger school in town instead of the small country

school that Marly and younger local children attend.

One night shortly before Christmas, Joe does not come home. After hours of the family worrying and searching, Marly remembers that Joe had wanted to visit Harry. Daddy and Mr. Chris find Joe helping Harry, who had fallen and hurt his leg and probably would have frozen to death without Joe's help. When Joe comes home, he asks that Harry be allowed to stay with them for Christmas. Mother objects because of Harry's smell, but when Daddy reminds her of the people who helped him while he was a prisoner of war, Mother is shamed into cooperating.

When sugaring time arrives in February, Marly's family is excited about helping Mr. Chris with his harvest, but Mr. Chris falls ill shortly after the harvest begins. Marly's family and Fritz are determined to bring in the harvest for him, but it is a lot of work for three adults and two children. When the truancy officer, Miss Annie, arrives to find out why Joe has not been going to school, Miss Annie concludes that it would be educational for Joe's classmates to assist with the harvest.

Mr. Chris does not come home from the hospital until the sugaring is over. Marly's family worries that the syrup is not good enough, but Mr. Chris approves it. The story ends with Marly reveling in the miraculous changes in her life since she has come to Maple Hill.

Open-Ended Questions

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

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Initial Understanding

How does Marly's family make the decision to stay at Maple Hill?

Marly's parents institute a rather democratic method of making the decision. They allow the children to discuss with them their feelings about the idea of staying. They make a list of advantages and disadvantages of both Pittsburgh and Maple Hill, and when they are done discussing the list, they each have a vote to make the final decision.

Literary Analysis

What are the miracles on Maple Hill?

There are a wide variety of miracles on Maple Hill. For Marly, one of the most important miracles is the way Maple Hill changes her father from being a bitter, angry man back into a gentle, fun-loving, happy man. For Marly and Mr. Chris, new flowers, the running of the sap, and the fruitfulness of the land are also miracles. A miracle also occurs when the community pulls together to help Mr. Chris finish his harvest when he is recovering from his heart attack. Another miracle is that Joe just happens to visit Harry when Harry is helpless from having hurt his leg and desperately needs assistance.

Inferential Comprehension

What probably would have happened to Marly's family if they had not come to live on Maple Hill?

It is clear that Marly's family was having some severe problems before they came to Maple Hill. Daddy was moody and unpredictable, and there is some suggestion that he was becoming abusive with his family. If they had not come to Maple Hill, Daddy's problems would probably have continued to worsen. His anti-social behavior, such as avoiding relationships with the neighbors, lashing out at his family, and feeling overwhelmed by the demands of daily life would have caused the entire family to suffer for many years and would have probably burdened the children with emotional problems as well. From the amount of pride and relief that Mother feels about Daddy's return, it seems unlikely that she would have ever left him, but it is also clear that she, too, would have suffered from dealing with Daddy's emotional pain.

Constructing Meaning

How does the reader know that Mr. Chris is a well-loved man?

When Marly's family arrives on Maple Hill, they are immediately befriended by Mr. Chris and his wife. Marly says that Mr. Chris "was a man who wanted everybody to feel all right." Chrissie loves Mr. Chris so much that she has grown to hate the joyous sugaring time because it threatens Mr. Chris's health. Harry is inspired to relocate near Maple Hill because Mr. Chris's generosity has helped him feel better about life. When Mr. Chris falls ill, Marly's family exhausts themselves trying to bring in the harvest so that Mr. Chris will not be without money. Marly and many others are greatly worried that they might lose Mr. Chris. It is a big event when Mr. Chris returns home, and Marly celebrates by bringing Mr. Chris the first spring beauty.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The nature of Maple Hill changes dramatically every season, and each season has a different effect on Marly's family.

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Have the students choose one of these seasons and draw a picture of Maple Hill and the kind of activities Marly's family might be doing during that season.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The harvesting of maple syrup is very important to Mr. Chris and the community in general. Have the students research the harvesting of syrup and compare their findings with the details in this book. Have them discuss their research in class.

Recognizing Feelings Joe seems to feel quite differently about many events in this story than Marly does. Have the students choose one of these events and rewrite the event from Joe's point of view. Have the students take special care to convey what Joe feels about the event they chose.

Differentiating Fact and Opinion Marly's family has differing opinions about Harry the Hermit and the role Harry should play in their lives. In a classroom discussion, have the students create two lists. One list should include facts about Harry. The second list should include opinions about Harry. The second list may also include the name of the character who expresses the opinion.