

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Mystery of the Cupboard by Lynne Reid Banks

Book Information

Lynne Reid Banks, The Mystery of the Cupboard
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Omri unearths an old journal that reveals the mystery of the Indian in the cupboard.

Award: Misc./Other; Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Children's Literature

Topics: Family Life, Misc./Other; Family Life, Moving to a New Area; Family Life, Toys; Mysteries, Magic; People, Native American; Series, Indian in the Cupboard

Main Characters

Adiel & Gillon Omri's older brothers

Elsie Jackson, Constable Terryberry, Bert Martin the little people who are brought to life by the cupboard and who knew Jessica Driscoll

Father Omri's father, who learns about the cupboard and little people

Frederick Jessica Driscoll's son, a toy manufacturer and maker of the cupboard

Jenny one of the little people, a young maid who remained in Tom Towsler's world

Jessica Charlotte Driscoll Omri's mother's great aunt, an actress and fortuneteller who created the magical key

Lottie the daughter of Maria and Matthew

Maria Omri's mother's grandmother; Jessica's sister

Mother Omri's mother who was raised by Maria

Omri an English boy who owns a mysterious cupboard and key that can bring plastic figurines to life

Patrick Omri's friend from school who shares the secret of the cupboard

Tom Towsler an elderly thatcher who befriended Jessica and took care of Jenny

Vocabulary

fluke a stroke of luck

grotesque fanciful or bizarre

obsession a disturbing preoccupation with an unreasonable idea or feeling

rational having reason or understanding; sane

Synopsis

Omri's family is moving from their home in London to a house in the country that Omri's mother has inherited from a distant relative. When they arrive at the home, two problems occur: Omri's cat runs away, and they have to begin the major remodeling task of replacing the thatched straw roof.

One night, Omri thinks that he hears his cat and sneaks outside to look for her. As he walks on the discarded thatch that has been left on the ground, he stumbles upon something that was buried in the roof. He brings the bundle back to his room and discovers that it is a metal cashbox and a notebook written by Jessica Charlotte Driscoll, his mother's grandmother's sister.

Omri begins to read the notebook and learns about Jessica's life. He realizes that she not only knew about the powers of his magic key and cupboard, which can turn a plastic figurine into a miniature living person from the past, but she was responsible for its creation. In the notebook, Jessica explains how she embarrassed her family by becoming a singer and fortuneteller, how she stole a pair of earrings from her sister out of jealousy, how her son's career was nearly destroyed by the invention of plastic toys, and how she accidentally discovered how to bring a plastic toy to life by locking it in her cupboard with her key. On Jessica's deathbed, she asked a roofer named Tom Towsler to assist her in giving the key and cupboard to her unfortunate sister, Omri's grandmother. Omri learns that Tom Towsler is still alive and living in the area, although many people think he is crazy. Omri visits Tom and learns that Tom had kept a "little person" in his own world until she died.

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When Omri returns home he uses the magical key to open up Jessica's cashbox. The cashbox contains five packages wrapped in paper, but Omri only opens four of them, assuming the fifth one contains the stolen earrings. Three of the other four packages contain plastic figures that are brought to life when Omri turns the magic key. The remaining package has nothing in it because the person who should have been brought to life had died. Omri speaks with the three figures and learns a little more about Jessica Driscoll. One of the "little people," a thief, shows Omri the loot he is carrying in a sack. Omri recognizes the items as belonging to his great-grandmother and realizes that this is the burglar who is responsible for ruining his grandmother's life. Omri demands that he at least return his great-grandmother's jewel box, and the burglar agrees.

After Omri sends the three "little people" back to their times, he realizes that the fifth package does not contain the earrings but another person. As Omri tries to decide what to do with this "little person," who is at the moment unconscious, he hears a commotion outside of his window. Tom Towsler's daughter has arrived and informs Omri that Tom has seriously injured himself while attempting to do some roofing and wishes to speak to Omri. Omri leaves the figure where it is and goes to visit Tom.

As Tom is dying, he reveals to Omri that the mysterious figure he left at home is actually a miniature Jessica Driscoll. Since she was a fortuneteller, she knew which figurine would correspond to her and that she would one day be brought back to life. Omri and his friend Patrick return to Omri's room and revive the little person. Omri decides not to tell Jessica all that has happened but instead asks her to sing him a song before he returns her to her own time.

Omri begins to worry that by demanding the burglar to return his great-grandmother's stolen property, he may have altered history and possibly erased his own existence. He begins asking his mother a

barrage of questions about her grandmother while they are visiting the zoo, and he discovers that the burglar returned the jewel box as promised, but kept the jewels. Now assured that he will not cease to exist, Omri returns home to find that his father was building new shelves in his bedroom, and while doing so, accidentally discovered the secret of the plastic figures and the cupboard. Omri is frightened at first, but soon becomes comforted by the knowledge that he can trust his father. The story ends as Omri introduces his father to Little Bear, an Iroquois Indian from the past.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why did Jessica begin to feel guilty about taking the earrings?

Jessica felt that in taking the earrings she caused Lottie to be accused wrongly. She loved Lottie so much that she could not bear to have Lottie cry. Jessica also believed that she was responsible for Maria accusing Lottie of stealing, Lottie running out the door, and Matthew being killed by the carriage while trying to catch her. Jessica thought that her greed and jealousy was the cause of her family's misery.

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Literary Analysis

Jessica told people's fortunes by boiling lead and reading the shapes the lead made when it cooled in water. Why do people want to know the future? How might knowing it help? How could it hurt?

Some people think that by knowing what will happen, they will be better prepared for life. The people that Jessica predicted good things for were very happy and enjoyed living. But when Jessica saw bad things, she did not want to tell the people because she thought they would not understand. People might also think that if they know what is to come, they can change or avoid the bad things. Omri and Patrick realize, however, that if you try to change the future, then you are changing more than one event and thereby affecting many people's lives.

Inferential Comprehension

What led Jessica to become an actress?

Jessica was extremely jealous of the attention Maria received and wanted some of this attention for herself. She was very good at mimicking, or acting like people, a skill which would be useful as an actress. She realized she could make people laugh and cry with her acting. This made her forget that she was not beautiful like Maria.

Constructing Meaning

Omri is excited to get the cupboard from the bank, but at the same time he says he feels somehow dependent on it. What does Omri mean when he says, "That's part of the bad part of the magic -- Frederick's part"?

Jessica told Frederick to get rid of his rage against plastics by putting it into the cupboard. Frederick recalled how he washed his brain of the anger, and the thoughts became real plastic pieces which he put into the cupboard where they were locked and sent away. But some of the obsessive feelings of having to use the cupboard seem to have remained with it. Omri feels the need to use the cupboard even though he knows that it is not always right.

Understanding Characterization Jessica tells Tom not to throw away the other plastic figurines that he bought her because "each one is someone." Bring in three or four plastic figurines, or cut out magazine pictures of people. Have the students choose one and write a story about what they would be like if they came to life.

Extending Meaning Omri and Patrick worry about the effects of tampering with the past. Have students think about an event in history such as Columbus landing in the New World, astronauts landing on the moon, the Revolutionary War, or any other well-known event. Ask them to think about how changing one part of it might affect the rest of history. Have the students write a paper or give a short presentation to the class about the effects of tampering with time and history.

Making Predictions At the end of the story, the author leaves Little Bear with an unknown problem while Omri's father meets the little people. Have the students predict how the story will continue. How might the father play a part in helping the little people? What new problem could Little Bear have that would require help from Omri? The students can then write a synopsis explaining what they think will happen in the next book of this series.

Recognizing Details Tom said he kept Jenny with him for thirty years and claimed she was very comfortable. Have the students create a diorama showing how Tom might have adapted big people's things for Jenny's use.

Teachable Skills