

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Onion John

by

### Joseph Krumpold

---

### Book Information

Joseph Krumpold, Onion John  
Quiz Number: 68  
HarperTrophy, 1984  
ISBN 0-06-440144-8; LCCN  
248 Pages  
Book Level: 4.5  
Interest Level: MG

An old man teaches his young friends the value of friendship.

**Award:** Newbery Medal

**Topics:** English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 8, 90%; Family Life, Growing Up; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8

### Main Characters

Andrew J. Rusch, Senior Andy's father, who wants his son to live out his own dream of becoming an engineer

Andy Rusch, Junior a twelve-year-old boy who befriends Onion John

Eechee Ries one of Andy's best friends

Ernie Miller the editor of the town's newspaper

Onion John a European immigrant who is the town's well-liked resident eccentric

### Vocabulary

**comprehensive** complete, total

**foundation** the base upon which a house is constructed

**fumigate** to use smoke to kill or drive out pests or vermin

**procession** similar to a parade, often used in rituals

**serenity** peace, the state of being untroubled

### Synopsis

Andy Rusch is a seventh-grade boy who lives in the town of Serenity. His father, Andrew J. Rusch,

Senior, owns the hardware store in town. He is dedicated to making sure Andy excels in life. The relationship between the father and son is peaceful until Andy becomes friends with Onion John, the town eccentric, one summer during the championship game of Andy's Little League team.

His team wins the game, with Andy deserving most of the credit for the victory. Instead of immediately celebrating with the team, however, he goes to the Serenity dump, located behind the ball field, to talk to Onion John, who is "shopping" there. An immigrant from Europe, John speaks a language that no one can understand, but he has been in Serenity for such a long time (twenty-five years) that the townspeople accept his incomprehensible speech without question. However, as Andy prepares to join his friends in town to celebrate, he suddenly realizes that he understands a few words of what Onion John has said.

Both the man and boy are astonished by this occurrence and, over the next few days, they unsuccessfully attempt to discover how Andy did it. One day, however, as Andy is only half-listening to Onion John, he realizes that he understood everything the older man had said because he was not trying. From then on, Andy and Onion John are best friends and Andy gains the reputation of being the only person with whom Onion John can communicate.

At first, Andy's father is not happy about the relationship. He wants his son to become a scientist and travel to the moon, and he does not think that Onion John, who has a superstitious explanation or magical cure for everything, will help Andy develop the logical thinking skills he needs to succeed in the world. Andrew, Sr. is relatively tolerant, however, until Andy chooses to give up a date with his father to see a magic show on Halloween and opts to attempt making gold with Onion John instead.

Although things look bad at first, rather than forbidding his son from seeing Onion John, Andrew, Sr. attempts to befriend Onion John with the hope of changing him into a positive influence on Andy. He

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Onion John

by

### Joseph Krumbold

---

proposes building a new house for Onion John and soon rallies the entire town around him to execute the plan. Although Onion John agrees to the idea, he seems to have some reservations. The house is built in one day, and this day is dedicated as Onion John Day. Andy, however, has mixed feelings about the situation, not only because Onion John does not seem to be happy with it, but also because his father has taken Andy's place as Onion John's best friend.

The house does not last long. Three days later, it burns to the ground in an accidental fire. John is taken to the hospital after the house collapses on him and, although he is not injured, the hospital plans to keep him for a week. Meanwhile, plans to rebuild the house have already begun in spite of protests from Andy and the town's newspaper editor.

One morning, news reaches Andy that Onion John has disappeared. Andy and his friend, Eechee Ries, find him hiding in a cave outside of town. Onion John does not want a new house and is planning to try to drive the evil spirits away from the townspeople who are hurting him with their kindness. Andy convinces John that his only option is to run away and that he should take Andy with him, as Andy is trying to escape the plans his father has made for Andy's future. The plan falls through. Although Onion John leaves, Andy stays home, and eventually he and his father come to understand one another better and resolve the problem. There is a hint at the end that perhaps Onion John will return.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Andy says that Onion John's idea to fumigate the town to remove evil spirits is "foolish." How does this show Andy is beginning to grow up?

*Andy's comment shows that he no longer accepts all of Onion John's ideas automatically, but has started to evaluate what Onion John says and makes his own judgment about what is reasonable and what is not. Andy no longer agrees to things on the basis of blind faith, but needs concrete proof that Onion John's ideas could work. Andy is becoming more like his father.*

### Literary Analysis

What purpose might the author have had in setting the story in a town named Serenity?

*In a town named Serenity, the reader would expect that everything would be peaceful and that all the people would be content. However, in the story there are people, especially Andy and his father, who are in conflict with one another and with themselves. The author's use of irony makes the reader more aware of these troubles.*

### Inferential Comprehension

On Onion John Day, how does Onion John act differently from his usual self?

*Onion John attempts to act more like the rest of the townspeople. He eats a normal breakfast, dresses like everyone else does, tries to keep on a schedule and help out wherever he can, learns a speech that everyone else can understand, and just tries to conform to whatever people expect him to be.*

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Onion John

by

### Joseph Krungold

---

#### Constructing Meaning

How does Onion John's explanation of how the clouds make rain show personification?

*Onion John's explanation makes it seem that the clouds have minds and personalities of their own and that they can choose whether or not they want to make it rain. John considers the clouds human and, therefore, they can be persuaded or tricked into producing rain in the same way that someone can persuade or trick another person into doing something.*

something, believe something, or act in a way that was not in accord with their true personality. Have them explain how they reacted to the peer pressure by telling how they handled the situation and how it made them feel.

#### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Many of Onion John's apparently crazy and strange ideas about the causes and effects of events are probably based on traditions or superstitions present in his European heritage. Ask the students to think of some superstitions or explanations in their cultures. Initiate a discussion of whether or not people from other cultures would understand them, providing predictions for why or why not.

**Extending Meaning** Andy tells his father he thinks he is the greatest person in the world or, in other words, that his father is his hero. Have the students draw pictures of their heroes with a short explanation of why they think they deserve this title.

**Recognizing Feelings** Onion John spends most of his life being unable to communicate verbally with other people. To help students empathize with him, give the students different ideas that they have to communicate to each other using only body language, gestures, or nonsense words. Later, discuss how successful or unsuccessful each student was in communicating his or her idea and the emotions each student experienced as a result.

**Responding to Literature** Most of the problems with Onion John in the story occur because someone is trying to pressure him to change into someone he is not. Have the students write about a time when they were pressured to do