

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Out of the Dark

by

Betty Ren Wright

Book Information

Betty Ren Wright, Out of the Dark

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Book Level: 4.8

Interest Level: MG

When Jessica moves to her grandmother's childhood home and makes friends with the handicapped girl next door, she begins to have nightmares about the old schoolhouse.

Topics: Disabilities, Physical; Family Life, Grandparents; Horror/Thriller, Nightmares

Main Characters

Grandma Belland Jessie's grandmother, who allows Jessie's family to use her house while she works in Madison

Jessica (Jessie) Belland a twelve-year-old girl who moved with her family from St. Louis to the Wisconsin countryside

Mr. Belland Jessie's dad, who is writing a book on his experiences in Vietnam

Mr. Draves Toni's dad, who worries about Toni and wants her to have a friend

Mrs. Belland Jessie's mom, who takes a low-paying clerk's job to make ends meet and who is frustrated with the move and her job

Sophie "Sandra" Gorder Toni's grandmother and a former classmate of Jessie's grandmother, who is the ghost-woman who appears to and tries to harm Jessie

Toni Draves a girl Jessie's age, who lives near Jessie's grandmother's home

Vocabulary

eavesdroppers people who listen in on other people's conversations

loathing hatred

ruefully with feelings of sorrow or regret

venomously full of hate; spitefully

wistfully with longing

Synopsis

Jessie Belland is a twelve-year-old girl who moves with her parents to her grandma's house in rural Wisconsin. Both her parents had lost their jobs in St. Louis six months earlier. Her grandmother offers to let them use her house after she accepts a temporary job in Madison. Her father is working on a book about his experiences in Vietnam. Her mother accepts a low-paying job as a clerk at a small hardware store.

Jessie meets her neighbor, Toni Draves, a girl her own age. Toni has a deformed foot which causes her to become very cynical about making friends and life in general. She and Jessie develop a very limited sort of friendship.

While staying at her grandma's house, Jessie begins having nightmares about walking through the woods and to an old schoolhouse in a clearing. She sees an angry woman dressed in blue who seems to want to harm her. The woman in blue also appears to Jessie several times when she is awake. Part of her nightmare comes true when she and Toni are walking along a nature trail in the woods. When it begins to rain, Toni suggests they take shelter in the old schoolhouse. At the building, Jessie realizes it is the schoolhouse of her nightmares. She is extremely frightened and runs away after seeing a blue ribbon on the schoolhouse floor.

While looking through some boxes at her grandmother's house, Jessie discovers and reads some old journals that her grandmother had written when she was in eighth grade. After reading them, Jessie believes the woman in blue is Miss Caldwell, her grandmother's teacher. The journal also leads Jessie to believe her grandmother may have cheated on a scholarship test. The entries stop, however, before all Jessie's questions are answered.

The story climaxes when Jessie follows Toni back to the schoolhouse, and the woman in blue traps them in a storage bin under the school. Jessie's father and Mr. Draves find the girls and rescue them after

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lightning starts a fire in the belltower of the school. As they run from the fire, Jessie notices the woman in blue sitting at a desk in the burning school.

Back at the house, Grandma Belland is waiting with Jessie's mother, and Jessie finds out that the woman in blue was not Miss Caldwell, but was Grandma's former classmate, Sophie "Sandra" Gorder, Toni's grandmother. She was jealous of Grandma Belland because she won the scholarship, and she accused her of cheating. She continually blamed others for her problems and became a bitter, depressed woman. She eventually committed suicide, leaving behind a husband and young daughter. Grandma assures Jessie that she had not cheated to win the scholarship.

After the fire at the schoolhouse, Toni is taken to the hospital. Jessie and her grandma decide to visit Toni in the hospital and share the story of the woman in blue with her in hopes that Toni would learn from her grandmother's mistakes and not continue to blame others for her problems. Jessie is no longer bothered with nightmares or with visions of the woman in blue. The ghost seems to finally be at rest.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why do you think Toni's family never spoke of her grandmother?

It may have been hard for them to talk about since she committed suicide. They might have been ashamed or they might have been unsure of how to tell Toni, since she was just a child.

Literary Analysis

How do you think Toni will feel after Jessie's grandmother tells her the story of her own grandmother, Sophie Gorder?

The answer might include that she was surprised and interested to learn about her grandmother. She might be a little angry and sad. It might cause her to think about her own anger and the way she deals with her problems.

Inferential Comprehension

How might Jessie's grandmother's life have been different had she cheated on the scholarship test?

She may have become guilt-ridden. She would not have had as much fun at school. She would have had regrets and may have lost faith in herself.

Constructing Meaning

Which character in the book are you or a friend or family member most like? Why?

Answers should compare the person chosen to a character in the book. A brief description of the important characters follows: Jessie-young, honest, friendly, out-going; Toni-angry, out-spoken, blames others, hurt; Grandma Belland-understanding, honest, compassionate, wise; Mrs. Belland-unhappy (at first), out-spoken, dedicated; Mr. Belland-lacking confidence, haunted by the past, kind; Sophie Gorder-bitter, depressed, unforgiving

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Part of *Out of the Dark* takes place in an old schoolhouse. The students may be interested in learning about one-room schoolhouses. They could do research or talk to grandparents and other elderly people about their school experiences. How were these schools the same as theirs? How were they different?

Understanding Literary Features One important part of the story is the developing friendship between Toni and Jessie. The story ends before the reader knows how their relationship turns out. The reader does not see the outcome of the

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conversation between Grandma Belland and Toni at the hospital. Students might enjoy discussing what the outcome might be, or they might like to write a short sequel to the book.

Understanding Characterization In the story, the ghost of Toni's grandmother doesn't speak. The students could role play a situation in which she does speak, either to Toni or to Jessie. What would she say to them? What would their response be? Could they say anything that would give her peace?

Understanding the Author's Craft Several chapters in the story contain excerpts from Grandma Belland's diary. Students could pretend to be another character from the story -- Jessie or Toni -- and write several diary entries from an interesting part of the book.