

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Pinballs

by
Betsy Byars

Book Information

Betsy Byars, The Pinballs
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Three lonely foster children learn to care about themselves and each other.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books

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Main Characters

Carlie the oldest of the three primary characters, who was placed in the foster home after getting in a fight with her stepfather, which resulted in a concussion

Harvey a thirteen-year-old boy who went to the Masons' foster home after his father accidentally ran over him with the car

Harvey's father an alcoholic and, in some ways, negligent parent

Harvey's mother a restless woman who abandoned Harvey and his father in order to "find herself" in a commune in Virginia

Mr. Mason foster parent and husband to Ramona

Ramona Mason foster parent to Carlie, Harvey and Thomas J

the puppy the catalyst to Harvey's recovery from infection

Thomas and Jefferson Benson elderly twins who took in Thomas J after he was abandoned

Thomas J the youngest foster child, abandoned at the age of two and taken in by eighty-two-year-old twins

Vocabulary

commune a small group of people living together, sharing possessions, work, income, and often pursuing unconventional lifestyles

juvenile characteristic or suitable for children or young people, but can also imply immaturity, childishness or delinquency

Synopsis

This is a story of three young people from widely diverse backgrounds who come together to find friendship and family in a foster home. At first each one struggles with his and her own fate, but with the help of their foster parents, all gain a feeling of belonging through helping and appreciating one another, facing hardships together, and finding new hope.

Harvey, thirteen, has literally been run over by his father. Drunk at the time of the accident, Harvey's father has an issue with control and takes out on Harvey many unresolved problems regarding their abandonment by Harvey's mother. Recovering from two broken legs, Harvey's condition worsens when his father stifles any hope Harvey has of reuniting with his mother. An infection follows with a deep depression, and it is only the efforts of Carlie and Thomas J that bring Harvey back from probable death.

Carlie, the oldest of the three, has never met her real father and has suffered at the hands of the stepfathers she has had since. She longs to be appreciated and wanted, but has learned to be rude and uses insult as her initial mode of communicating. She has become "hard as a coconut." Her insults, however, conceal love, too. Marked for misunderstanding, she is prone to rejection and being ignored. But Carlie has revealed herself strong enough to get up after being knocked down physically and emotionally. And she definitely will not back away from a fight. On the other hand, she has lost trust in parents and the system, and she yearns for escape.

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Thomas J, eight, has never learned to communicate. Abandoned "like an unwanted dog" while still in diapers, he was taken in by two elderly twins who really had no idea how to raise a child. Nevertheless, in the foster home Thomas J reveals what it means to listen to the needs of another. Together the children find strength in friendship, a feeling of home, and with it hope for the future.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How did the reader know that Carlie was not as hard a nut as she pretended to be at the beginning of the story?

If Carlie had indeed been as hard as she pretended, she would not have been as concerned about how others regarded her. Her insults were more a learned response that meant a kind of affection, than total attempts at offending and alienating others, or proving her verbal superiority.

Initial Understanding

Why did the birthday puppy mean so much to Harvey's recovery and the development of hope for the future?

From being a young, living thing in many ways like himself, failure to receive a puppy represented his mother's abandonment and his father's opposition to Harvey's finding ways to fulfill his desires. Harvey's father's need to control prevented survival to anything living, apparently including both the real selves of Harvey and Harvey's mother. Receiving the puppy as a birthday gift, then, implies Harvey is again in a more healthy environment that contains hope for his healthy development.

Literary Analysis

Why does the author, Betsy Byars, choose not to describe many of the primary characters' physical features?

This makes it possible for more readers to identify themselves with these characters and what happened to them, rather than separating them from the reader due to how they appear outwardly.

Literary Analysis

Why does the author use a knowing narrator, but also rely on the dialogue of the characters to tell the flashbacks of the story?

The knowing narrator gives credibility to the children's story, whereas the dialogue keeps the reader in touch with the emotions involved.

Inferential Comprehension

Was Harvey right about his mother having sent him letters, or was his father telling the truth about that? Who is more responsible for the breakdown of communication and estrangement between Harvey's mother and father?

Harvey comes to the conclusion that his father was actually telling the truth about his mother not having sent any letters. But the matter could still be debated. More importantly, it is possible to debate why she felt she had to abandon Harvey when she separated from her husband and what caused the total breakdown in communication between husband and wife.

Inferential Comprehension

Which truth would be more devastating for Harvey, and how did that dilemma complicate his condition?

Although Harvey's outward appearance was more like his father, Harvey admitted to greater inner similarity with his mother. While it probably is the combination of factors that proves nearly fatal for Harvey, his hopes for salvation rested with his belief in his mother. He had steeled himself for his father's lies, but was still in denial regarding his mother's abandonment of him.

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Inferential Comprehension

Did Carlie "find herself" by the end of the story or did she take on the indoctrination of (what was being taught her by) the Mason foster home?

This question asks the reader to step away from the intention of the author and to view what happened without the emotion that was generated for a positive outcome. It could even be debated whether there is such a thing as the self or is it malleable to the environment. However, Carlie with her previous desire to be a nurse and helper, seemed more attuned to the Masons' approach to life. Hard as a coconut on the outside, inside she was milky and softer white.

Constructing Meaning

Instead of "Pinballs," how would you describe Harvey, Carlie and Thomas J when the story ends?

As friends and alternative family members, they might be the set Carlie claims them now to be (transplanted trees huddling together, uprooted after the storm, but growing in the warm light for now), or playing a game where they may not have chosen the sides, but are a part of a team with hopes to win.

Constructing Meaning

Since Mr. Mason was able to set in motion Thomas J's healing by being sensitive to Thomas J's needs even though Thomas J wasn't his child, does that mean any child who has become an adult can still blame his/her parents when he/she has had opportunities to learn different behaviors from other adults not part of the original family?

This question addresses personal responsibility as separate from the responsibility of parents, care-takers and educators. Personal responsibility is probably to be considered paramount, or at least what all adults must fall back on for sound growth. Life usually, if not always, provides alternative lessons and other role models if the person is open to experiencing them. None of these, however, absolves the educator/care-taker's responsibility for what he/she taught during vulnerable stages in another person's life. The degree of responsibility and extenuating circumstances may be debated.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story is set in a foster home near a city called Madsville with no exact time given, but the point seems to be it could be almost anywhere in the present or recent past U.S.A. from the time it was written (1977). For that reason, students could compare their own home lives to those of the characters of the story, both before and during their stay at the Masons' foster home. How is the student's home-life similar to or different from that described in the story? How does the student relate to parental figures or siblings within the environment they consider "home"? It is also possible to draw comparisons between the previous home lives of the main characters. Carlie came from conditions that were crowded and she felt resented, while both Harvey and Thomas J had no siblings. How did the main characters' previous home lives compare to and contrast with one another and that provided in the Mason foster home? Another setting mentioned in the story was that of the so-called commune in Virginia in which Harvey's mother was to have gone to live. Students could

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research what such places promise, whether they are farm-based or alternative religious retreats. What is it about such places that appeal to people? What are some of their ideals? Are they all positive, growth-enhancing environments, or are some dangerous in their ways, too?

Understanding Literary Features Two seemingly contrary themes dominate *The Pinballs*: abandonment, neglect, and rejection issues versus adoption, caring and acceptance issues. Both can be intimately associated with the term "family." Furthermore, they can come in the spectrum from physical and psychological abuse that is life-threatening to a respectful nurturing both physically and psychologically that is loving and life-enhancing. Another set of contrary themes is the so-called natural family based on birth and that of the foster family provided by the state. Perhaps it would be helpful for the students to compare their own families to their friends'. What if a student found it necessary to work on a project with a couple of lesser-known students? Afterward they could discuss why it did or did not work as they expected. What were the obstacles? What were the successes? Did they come to regard one another as a "set" (such as Carlie mentioned happened for her toward Harvey and Thomas J after a while)?

Understanding the Author's Craft It is possible to compare the third-person narration and flashback/present time techniques of Byars to the first-person memory techniques of Dickens. Dickens is renowned for his memorable characters, but how are Betsy Byars' characters more believable and even memorable for the present time? Contrast Byars's use of three protagonists to the one possible using a first-person technique. Students could try to rewrite or retell the story from a different point of view in the story. For example, what if one of the main characters was telling the whole story? What if one of the minor characters, such as Harvey's father or mother, was telling the story? What if Mr. or Mrs. Mason was telling the story? What if Carlie's real father tried to tell the story? How does the perspective of the children differ

from that of the parents? What voice does the third-person narrator lend to the story--more of a child's perspective or that of an all-knowing adult? Move out of and beyond the story, if desired. Use an example from the students' lives together. A game or sports or dramatic event could work readily.