

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Planet of Junior Brown by Virginia Hamilton

Book Information

Virginia Hamilton, The Planet of Junior Brown
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Interest Level: MG

This book is a story of friendship between a troubled teenage pianist, a street-wise classmate, and a janitor who constructs a 10-planet revolving model of the solar system.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Newbery Honor; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Community Life, School; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; People, African American

Main Characters

Buddy Clark a bright, homeless, teenage boy who frequently helps others; he is a good friend of Junior Brown

Doum Malach Buddy's kindhearted employer who vouches for Buddy when he is in trouble

Franklin Moore a young, homeless boy who has difficulty trusting Buddy

Junella Brown Junior's possessive, sickly mother who tries to control Junior with food and guilt

Lynora Peebs Junior's mentally unbalanced music teacher who believes she is being harassed by a sick relative; this relative is only a delusion

Mr. Pool the cynical teacher-turned-janitor who has his faith in humanity redeemed when he helps Buddy and Junior

Mr. Rountree the assistant principal who tries to inform Buddy's and Junior's guardians that they are not attending school

Nightman Black a young, homeless boy who is being taught survival skills by Buddy

Tomorrow Billy the older boy who taught Buddy and several other boys how to survive on the streets; also a generic name for a boy who continues the work the original Tomorrow Billy began

Virgil (Junior) Brown an obese, teenage boy who is a talented musician; he is emotionally very fragile

Walter Brown Junior's absentee father who works in a distant city; Junior greatly reveres him

Vocabulary

commenced began or started

feeble faint and weak

feverish having the symptoms of a fever; restless and marked by intense emotion

filth a condition of extreme dirtiness

foyer an entrance area in a house or apartment

goblet a tall drinking glass with a stem and a base

revolving spinning

shrouded covered with cloth

spindle a rod or stick used to twist and wind thread

terminal a station where vehicles that transport passengers or goods can be loaded or unloaded

Synopsis

Mr. Pool was once a teacher but has lost his faith in humanity. He is now a school janitor. He allows two boys named Buddy Clark and Junior Brown to hide in a secret basement room during the school day. Both boys are extremely intelligent, but they have social problems, which make regular classes difficult for them. To keep them occupied, Mr. Pool has helped them build a model of the solar system. Today Mr. Pool and Buddy are demonstrating it to Junior. Buddy has added a tenth planet, the planet of Junior Brown, as an homage to his friend. Junior is a musical genius whose obesity makes him a social outcast.

After school, Buddy follows Junior to the house of Miss Peebs, Junior's piano teacher. Once there, Junior goes in alone for his lesson. For weeks, Miss Peebs has been telling Junior she has destroyed her piano. Junior has been taking his lessons by pounding the rhythms on a chair. Junior is determined to see the piano despite Miss Peebs's claim that she has a very ill relative staying with her

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and this relative cannot stand to hear music. When Miss Peebs goes to make tea, he sneaks into the piano room and finds it in shambles. As Junior leaves, he begins imagining a filthy man lurking in the apartment. Junior makes Buddy promise to help him do something about the relative. Buddy says he will if he can visit Junior at home. Junior reluctantly agrees; his mother, who has asthma, disapproves of Buddy. She is threatened by Buddy's friendship with Junior and is jealous of the time the two boys spend together.

After leaving Junior, Buddy travels to a secret place in an abandoned building. For years Buddy has been disguising the fact he is homeless. When Buddy climbs down a rope ladder into the basement of the building, two homeless children await him. The older boy of the two is called Franklin, and the younger boy is Nightman. They are members of a system called the planets of Tomorrow Billy, in which older boys, each called the Tomorrow Billy, teach younger children how to survive on the streets. Buddy was cared for when he was young by a Tomorrow Billy. Buddy is now a Tomorrow Billy himself. Buddy teaches the younger boys lessons about life on the streets. He discovers that Franklin has stolen money. He reprimands him. Buddy keeps some of the money to buy food for other planets where homeless children are cared for by a Tomorrow Billy. He also gives Franklin five dollars for food for him and Nightman. Nightman disdainfully refuses to take any of the stolen money. After Buddy has seen that the boys are fed and in bed, he wanders the streets until it is time for him to work at Doum Malach's newsstand. Doum is friendly with Buddy despite Buddy's reluctance to confide in him.

On Wednesday, as Junior promised, Buddy visits Junior's home. Buddy lies on Junior's bed while Junior plays the upright piano on one side of the room. No music comes out of it. In his head, Junior hears the music of Miss Peebs's grand piano. Curious, Buddy looks inside the piano. The strings that make the sound have all been removed. Buddy slowly realizes that Junior's mother has removed the strings so she can have her rest. He is outraged by

what she has done to Junior.

Finally Junior's mother calls them to dinner. Both Buddy and Mrs. Brown secretly bristle at one another during dinner. After they finish eating, Buddy announces that Junior is going with him to see a movie. Mrs. Brown has an asthma attack at this announcement, and Junior is forced to attend to her medical needs. After Buddy leaves, Junior feels lonely and he stays up all night working on a painting he calls *The Red Man*. It is a large red figure of a man. Within the figure, Junior paints tiny scenes of people from the streets, himself, and Buddy. Many of the scenes are dark and sordid. After painting all night, Junior is exhausted and simply slides the painting under his bed before leaving for school, rather than carefully rolling it up and hiding it in the closet as he would usually do.

Buddy and Junior arrive at school and see Mr. Pool being chastised by his supervisor. They cannot access their secret room. A teacher sees them, and they have no choice but to go to their regular classes.

The teacher in their first class realizes at once that they have been truant for months. She sends them to the office, where Buddy tells the assistant principal, Mr. Rountree, that Doum Malach is his uncle. Mr. Rountree calls Doum, who, without knowing what is going on, confirms to Mr. Rountree that Buddy is his nephew. Doum says he has been in the hospital and that Buddy and Junior were helping him with the newsstand. Buddy convinces Mr. Rountree that calling Junior's mother would unnecessarily aggravate her illness. Junior promises to tell his mother to come to the school the next day. Eventually the two boys manage to return to their secret room. Mr. Pool tells them they must dismantle the solar system, but that they can continue coming to the secret room if they are careful.

While Junior is at school, his mother finds *The Red Man*. She is shocked by the raw scenes Junior has depicted. She throws the painting away. When Junior comes home, his mother refuses to speak to him. When he goes into his room, he finds his

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painting missing. He knows his mother has destroyed it. In the morning, Junior's mother goes to his room to tell him he cannot have any more painting supplies until he can show he will paint only appropriate things. She is surprised to discover that Junior has left with many of his belongings.

After school on Friday, Buddy accompanies Junior to his music lesson. Miss Peebs shows Junior where the mysterious relative is hiding, and Junior backs away in horror after he looks. Buddy also looks, but he cannot see anything. Junior tells him he is taking the relative away for Miss Peebs. Buddy goes along with what Junior says. The boys go to the secret room. When they arrive, Mr. Pool is there, packing up the solar system model. Buddy tells him that Junior has a delusion that a sinister man is with him. Mr. Pool suggests taking Junior to the hospital, but Buddy argues this will destroy Junior. Mr. Pool agrees that they will hide Junior until he knows that someone cares for him. Then they will find him help.

Buddy is exhausted by the tension and responsibility. He breaks down and tells Mr. Pool about the planets of Tomorrow Billy. He asks Mr. Pool for help in caring for the younger boys and now Junior. Mr. Pool takes the boys to Buddy's secret hiding place. There are now eight or ten boys waiting for Buddy to arrive. Mr. Pool and Buddy help get Junior into the hiding place. Buddy looks at the boys and remembers that he was told by his Tomorrow Billy that he must learn to live for himself. Buddy consciously rejects this and tells the boys that they must live for each other and help each other. As Junior listens to Buddy talk, he feels affection for Buddy and a safety that seems to make the sinister relative fade and go fuzzy. Mr. Pool, who has pledged to help the boys, locks eyes with Buddy. Buddy tells the boys that their highest law is to live for each other, and Mr. Pool feels his faith in humanity being restored.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why is Buddy afraid when he is sent to Mr. Rountree's office?

Buddy is worried that Mr. Rountree will figure out he is homeless and make him go to a shelter or a foster home. Buddy has spent years establishing an independent life where he has control over his own fate. He does not want to be put in a home where adults who may not be trustworthy are making decisions for him. Buddy also fears that Junior's controlling and possibly unstable mother will be informed of Junior's absenteeism and will severely punish Junior.

Literary Analysis

What are some of the ways Junior Brown's mother tries to control Junior Brown?

Junior Brown's mother uses guilt to make Junior stay home with her and continue to take music lessons. She makes him feel that if he does not stay with her she may die. She also tries to make Junior ashamed of certain things that he does. Junior knows without being told what she thought of his painting. She also uses food to make him feel attached to her. She tries to make him diet, but she also prepares an enormous meal for him when she wants him to give up going out with Buddy.

Inferential Comprehension

What might be some likely reasons that Nightman makes Franklin return the five dollars Buddy gives him?

Nightman resents how Franklin has been belittling him. When Nightman makes Franklin return the money while he declares he does not need it, he demeans Franklin and at the same time he enhances his own status. Also, Nightman appreciates how Buddy has been treating him. Since Franklin is trying to portray Buddy as a thief, Nightman clearly defines his loyalties by siding with Buddy.

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Constructing Meaning

Mr. Pool worries that Junior Brown is selfish. Do you agree with Mr. Pool's assessment of Junior Brown? Why or why not?

Answers will vary. Some will feel that Junior Brown is oblivious to the problems of Buddy despite Buddy's devotion, and that he does not fully appreciate the things both Mr. Pool and Buddy do for him. Others may note that Junior devotes most of his time to his mother and is willing to bravely remove the relative in order to help Miss Peebs. Still both of these actions could be attributed to a selfish ulterior motive.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Plot There are several events in this story that contribute to Junior's breakdown. Have the students make a chart of the most important events. Have them explain how each event adds to Junior's stress.

Making Predictions Mr. Pool is impressed when Buddy tells him about the planet of Tomorrow Billy. Have the students write a story that shows how Mr. Pool can help improve the lives of these homeless children without reporting them to the authorities they fear so much.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The homeless children who have become part of the planets of Tomorrow Billy must live by a certain code. Have the students create a manual that explains what a person is expected to learn as a member of one of these planets. Have the students use details from the book to create their manuals.

Recognizing Feelings Junior Brown is frequently disturbed by thoughts of how his mother would respond to his experiences. Have the students find at least three examples of these moments and identify both the feelings experienced by Junior Brown when he hears his mother's voice and the feelings being expressed by his mother's statements.