

Rat Teeth

by

Patricia Reilly Giff

Book Information

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It's bad enough that his parents are divorced and his teeth stick out a mile, but when he loses a baseball game to the fourth graders, tough Cliffie feels he has to run away.

Topics: Behavior, Conflict; Behavior, Manners; Behavior, Meanness; Family Life, Growing Up; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, See All Sides; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 4-6 (Theme: Friends and Family); Series, Casey, Tracy & Company

Main Characters

Amy Warren a pesky third-grade girl who wishes Cliffie would be her friend

Anthony Abrusco Cliffie's cat that he found in an empty house

Arthur Vumas a classmate of Cliffie's who brings him his homework

Aunt Ida Cliffie's kind, paternal aunt, who is studying to be a beautician

Casey Valentine a girl at Cliffie's school who wears braces

Cliffie (Rat-cliffe) the main character in the story; a fifth-grade boy who is learning to deal with his parents' divorce, living in two homes and his self-consciousness about his extreme overbite

Jo-Jo Hines a street-smart older boy whom Cliffie meets when he plays hooky

Miss Bailey a librarian at the school's media center

Mr. Samson Cliffie's father, who just opened a chiropractor's office

Mrs. Elk Cliffie's strict teacher at school

Mrs. Furman a neighbor lady who lives near Cliffie's mother's apartment

Walter Moles Cliffie's schoolmate who has a red cat named Carrots

Winifred Samson Cliffie's mother, who works as a waitress and goes to school during the evenings

Vocabulary

chiropractor a person who moves and manipulates body structures as a form of therapy

hooky skipping school; the state of being truant

subway an underground rail system

token a piece of metal that is stamped with a design and used in place of money

trudged walked heavily or with great effort

Synopsis

Cliffie's life has turned upside down. He was living in Brooklyn and going to school with his best friend, Matt. But when his parents divorced, his dad moved to his sister Ida's house and set up a chiropractor's office, and his mom moved to a smaller apartment closer to Ida's. The kids at Cliffie's new school tease him about his teeth that stick out a mile. His new teacher, Mrs. Elk, is strict about being on time and turning in homework -- two things that Cliffie has trouble keeping on track.

Cliffie hates going back and forth between his parents with his beat-up old suitcase. When he goes to his father's, a pesky third grader, Amy Warren, is constantly spelling out words and bugging him to teach her to throw a baseball. Aunt Ida is a dear, but she is always doing something with her mannequin head or her own hair so that she can pass her test for beauty school. Cliffie finds relief in playing baseball on Saturdays. But when his fifth-grade team loses to the fourth graders, and he is blamed for the loss, his life goes from bad to worse. He reacts angrily to his teammates' taunts and is kicked off the team. He doesn't want to face the kids at school on Monday morning, so he decides to play hooky at Macy's watching TV. He learns the hard way that playing hooky is not such a good idea when a fellow hooky player that he meets takes his

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money. When he returns to his dad's, a boy from school brings his homework and tells him that he thinks the stray cat Cliffie found belongs to another boy. This is too much for Cliffie to bear, and he decides to run away, taking the cat with him.

Cliffie hides in the empty house where he had found the cat. But as the day passes, he finds that he misses his mom, his dad and even the routine of school. When he sees Aunt Ida walking around the neighborhood looking for him, he decides to come home. Aunt Ida comforts him and shares the good news that she passed her beauty exam and that his father has enough new patients so that Cliffie can get braces. Aunt Ida promises to straighten things out at school. Cliffie decides he must bring the cat to the boy who lost his. When he gets there, however, the boy's cat has been found, so Cliffie can truly adopt his little stray. Cliffie has a good conversation with the neighborhood boys. He apologizes for his behavior at the last baseball game and makes plans to play again the next day.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Jo-Jo use the word "lift" instead of "steal"? Are there other times people tend to change words? Give examples.

People tend to use words that don't sound as offensive when they are doing something wrong. "Lift" doesn't sound quite as bad as "steal," and might help a person rationalize bad behavior. Other examples are saying "I'm just stretching the truth" instead of admitting to lying. Some people will admit to copying a few words, but not to plagiarizing or cheating.

Literary Analysis

What type of humor does the author interject into the story? How does it affect the mood of the story?

Some of the humor is a self-deprecating type of humor. Cliffie makes fun of his teeth and calls himself a rabbit or says he can get a brace on one tooth. This humor serves to lighten the mood a bit, but a reader still feels sorry for Cliffie. Amy also provides comic relief of sorts. Everyone can identify with being followed by a pesky youngster, and she becomes almost endearing to the reader. She throws Cliffie off-balance with some of her comebacks, and one can imagine that years from now they will be great friends.

Inferential Comprehension

Cliffie is thrown out because he tries to steal second base. He feels that he loses the ball game for his team. In fact, he feels so bad about what happened and what he said that he plays hooky from school on Monday. Is competition a good thing at this age? What are the benefits of competition and what are the drawbacks?

Answers will vary. In the past, competitive sports did not begin until high school, but with every subsequent generation, competition and organized sports seem to begin for children at younger ages. Some benefits of competition may be helping a person to focus on a goal, building team spirit and the higher level of play that results. A major drawback is the huge focus on the winning aspect, not necessarily on personal performance. Sometimes this becomes a blaming situation, and young people are not always able to handle that burden. Oftentimes the person who misses the last play is the one blamed for the loss.

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Constructing Meaning

Cliffie tries to be a tough kid. How does the reader know he is, in reality, a sensitive kid?

When Cliffie feels his eyes burning, he is trying to hold back tears. He finds it hard to go between two homes, to adjust to a strict teacher, to deal with Amy and to be teased about his teeth. When he plays hooky, he tries to act tough, but Jo-Jo intimidates him. He is a lot more street smart than Cliffie is. Cliffie realizes that he actually likes learning more than he cares to admit. He is concerned about his book and concerned that Jo-Jo won't make anything of himself if he does not read books. When Cliffie runs away, he thinks about all he is missing and decides to return. He would rather have two homes and the guidance of his mom and dad than no home.

with new ideas. The class should be responsible for making up the rules, setting dates, planning publicity, etc. They may choose to participate in the contest or just act as judges or referees.

Recognizing Cause and Effect Many students find themselves in situations similar to Cliffie's. Ask the students to talk about the different strategies they use to keep their schoolwork and home lives organized. This exercise can benefit all students whether they have one or two homes.

Teachable Skills

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning

Casey Valentine has quite a list of things to call braces. Ask the students to take her lead and come up with names for her or bracewearers in general. Students can share their lists with the class.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Students know that they are supposed to go to school, but many are not aware of truancy laws. Ask the students to do some research to find out what the truancy laws are where they live. How many days can a student miss school before being considered truant? What are the consequences of truancy for the student? The students should make a list of the facts they find. Then they can list some opinions on what could be done about the problem of truancy.

Describing Actions or Events Cliffie's school seems to sponsor a lot of contests for the students. Cliffie's baseball game was between the fourth and fifth grades, and a third-grade team was also going to be started. Now the school is having a spelling contest. It might be fun for the class to organize a couple of contests themselves. They can choose to sponsor a spelling contest and baseball game or come up