

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Remembering Box by Eth Clifford

## Book Information

Eth Clifford, The Remembering Box

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Interest Level: MG

Nine-year-old Joshua's weekly visits to his beloved grandmother on the Jewish Sabbath give him an understanding of love, family, and tradition, which helps him accept her death.

**Topics:** Family Life, Death; Family Life, Grandparents; People, Jewish; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+

## Main Characters

Ari Beck Joshua's younger brother; Joshua once pushed Ari's rocking chair so hard that Ari fell out and got a bloody nose

Daniel Beck Joshua's younger brother who was very sick with scarlet fever

Grandma Goldina Joshua's loving and high-spirited grandmother, who often tells him stories of her life; she insists on maintaining her independence despite her deteriorating health

Grandpa Abba Grandma's kind-hearted husband, who told his wife that she did not need to save money secretly

Herschel Farber a neighbor of Grandma when she was a young woman; he was notorious for borrowing without repaying

Joseph Beck Joshua's concerned father, who wants to make sure Grandma's needs are met

Joshua Beck a young boy who spends Sabbaths with his grandmother because he wants to take care of her

Mazel the horse Grandma loved when she was a girl

Mrs. Beck Joshua's mother, who is also worried about Grandma

Schmuel Grandma's tall grandfather who worked as a water finder in the old country

Shimon Grandma's grandfather who was a talented metalworker

Shoshanah Beck Joshua's younger sister, who wears ribbons in her hair

Uncle Hayim Grandma's uncle who worked as the Sabbath bell ringer

## Vocabulary

**extravagance** an unnecessary expense

**fondly** in a loving way

**fragrant** pleasant or sweet smelling

**pawned** gave something as security for a loan

**promptly** without delay

**Sabbath** the Jewish day of rest and worship, which starts Friday evening and ends Saturday evening

## Synopsis

Nine-year-old Joshua Beck has spent the Shabbat, or Sabbath, each week with Grandma Goldina since he was five, when his parents began to worry about her being alone so much. Every Sabbath, Grandma makes a special meal while Joshua polishes the candlesticks made by his great-great-grandfather Shimon.

Sometimes Grandma cries when Joshua is visiting, and on one occasion she explains to him that she has different kinds of tears for different feelings. When she sings, she cries "remembering tears." When Joshua's brother Daniel was ill and almost died, she shed "sad tears." And when she says the Sabbath prayers, she cries "tears of her soul."

During Joshua's visits, Grandma tells him stories about the unusual mementos she keeps in her remembering box. When Joshua finds a Y-shaped stick in the box, Grandma explains that her grandfather Schmuel used the stick to find water in the ground. Joshua notices that none of the people in her photographs is smiling. Grandma explains that people used to have to sit for a long time when they had their pictures taken and, since the photographer only took one photo, people were very serious about their pictures. Joshua does, however,

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spot one girl laughing in a photo. Grandma admits that she was that girl and that she could not help laughing at the funny-looking photographer. Grandma then pulls ribbons from the box and shows him the blue set that she used to tie to a horse named Mazel. Her father let her take care of Mazel until he could sell the horse in a big city. Although she was not supposed to ride Mazel, she often took him for secret jaunts.

One Sabbath, Joshua asks Grandma if she loves him best of all of her grandchildren. She will concede only that she loved him first because he was the first-born. Then Grandma and Joshua reminisce about the time they have spent together. Joshua recalls that he made several drawings for Grandma, including an awkwardly-made portrait of her. He also mentions the letter he wrote to comfort her when one of her friends died. Grandma framed the letter, and the letter still hangs on her wall.

The next morning as Joshua watches lightning, he remembers how Grandma calmed him during a terrible storm when he was little. Later, when he was in third grade, he learned about thunderstorms in science and decided to share this information with Grandma. The next Friday he taught her about magnets but was disappointed to learn that she already knew how to use them, even if she did not know how they worked.

One day Joshua finds an old sock in Grandma's remembering box. She explains that she and her husband, Grandpa Abba, kept their money in it. They were saving money to buy two chairs, but one day she discovered the sock was empty. Grandpa Abba told her that he felt obligated to lend it to their next-door neighbor Herschel Farber, a man notorious for not repaying loans. Although she was very upset, she realized that two good things happened as a result. Herschel repaid the loan with two theater tickets, which introduced the young couple to a lifelong love of the theater. In addition, her husband was inspired to get an education so he could earn more money.

Just before his tenth birthday, Joshua misses four

Sabbaths with Grandma because both he and Grandma are ill. When he returns to Grandma's house, she gives him his own remembering box. In the box he finds Great-grandfather Schmuel's stick, the two blue ribbons, and the sock. He also finds a small silver bell. Grandma tells him that when she was a young girl her uncle Hayim would march through the town ringing a bell to announce that it was time to light the Sabbath candles. One day her uncle complained that the bell did not make music and asked Shimon to make a bell that would sing. Shimon made the bell and a smaller one that Grandma could ring, too. This smaller bell is the one that Grandma has given to Joshua.

Grandma grows tired after telling the story of the silver bell. She closes her eyes, and Joshua is unable to wake her. He lights the Sabbath candles before calling his father.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

When Grandma tells Joshua she was five years old in 1873, Joshua is surprised. Grandma then says, "Don't say it ... I know how old I am." Why does Grandma say this?

*Grandma probably realizes that she is not going to live much longer. She has been very sick in the past month, and she has started giving away treasures from her remembering box. She not only does not want to think about her own mortality, but she also does not want Joshua to worry about how old she is. In addition, she has always pretended that her age is not a problem for her. She refused to move in with Joshua's family, she made up excuses for why she walked so slowly when she and Joshua went for walks, and she makes jokes when Joshua comments that she looks much different from the picture of herself as a girl. When she asks Joshua not to say her age, she knows that soon she will not be able to avoid the problems associated with her age.*

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## Literary Analysis

In what ways was life different for women and girls when Grandma was young than it is now?

*Grandma says girls were supposed to sit sideways on a horse. She also says that women were not allowed to keep the money they earned, and that husbands gave wives a spending allowance. Many women tried to save money from this allowance in a knotted handkerchief called a knippel. Grandma also recalls that women waited for the cue from the bell ringer to light their candles. Also, the clothing styles were different. Women wore skirts so long that they dragged on the sidewalk if they were not held.*

## Inferential Comprehension

Why is the tradition of the Sabbath important to Grandma?

*The Sabbath means many things to Grandma. In the first place, she is very moved spiritually by the ritual. Every Sabbath she cries what she calls "tears of her soul" as she lights the Sabbath candles. Sabbath is also a reminder of those she has loved. She still uses the candlesticks her grandfather made for her grandmother, and she very carefully repeats many of the rituals of the Sabbath observed by her family as a young girl, from making the challah to using a snow white table cloth. The Sabbath is a time for celebrating family closeness. Grandma appreciates the time she spends with Joshua both because she loves Joshua and because it gives her an opportunity to tell stories of her life.*

## Constructing Meaning

How can the reader tell that Grandma is the kind of person who usually does what she wants to do?

*Grandma does many things that defy either convention or authority. When she was five she decided to be a bell ringer and followed her uncle on the Sabbath. When her father let her take care of Mazel, she often took him for secret rides. When her picture was taken, she laughed at the photographer even though most people at that time did not smile in pictures. When her husband gave away her money for chairs, she scolded him even though most women at the time did not have much control over how money was spent. She also pawned her wedding ring to force her husband to find money for the chairs. Even as an old woman with health problems, she refuses to live with Joshua's parents because she does not want to give up her independence.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The Sabbath is very important to Joshua and his grandmother. Have the students write a report about the traditions of the Sabbath and the meaning of these traditions. Then have them explain why Grandma and Joshua are very careful to follow the rules of the Sabbath.

**Responding to Literature** Grandma has documented her life by keeping a box full of reminders. Have the students create their own remembering box. Have them pick one thing from their box to present to the class in the form of a story that explains the object's significance.

**Recognizing Feelings** Grandma has names for the different kind of tears that she cries. Have the students create a list of other kinds of tears and explain the feelings that they represent. Then have the students review the book and create a list of events. Ask students to identify which kind of tear each event would cause.

**Understanding Sequence** This story is not told in chronological order, but the author gives many clues about the time order of events. Have the

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students create a timeline of the events told in this story. (Some of the events that occur between Joshua and Grandma may be harder to place than the events from Grandma's youth.)