

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Stepping on the Cracks

by

Mary Downing Hahn

Book Information

Mary Downing Hahn, Stepping on the Cracks
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In 1944, while her brother is overseas fighting in World War II, eleven-year-old Margaret gets a new view of the school bully Gordy when she finds him hiding his own brother, an army deserter, and decides to help him.

Award: BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Misc./Other; Scott O'Dell Award; State Award

Topics: Behavior, Bullying; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Mysteries, Secrets; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; Wars, World War II

Main Characters

Barbara (Fisher) a war widow and Stuart's friend
Elizabeth Crawford Margaret's next door neighbor and best friend
Gordy Smith their classmate, a bully, and a battered child
Lillian Baker Margaret's mother
Margaret Baker the twelve-year-old narrator of the book
Stuart Smith Gordy's older brother

Vocabulary

battle fatigue psychological reaction to combat that leaves a soldier unable to fight
conscientious objector an individual who refuses to participate in any war for any reason
delirious related to a mental state marked by confusion, disorientation and hallucinations
deserter a soldier who leaves his position without proper authorization

furlough a soldier's officially authorized absence from duty
jitterbug a dance popular in the 1940s
pneumonia a disease that affects the lungs

Synopsis

The novel is set in 1944 in a small, northeastern town. Its narrator is Margaret Baker, a sixth grader. Her neighbor and best friend is Elizabeth Crawford, a girl with much gumption. Their conflict with Gordy Smith, a classmate and bully, precedes the events of the novel. Their war is set against two other wars: the battles overseas, which has brothers (including the main characters' siblings) in their grip, and the war in the Smith household, where Gordy's father is a violently abusive drunkard.

Seeking revenge for previous bullying, Elizabeth coaxes Margaret to join her in a mission to trash Gordy's "secret" hut in the woods. After they do so, the girls learn a "crazy man" resides there. Gordy tries to frighten them into staying away from his hut by weaving a tale about how the crazy man will attack them. Eventually, the girls discover his true identity. Stuart Smith, Gordy's brother, has deserted from the Army rather than be sent to fight. Belatedly, he has come to the moral conclusion that all war and fighting are immoral.

Having Gordy in their control is a unique situation for the girls. Initially, they exchanged silence about Stuart for Gordy's building them a tree house. The secret, however, becomes much heavier to bear when Stuart contracts pneumonia. Willingly, the girls attempt to provide food, medicine and company to him, but Stuart's condition worsens. Desperate, they reveal the secret--with Gordy's reluctant acquiescence--to Barbara, Stuart's high school friend and a war widow. Ultimately, Barbara takes Stuart into her parents' house and nurses him back to health.

Gordy's father, meanwhile, continues to batter his family. Once recovered, Stuart becomes aware of how brutally Mr. Smith has been beating Gordy. He leaves Barbara's house to confront his father, which

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leads to an all-out attack. Stuart is beaten senseless as he stands between his father and the rest of the family, refusing to lift a hand in his own defense. Neighbors call the police, and Mr. Smith is hauled to jail.

Gordy's mother soon leaves town with her children. Stuart has been hospitalized with his injuries. Free of their nemesis, Margaret and Elizabeth feel no joy. Margaret's own brother has been killed in the war, yet she resists her mother's views of Stuart's "cowardice." Both she and Elizabeth hope, in the end, Barbara's secret news of Stuart's proposal to her will lead to a wedding.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why was Gordy so mean to Margaret and Elizabeth?

As an abused child of an alcoholic, Gordy had the burden of keeping the family's "secret." His beatings made him almost fearless, but friendship was truly scary to him. Not only was it difficult for him to know how to treat people decently, if he did befriend the girls, their sympathy for him could have been very dangerous. When Mrs. Baker tried to help, the end result was more beatings from his father. Even in the savage scene when his mother must lock the children upstairs as Mr. Smith rages, she was reluctant to holler out the window for help. Gordy's anger was one way of protecting himself from "help."

Literary Analysis

Why might the author have chosen Margaret as her narrator for this story?

Margaret is the character who changes the most. In the beginning, she is fearful and relies on Elizabeth and her parents to guide her thinking and actions. By the end of the novel, she not only makes up her own mind about Stuart's view of war, she argues outspokenly with her mother against the idea that he was just a coward. Her mother slaps her for it, but the slap does not force Margaret to change her mind since she is now just a tiny bit like Gordy. She has started to grow up, and her character best shows how hard a thing that is to do.

Inferential Comprehension

Was Stuart a coward, as Mrs. Baker believed at the end of the novel? Why or why not?

The author plainly intends Mrs. Baker's view of Stuart to be seen as inadequate. She is reacting more from her grief over her son's death in action than from a full appreciation of Stuart and his beliefs. The fact that Stuart confronted his father and took such a severe beating without fighting back showed that he was willing to act on his belief that violence is never justified. A coward would have either avoided Mr. Smith or pummeled him.

Constructing Meaning

Why did Margaret find Stuart's ideas about the war persuasive?

When she thought about them in the light of her own feelings, particularly toward her brother's death, they made more sense to Margaret than did the medals and patriotic slogans her parents showed her. One very important fact in her change of mind was that she began to see Stuart as her brother, Jimmy, had seen him. Jimmy was not only Stuart's friend, but his childhood protector. Margaret realized that her brother always saw Stuart as different from other boys, and she connects Stuart's beliefs with her brother's friendship toward him. Unlike her parents, she feels that standing up for Stuart's rights honors, rather than shames, her brother's memory.

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Teachable Skills

for several of the book's figures, including Margaret's brother, Jimmy, despite the fact he never truly appears.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Like Margaret's parents and most of College Hill in this book, history tends to cast World War II as "The Good War." You may want to prompt students to examine the legal and historical background of "conscientious objectors" more fully. Beyond thoughtful discussion, research might include the status of that classification in other wars. During Vietnam, for example, Stuart's dilemma would have been much more widely appreciated. *Down in My Heart*, by the poet William Stafford, is a fine account of his personal history in "The Good War" as a conscientious objector.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Radio is featured throughout the book as a force in people's lives. Mr. Baker listens for the war news, Mrs. Baker has her favorite dramas, and the children often tease each other by making references to *The Shadow* or other shows. Some discussion of the world before TV might be illuminating to your class. Some listening to tapes of old radio shows might even introduce a general discussion of how differences in media affect our culture and our lives.

Extending Meaning Gordy's dilemma toward Stuart and his father is one of the book's strongest features. As a writing assignment or discussion topic, you might give students some opportunity to generate options for help or action that Gordy never sees or seizes. In follow up activities, the ideas could be measured against changes in domestic violence laws and social perceptions. In College Hill, for one example, we saw that neighbors and the police were helpless to intervene. What about Mrs. Wagner, the teacher? What about the responsibilities of schools today in such cases?

Responding to Literature One interesting topic from this book might be to ask who is the most "heroic" character? Either before or after broaching the topic, you could engage students in an analysis of the qualities that make a person or a character "heroic." Cases should be available