

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Sun & Spoon

by
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Book Information

Kevin Henkes, Sun & Spoon
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After the death of his grandmother, ten-year-old Spoon observes the changes in his grandfather and tries to find the perfect artifact to preserve his memories of her.

Award: ABC (Assoc. of Booksellers for Children) Choice Aw; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Emotions, Sadness; Family Life, Death; Family Life, Grandparents; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice

Main Characters

Gram the children's late grandmother, who loved to play cards, collect suns and spend time with her family

Joanie Spoon's six-year-old sister, a sweet, dreamy and imaginative child who loves nothing more than being with her older brother

Kay and Scott Spoon's parents, both teachers with a passion for gardening, who are loving and very involved with both their children and Scott's widowed father

Pa the children's grandfather, a dignified, kind, former professor whose recent loss is still fresh and painful

Spoon a sensitive, ten-year-old boy grappling with the recent loss of his grandmother

Vocabulary

breakfront a kind of cabinet

clairvoyant having the ability to see things that are not in sight or know things that have not yet happened

orb a sphere or globe

solitaire a card game, usually played by one person; variations of the game can be played by two or more

Synopsis

As the story opens, Spoon's grandmother has been dead for two months, and he suddenly longs for something to remember her by - just the right thing that belonged to her. He hatches a plan to get his treasure by visiting Pa's house that very day. At Pa's house, Spoon thinks about the ways that Pa has changed since Gram died. He asks tentatively if Pa will play double solitaire with him, just as the three of them used to do when Gram was alive. But Pa, distracted, doesn't really respond. As Spoon and Joanie help Pa clean out the garage, Spoon keeps sneaking into the house to look for something of Gram's. Finally, while sitting in the sunny dining room surrounded by Gram's prized collection of suns, it hits him. He will take Gram's deck of cards. He stashes the cards in his pants pocket and immediately feels their strange power.

Later that day, he goes to the park, falls asleep in the grass and dreams of Gram. Gram warns him to drink enough on these hot days while the sun darts strangely around the sky. When he awakes he is certain: "The cards are working."

Dreams of Gram return that night after Spoon places the cards under his pillow. This time, Gram appears in a room with no ceiling, serving soup while thunderstorms appear suddenly from a china-blue sky. The next day, Spoon decides to make a secret notebook about Gram. He places the numbers one through fifty two on the pages--just the number of cards in Gram's deck. He writes a few entries showing what he knows about Gram.

Later that day, when Pa comes for brunch, Spoon feels "changeable, like the weather," and indeed, a storm seems about to break. As the family relaxes on the porch, Pa reveals that he is very troubled by the fact that Martha's cards are missing. The revelation throws Spoon into a tailspin of self-doubt,

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guilt and uncertainty, all of which are reflected in the violent rainstorm that suddenly breaks forth upon them. After Spoon walks Pa home, he slips the cards back into the dining-room breakfront.

The next day, Pa tells the family the cards have somehow returned, but is evasive about where they had been. It's only after Spoon joins him at Gram's grave site that Pa admits that he thinks the miraculous return of the cards could be a special sign from Gram. This is enough to force Spoon to admit it was he who'd taken the cards.

When the pair return to Pa's house, he gives Spoon a photograph of Gram when she was just Spoon's age. He also shows him a special mitten pattern on which Gram had written her name many years ago. Inscribed on the pattern is also the phrase, "M is always for Martha." Back at home, Spoon receives a true sign from Gram when he realizes that in the creases of all the palms of his family, the same "M" can be seen. Later, when Pa tries to offer Spoon the gift of the cards, Spoon wisely allows Pa to keep them for himself. Knowing he will share the gift of the "M" with Pa, Spoon gleefully agrees to a game of double solitaire with his grandfather.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How do Spoon's emotions change, or even conflict with each other, throughout the story?

Spoon goes through several cycles of sadness, relief and alarm while trying to come to grips with the loss of his grandmother. In the beginning of the story, his sadness is relieved somewhat when he gets Gram's deck of cards. After learning that Pa knows about the missing cards, he feels alarmed and guilty. Things are not much better after he confesses to Pa. He feels great relief accompanied by a sharp stab of longing for Gram. Finally, after receiving the photograph, discovering the M's and a final happy dream of Gram, he seems to have made peace with his tragedy. Spoon goes through several cycles of sadness, relief and alarm while trying to come to grips with the loss of his grandmother.

Literary Analysis

In Spoon's last dream, he and Gram are stretching their hands toward each other until finally, their fingers touch. Can you identify another image from early in the book that is reflected in this dream? What do you think the dream means?

The touching fingers bring to mind the image of the Sistine Chapel, which Gram had described to Spoon. For students not familiar with this work, a central feature of the ceiling is a painting of the creation, with God and Adam touching fingers. This dream, unlike all the others, was radiant and peaceful. It is likely a suggestion that, even though Gram is gone, everything will be all right.

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Inferential Comprehension

In the beginning of the story, Spoon wants very much to get "something of Grams." Why didn't he ask his grandfather for what he wanted?

He likely knew such a request would upset Pa. When Spoon goes to Pa's house to clean the garage, it is clear that Pa still feels the loss of his wife intently. In fact, he ignores Spoon's request to play cards, probably because the memory of the happy times would be too painful. We learn that Spoon himself is aware of Pa's fragile state on page 40 when he thinks to himself that he'd have to "be more delicate with Pa."

Constructing Meaning

Put yourself in Spoon's place. Would you try to deal with your sadness the same way Spoon did? What would you do differently?

Responses will vary with the students.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Plot A crisis point in the plot of this story occurs when Spoon learns that taking Gram's cards is having a devastating effect on Pa. Many novels use the plot device of unexpected consequences resulting from innocent acts. As a classroom lecture, discuss other familiar stories or books that utilize this same plot twist. Ask students to enter the discussion with examples from their own lives. What was the unexpected result of their action? Was it a positive or negative result? How was the situation resolved?

Understanding Characterization In an attempt to keep the connection with his grandmother alive, Spoon started a notebook of memories about her. He chose to include spaces for fifty-two entries, the number of cards in her deck of playing cards. Through these entries, the reader learns or becomes privy to the things about Gram that are most important to Spoon. To understand how the author used this format to reveal a character, ask students to make their own memory notebook about someone they know

well: a parent, grandparent, friend, or sibling. Ask them to write down ten things about the person that most people outside the family would not know. Items should reveal unusual or unique things about their personalities or backgrounds. Then, students may wish to share their lists with the class.

Understanding the Author's Craft In *Sun & Spoon*, the sun appears as a symbol for Gram. The connection between Gram and the sun is obvious - she collected suns of all kinds, and suns appeared on the backs of her favorite playing cards. But, on a deeper level, the sun represents the warmth and brightness of her personality. As an aid in understanding the use of symbols in literature, ask students to imagine themselves as characters in a novel. Considering their real-life personalities, what might be a logical item to use as a symbol for them? Encourage students to use something that mirrors their personalities, special dreams and great talents, rather than simple physical appearance. Ask each student to share their symbol with the class and why they chose this particular item to represent themselves.

Making Inferences During the course of this book, the main character has dreams involving Gram, himself and other members of the family. Dreams are often used in literature to reveal the state of mind of a character. To assist students in appreciating this technique as used in *Sun & Spoon*, review the dream sequences on pages 62-64, 65-66, 109, and 129-130. As a class, summarize each dream. Then, begin a classroom discussion in which the following topics are considered: What was happening in "real life" at the time of each dream? How does each dream reflect these events? How is Gram presented in each sequence? How do the dreams change between the beginning and end of the story? How is the sun used as a symbol of Gram in the dreams?