

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Switching Well

by
Peni Griffin

Book Information

Peni Griffin, Switching Well
Quiz Number: 5336
Macmillan, 1993
ISBN 0-689-50581-7; LCCN
218 Pages
Book Level: 6.4
Interest Level: UG

Will Ada from 1891 and Amber from 1991 find what they're looking for when each winds up in the other's time?

Award: Misc./Other; Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Children's Literature

Topics: Mysteries, Magic; Science Fiction, Time Travel; U.S. States/Regions, Texas

Main Characters

Ada a young girl living in small-town Texas in the 1890s, who is dissatisfied with the opportunities afforded to women

Amber a girl of the 1990s who yearns to live in the 1890s where, she assumes, life was better

Dr. Cunningham Mrs. Burak's superior, who doesn't seem to act in the children's best interest

Ethel a girl at the orphanage who admires and befriends Amber

Grof Ethel's young brother, whose problems are misdiagnosed until Amber intervenes

Mrs. Bauer Ada's mother, who is interested in women's rights, much to the consternation of her husband

Mrs. Burak Amber's mother, a social worker trying to change the system

Mrs. MacRae the humorless "Christian" director of the orphanage

Mrs. Prine an assistant at the orphanage who is quick to slap the children

Violet a girl with secrets who befriends Ada at the children's shelter

Vocabulary

analogous similar, alike
diplomacy the art of negotiating

habitually doing something by force of habit
hostile vicious, unfriendly
mellifluous sweetly flowing
pinafore an apron worn over a dress
skinflint a stingy person

Synopsis

Amber Burak and Ada Bauer have the same wish. They wish to live in a different time; however, Amber wishes to live in the past and Ada in the future. When their wishes come true with the aid of a magic wishing well, they soon realize that things are not as they thought they would be.

When Ada lands one hundred years in the future, she encounters the noise, pollution, and the seemingly immoral habits of the twentieth century. Naively, she narrowly misses an encounter with an unsavory character, and ends up in a children's shelter that is not much of an improvement over the orphanages of her time. Even after she is taken in by the Buraks, she misses the closeness of her large, noisy family.

Landing one hundred years in the past, Amber finds life quieter, yet filled with intolerance, injustice, cruelty, and hard work. With no family, skills, or prospects, she is sent to the local orphanage. After a harrowing few days, she stands up to the authorities and is beaten for her efforts. Finally, the Bauer family takes her in as a "hired girl," and although they are kind, she craves solitude more than anything.

Each girl finds a friend who, though downtrodden and unfortunate, proves to be someone who can teach them a few valuable life lessons. Each, in turn, helps the new friend gain strength and confidence.

As the days progress, the girls learn that they were indeed better off where they started, and each begins to make plans to get back home.

When Amber returns home, she finds Ada has made it possible to prove to everyone what happened, and

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Switching Well

by
Peni Griffin

has dedicated a part of her life to making sure her friend, Violet, would be well taken care of in the future.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How was life different for children in 1891 than it is for today's children?

Girls were expected to take care of younger siblings, and they were not encouraged to continue their schooling. Both boys and girls had to do more chores in the house and yard and fields. They had less free time and fewer toys, but probably felt safer and had fewer rules to follow.

Literary Analysis

Who do you think fared better in the other's time period?

Obviously, there is no correct answer to the question. Some students will say Amber, because she had the luxury of knowing the future and had educational advantages. Some students will think Ada, because she had better daily living skills, more common sense, and stronger morals.

Inferential Comprehension

What things were the same in both time periods?

Problems that existed in the 1990s also existed in the 1890s, though they were presented differently, and the public had different attitudes. Drug abuse in the present seemed clear cut, but it existed in the 1890s in a more insidious form. The results of the problem were very similar. The problems that orphaned children had were similar. Though kids weren't physically beaten in the 1990s children's homeless shelter, they were emotionally drained, and their problems were not competently addressed.

Constructing Meaning

In what ways were Ada and Amber alike?

Both were independent. Both had an inner strength that only became apparent when they were out of their element. Neither appeared to like Billy, but deep down, he appealed to both girls. Both had a sense of fairness and righteousness.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The book is the story of two girls who live in San Antonio, Texas, one-hundred years apart. The author uses details to compare and contrast the city during the two periods of time. The author describes architecture, style of dress, a city celebration, currency, food and household objects to show the differences in the time periods. Students could describe their own city or neighborhood as it might have looked one hundred years ago. They could choose a local festival or celebration and describe it from the perspective of a child observing the event.

Through further research, they could discover which streets existed at that time, which current businesses were operational, the name of the local newspaper, and what kinds of transportation were used.

Understanding Literary Features The theme of the story discusses how one's perception of a place or a desire changes when the dream becomes a reality. Almost everything the girls thought would be wonderful in the other era, was not what they expected. Students could identify the girls' perceptions of what life was like in the past, or would be like in the future, and discuss how close to the truth each was in her ideas. They could discuss how each girl's life was better for her in her own era, and what each learned from the time switch. They might write about what they would have enjoyed about living in the 1800s, and what they would not have liked. Another writing activity could involve a student taking his or her deepest desire, and discussing the possible adverse results that may occur.

Understanding Characterization The author

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Switching Well

by
Peni Griffin

uses two girls, one from each era, to illustrate how children of today are very similar to the children who lived in the 1880s. The girls are the same age; both are independent, strong, and sensible. Both wish for things in their lives to be different. Students could write about how the girls change over the course of their journeys, and how those changes might affect their lives once they return to their own time. Students might list the similarities between Ada and Amber, and also the significant differences in their personalities, attitudes, and beliefs. Another activity might involve research into discovering what other books, besides *Alice in Wonderland*, might have been enjoyed by both girls. If they read other historical fiction, they might keep a list of other slang words children used in the past.

Understanding the Author's Craft The author's use of parallel stories illustrates the differences between the two eras. The author lets the reader decide which society had a better attitude toward several subjects. Both sides of most situations are presented to the reader in a neutral tone, and it becomes evident that certain ideas are not cut and dried. Some topics discussed in both time periods include women's rights, divorce, homeless children, religious beliefs, and drug abuse. As the days go by, each girl realizes that she agrees with Dorothy's mantra, "There's no place like home." As a writing exercise, students could write a journal from the perspective of a girl or boy in the 1800s. Students might write a dialogue of a conversation they had with a friend and then rewrite it as it would have occurred in the 1880s.