

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Upstairs Room by Johanna Reiss

## Book Information

Johanna Reiss, The Upstairs Room

Quiz Number: 143

Bantam Books, 1984

ISBN 0-553-24784-0; LCCN

165 Pages

Book Level: 2.9

Interest Level: MG

During World War II, a young Jewish girl and her sister in Holland hide from the Nazis in the home of a Gentile family.

**Award:** Jane Addams Book Award/Honor Books;  
Newbery Honor

**Topics:** People, Jewish; 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); Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Elementary School Library Collection

## Main Characters

Annie de Leeuw a young Dutch girl who has to go into hiding during World War II because she is Jewish; she begins to lose the use of her legs because of her long confinement

Dientje Oosterveld Johan Oosterveld's nervous but kind-hearted wife, who loves the girls but constantly worries that the Nazis will come for everyone in the family

Dini Hannink the daughter of Gerrit Hannink, who builds a snowman to help keep the girls amused when Sini and Annie first go into hiding

Gerrit Hannink the man who first hides Annie and Sini and helps the Dutch resistance against the Germans in Usselo

les de Leeuw the father of Annie, Sini, and Rachel, who wishes to leave for America before the Germans invade Holland; he arranges for the family to go into hiding after people are taken away on the trains

Johan Oosterveld the brave and generous man who hides Annie and Sini in his house to protect them from the Nazis; he develops a very close and loving relationship with both girls

Mr. Herschel Annie's schoolteacher, who is romantically involved with Sini

Opoe Oosterveld Johan's elderly mother, who lives with her son and daughter-in-law; she also has a good relationship with the girls although she does scold Annie for ruining a lace cap

Rachel de Leeuw Annie's older schoolteacher sister, who insists on taking care of her mother when the rest of the family goes into hiding

Sini de Leeuw Annie's older sister who hides with her at the Oosterveld's house; Sini sorely misses parties and dating when she has to go into hiding, but she tries to take good care of Annie

Sophie de Leeuw Annie's sickly mother, who insists the family stay in Holland instead of fleeing to America; she dies in the hospital shortly after the German invasion

the Gans family the kindly neighbors who live across from Annie's family in Winterswijk before the German invasion; the son is taken away by the Germans, and the father volunteers to go to a work camp in hopes of finding his son

Willy Bos a friend of Annie who turns against her when the Germans invade Holland

## Vocabulary

**Gentile** someone who is not Jewish

**indignantly** angrily

**kosher** adhering to the Jewish religious laws for food preparation

**liberate** to set free

**relent** to give up or give in

## Synopsis

In 1938, Annie de Leeuw's father wishes to move from Winterswijk, a Dutch town a few miles from the German border, to America, but his sickly wife refuses to go. When the Germans invade Holland two years later, the rights of Jewish people are severely restricted, so Father moves the family to

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the country. Annie's sister, Sini, loses her beau after he is seized by the Germans, and her sister Rachel loses her job as a schoolteacher.

In October of 1942, Father arranges to go into hiding. Father must go to Rotterdam, and the girls are to hide in Usselo. Rachel refuses to go because Mother is sick in the hospital, but Sini dyes her hair and Annie disguises herself as a boy while they travel. Mr. Hannink hides the girls in his house and digs a hiding place in his backyard to be used in an emergency. Shortly after going into hiding, the girls receive news that Mother has died and Rachel is now in hiding.

Soon after Christmas, the Hanninks move the girls because the Nazis may search their house. The girls stay in a cave until they can safely be moved to the home of the Oostervelds. Though kind, Dientje, the wife of Johan Oosterveld, is nervous about the risk. Her husband is braver. The girls stay in an upstairs bedroom in their new home, and Sini makes herself useful by helping Opoe, the grandmother, darn socks. Although the women are shocked by Sini's objection to eating pork, the girls like the Oostervelds. Johan finally announces that the girls are staying there rather than returning to the Hanninks, and he builds an emergency hiding place in the closet.

When the girls ask for books, Dientje borrows *War and Peace*. At night, Johan and the girls listen to the radio he keeps hidden in the ceiling. When it is Opoe's birthday, the girls are allowed downstairs to share a birthday meal. The Oostervelds rarely find fault with the girls, but Opoe does get angry when Annie sets *War and Peace* on her fragile lace cap, the only thing she has left of her mother's.

One day Mr. Hannink's daughter, Dini, warns the girls that the Germans are searching houses. The girls stay in the narrow closet for the entire night. The night passes without incident, but soon afterward, Sini realizes that Annie's legs are atrophying from lack of use. Annie has to practice walking every day.

When Annie starts having problems with her legs, Dientje takes Annie to play with another hiding child. Annie likes getting out, but she is shy with the other child, and Dientje questions whether the trip was worth the risk.

In the spring, the Oostervelds celebrate Annie's eleventh birthday with gifts and a visit from Dini. Johan predicts that Annie will still be with them for her twelfth birthday. He shows the girls a newspaper that tells of mass murder in the concentration camps. When the weather warms up, Johan moves the girls to an unheated back room where they can look out the window, but they cannot go outside. In the fall, the girls move back into the bedroom, and Miss Kleinhoonte brings Annie schoolbooks.

Sometime after 1944 begins, Rachel asks to visit. Johan reluctantly agrees, but Rachel upsets the girls by criticizing their lifestyle with the Oostervelds. Some happiness is restored when the troops land in Normandy, but the summer passes without the liberation of Holland. Just before harvest, the girls persuade Johan to let them spend a day outside. Johan takes them in a wheelbarrow to a hidden spot in his wheatfield. Unfortunately, he is unable to return for several hours, and Annie gets sunstroke.

Defeat for the Germans is drawing closer, but life is still dangerous. When the Germans start searching houses one day, the girls barely make it to their hiding spot. In an attempt to keep everyone safe, Mr. Hannink asks Johan to kill a dangerous informer. Johan refuses, but he gives a boy the revolver and instructions that had been given to him. After the informer is killed, the Germans take hostages in an attempt to force the villagers to talk. The hostages are later found murdered.

In early winter some German soldiers move into the Oosterveld house. The girls hide in a bed in the unheated back room. Sini occupies herself by darning socks, but when she runs out of yarn Annie risks going to the kitchen for more and is seen by a German soldier. The girls wait for the Nazis to take them away, but Johan comes to tell them that he convinced the soldier that Annie was a visiting niece.

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A week later the Germans move on.

As the Germans continue forcing Dutch men to work for them, Johan goes into hiding. Dientje is terrified the girls will be discovered while he is gone. She sends them to Mr. Hannink's cave. After ten days in the hole, Johan returns, angrily discovers they have been kept in the underground shelter, and takes them home. Sini refuses to continue hiding. She persuades Johan to get her false identification papers. Annie is distraught when Sini leaves, and she stops exercising her legs. One day Annie is downstairs when an unexpected visitor arrives. Johan has to push Annie up the stairs because her legs do not work.

On April 1, 1945, the Canadians arrive in Usselo, and Johan proudly introduces Annie and Sini to his neighbors. When Rachel arrives to take the girls home, the girls object. They are not ready to leave Usselo yet. Finally, after a month, they return to Winterswijk with Annie carrying a gift -- Opoe's treasured lace cap. Several years later, Annie moves to the United States. Then, as a middle-aged woman, she returns with her daughters to meet the Oostervelds.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

How does Johan deal with the German soldier after the soldier saw Annie?

*First, Johan tells the soldier that Annie is Dientje's niece and that she looked scared because she is a very shy little girl. Then Johan insists that Dientje go to her niece's school and bring her niece back to the house. Johan takes a gamble that the soldier had not seen Annie long enough to realize that Dientje's niece and Annie are not the same girl. Dientje's niece visits long enough to give credibility to Johan's story, and Johan goes upstairs to reassure the girls that they are still safe.*

### Literary Analysis

What are Annie's main problems in this story?

*Annie has a few big problems in this story that cause a chain reaction of negative events for her family. First, her mother is terminally ill, which prevents the family from leaving Holland before the Germans come. Then Annie finds her family targeted by the Germans because of their Jewish heritage, which forces the family to go into hiding in order to escape the Nazis. Being hidden in cramped quarters for an extended period of time causes Annie to begin to lose the use of her legs, which makes it difficult for her to continue to hide from people who might turn her in to the Germans.*

### Inferential Comprehension

How is Dientje different from Johan?

*Although Dientje obviously likes the girls and tries to take good care of them, she is in many ways ruled by her fear of being caught by the Germans. She is unable to be as brave as Johan and sends the girls away after Johan goes into hiding. She also does not have the same problem-solving skills as Johan, who comes up with the solution for hiding the girls, a plan for dealing with the Germans when they move into the house, and an answer for the German soldier when Annie accidentally shows herself to him. Dientje is hard working, but Johan gets up earlier and also works outside of the home in order to support his family. Johan also seems to get along with Opoe better than Dientje does, as Dientje tends to lash out at Opoe when she is upset.*

### Constructing Meaning

What does Johan mean when he says, "...drowning a fish and starving a farmer, that's not easy"?

*Just as a fish cannot drown because he lives in water, a farmer cannot starve because he is the source of most food. Although times are hard and many people around them are going without food, the Oostervelds have plenty of food because they raise it themselves. Even when the Nazis steal their pig and the refugees pass through begging for food, Johan's family has enough to eat.*

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## Teachable Skills

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Although Annie describes the events from her perspective, it is clear that other characters have different interpretations of the events in this story. Have the students choose another resident of the Oosterveld home and write a journal from that character's perspective that shows his or her point of view of the time Annie and Sini spent in Usselo.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Annie mentions several historical events that affect her life, such as Kristallnacht, the landing of the troops at Normandy, and the overthrow of Mussolini. Have the students read more about one of these events and discuss in class how their research affects their understanding of this story.

**Responding to Literature** Johan goes to considerable risk in order to protect Annie and Sini. Have the students consider what they or their families would have done if they had lived during this time. Have them write a brief account of how their families would have reacted in the same circumstances.

**Extending Meaning** Many of the characters in this story make decisions that have a significant influence on Sini and Annie's life, such as Mother's decision to keep the family in Holland, Rachel's decision to stay behind with Mother, and Dientje's decision to send the girls back to the Hanninks when Johan goes into hiding. Have the students choose a decision they feel is important and write why they think the decision is significant. Then have the students evaluate whether they felt the decision the character made was the correct decision to make. Have them use details from the book to support their evaluation.