

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## What Jamie Saw

by  
Carolyn Coman

### Book Information

Carolyn Coman, What Jamie Saw

Quiz Number: 15819

Front Street, 1995

ISBN 1-886910-02-2; LCCN

126 Pages

Book Level: 5.4

Interest Level: UG

Having fled to a family friend's hillside trailer after his mother's boyfriend tried to throw his baby sister against a wall, Jamie finds himself living an existence full of uncertainty and fear.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; National Book Award/ Honors; Newbery Honor; State Award

**Topics:** Community Life, Domestic Abuse; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - High School (Theme: Tough Decisions)

### Main Characters

Agnes Van's mother

Earl Patty's friend who gives her refuge when she leaves her abusive situation

Jamie the main character of the story, a young boy who is deeply affected by the abuse he and his family suffered at the hands of Van

Mrs. Desrochers Jamie's teacher, who helps Jamie and Patty cope with the changes in their lives

Nin Van and Patty's baby daughter; she is thrown by Van in one of his rages

Patty Jamie's mother, who leaves Van and tries to break away from the fear under which she and her children have been living

Van Nin's father, an abusive man

### Vocabulary

**deliberate** carefully thought out

**squall** an outcry; a yell

**trailer** a small, self-contained living space that is able to be towed from one place to another

**urgency** immediacy

### Synopsis

Jamie witnesses an unbelievable act -- his mother's boyfriend, Van, picks up Jamie's little sister, Nin, and throws her across the room in anger. Incredibly, Jamie's mother, Patty, catches her. Patty flees with the children immediately to the apartment of her childhood friend, Earl, who welcomes them in, and reluctantly, at Patty's insistence, takes them to live in a small trailer he has in the woods.

Patty sets up the tiny trailer and places Nin in a drawer to sleep. When the weekend rolls around, Jamie wants to go the Groveton fair, and after some prodding, his mother agrees to take him, dropping Nin off with Van's mother, Agnes. Jamie and Patty enjoy the fair. They are about to leave when they spot a man they think is Van. They are overcome with fear. The man turns, and they discover he is a stranger, but Patty and Jamie are still tense. The fear makes Patty short-tempered and Jamie physically ill.

Both Patty and Jamie have lost their motivation to go to work or school, respectively. They spend their days nesting in the trailer, playing cards, or with Jamie practicing his magic tricks in front of Nin. It is not until Jamie's teacher, Mrs. Desrochers, appears at the trailer and talks to Patty that things begin to change. She is kind and able to communicate with Patty without judging. Patty agrees to send Jamie back to school and will herself go to weekly group sessions for women.

As Christmas approaches, Jamie's excitement grows, but Patty is frustrated by a lack of money and a car that won't start. Earl comes to visit, bringing a pair of skates for Jamie. He teaches Jamie to skate while Patty takes his truck to pick up some Christmas gifts. On Christmas Eve, Van shows up at the trailer while Jamie is alone with Nin and Patty has gone out for a last-minute food item. Jamie hides Nin before Van enters the trailer. Jamie sees Van realistically for the first time, as a sad, beaten-down man. When Patty arrives, she rushes into the trailer, frantic. She orders Jamie to take Nin and walk down the road while she talks alone to

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Van, but Jamie refuses, and Van, seeing both Patty and Jamie standing together, decides to leave. Patty tells him not to come around again.

Jamie finally breaks down and cries. Patty comforts him. They both know they are on the path to healing.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

How does Mrs. Desrochers know that Jamie is not really sick?

*Mrs. Desrochers has seen Jamie at the fair. He has already missed about a week of school. He seems to be well enough to play the games. But Mrs. Desrochers also witnesses Jamie and his mother hiding from someone at the fair. She realizes then that an abusive situation is occurring and that Jamie and his mother are trying to keep a low profile. She comes to the trailer to assure Jamie's mother that she can keep Jamie safe and, with his regular attendance, break through to him.*

#### Literary Analysis

Why is Mrs. Desrochers able to be so influential with Patty and Jamie?

*Mrs. Desrochers does not butt heads with Patty, but rather takes an understanding approach. She seems to know the shame and fear that accompanies abusive situations. By promising to keep Jamie safe, she is able to get Jamie back into school and have some positive influence on him. By suggesting a women's group for Patty, she helps her find ways to improve her life.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

At the end of the story, why does Van leave the trailer?

*Van realizes he is not facing just Patty, but Patty and Jamie together. Jamie is not cowering any longer. He has hidden Nin and protected her. He is not going to leave his mother to face Van alone. When Jamie refuses to leave with Nin and stands at his mother's side, Van sees that he can get nowhere. Patty is also stronger with Jamie there and has the strength to tell Van not to come around anymore.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Why does Jamie's body become "as tense as a wire" in the classroom when he suddenly feels a hand on his shoulder?

*It probably indicates that Jamie, too, is abused by Van. Van's temper is explosive, and seems to erupt out of nowhere. Jamie has just been thinking about Van throwing last year's Christmas tree when he feels a hand on his shoulder. He is tense because he thinks something terrible is about to happen.*

### Teachable Skills

**Describing Actions or Events** Ask the students to recall a "first-time" memory of something they learned, such as ice skating, bike riding, or swimming, and write about the memory. Students should include whom they were with, the struggle it took to learn, and the feelings they experienced when they were finally able to do the activity on their own.

**Differentiating Fact and Opinion** Many myths surround social issues such as abuse. Perhaps some people feel that it is a problem only among the poor, or that only men are abusers. Invite a social worker from the public health department, a police officer, or counselor to come to the classroom to speak to the students about abuse, give some factual data about the incidence of abuse, and profile of abusers. The speaker may also wish to include where to go to report an abusive situation and ways to protect oneself from becoming a victim of abuse.

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**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** Ask the students to read about Jamie's first impressions of the trailer and its surroundings on page 41 and draw it, using the thoughts that came into Jamie's mind as he approached it. Then ask them to draw the inside of the trailer, padded, as Jamie imagined it (page 43) as a safe place for Nin. After the pictures are finished, have a class discussion about the feelings the students have about Jamie's home and the situation in which he finds himself.

**Recognizing Details** One thing that Jamie loves is magic. It is something that he can practice, it seems to keep his mind off his troubles, and it brings him a lot of joy. It might be fun to put on a class magic show. Ask each student to learn at least one magic trick and put on a show for the younger children in the school.