

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Z for Zachariah

by

### Robert C. O'Brien

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### Book Information

Robert C. O'Brien, Z for Zachariah  
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Interest Level: UG

Seemingly the only person left alive after a nuclear war, a girl is relieved to see a man arrive in her valley until she realizes that he is a tyrant and she must somehow escape.

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

**Topics:** Adventure, Survival; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Wars, Misc./Other

### Main Characters

Ann Burden a teenage girl left alone after her family fails to return from a search for other survivors following a nuclear war

John Loomis a scientist who survives the nuclear war in an underground laboratory and later finds the valley where Ann lives by traveling in a radiation suit

### Vocabulary

**companionable** having the qualities of a good companion

**Farmer's Almanack** a book published annually, containing information on subjects such as weather forecasts and astronomical data

**generator** a machine for changing mechanical energy into electric energy

**illusion** a false idea or conception

### Synopsis

Ann Burden is left alone at her family's home when her parents leave to find other survivors of a nuclear war. Gradually she is cut off from all others as the radio goes dead. She begins to believe she may be the only person on earth to have survived the war.

When she sees smoke in the distance and realizes that at least one other person may be alive, she tries to protect herself by returning to a nearby cave. At the cave, she observes a person in a green plastic suit enter the valley and find her family's home. After testing the air for radiation, the stranger, John Loomis, removes his gas mask and protective suit and begins to inspect the area. In his excitement to have found a safe haven, he mistakenly bathes in a contaminated river. Soon he becomes ill with radiation poisoning.

In her desire to see if the man is still alive, Ann ventures back home to check on him. Discovering that the man is alive, Ann begins to nurse him back to health. In a brief period while the man is not sick, she replants the garden and moves many of her things back into the house. During the worst days of his sickness, Ann spends most of her time in the house caring for him. She discovers from Mr. Loomis's feverish ranting that he killed a man in order to keep the safe-suit for himself. When he recovers from his fevers, Mr. Loomis slowly begins to take control of all that Ann does.

Ann slowly becomes uncomfortable with his need for control and she eventually is compelled to move back to her cave after he attacks her in her bed one night. Knowing that she needs the food at her house in order to survive and that Mr. Loomis is not well enough to work, she decides to continue to care for the plants and animals, but does not move back into the house. In his desperate attempt to get Ann back to the house, Mr. Loomis eventually shoots Ann in the leg.

At this point it is clear to Ann that Mr. Loomis wants her to be a prisoner in the house, and she devises a plan to get the safe-suit and equipment from him so she can leave the valley and search for other areas that may have escaped radiation contamination. Eventually Ann does lure him away from the equipment and leaves in search of other survivors.

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### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

Why does Ann go to the church to pray for Mr. Loomis?

*She feels helpless because there is little she can do for him. She isn't sure whether she is motivated more to help him or herself, but she knows they both need some help, and she doesn't know what else to do.*

#### Literary Analysis

Ann eventually understands that she and Mr. Loomis have different ideas about the future and their survival in the valley. Explain the basic difference between Ann's plans and Mr. Loomis's plans. Give some examples of their behavior that support your answer.

*Ann believes that the two of them will stick together and help each other survive, perhaps even marry and have children. She takes care of him when he is sick, plants enough crops for the two of them, and reads and plays the piano to entertain him. Mr. Loomis does not trust Ann and is afraid she will go behind his back and steal the safe-suit. Mr. Loomis tells Ann what and when to plant, tries to intimidate her, and even tricks her into doing things just to have control over her. Eventually, he even takes the key out of the tractor to try to force her to speak to him.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Ann feels as if she is engaged in a game she describes as move-countermove, like chess, with Mr. Loomis. Give some examples of the things she and Mr. Loomis do that demonstrates how they are planning their next moves based on the other person's last move.

*Ann watches Mr. Loomis tie Faro up to the porch and start teaching him to follow her scent. She then makes sure she confuses the dog by changing the route she uses to get to her hideaway. Mr. Loomis takes the key out of the tractor, which then forces Ann to speak with him. Ann knows Mr. Loomis will be looking for signs of where she is so she builds a firewall to hide the flames of her cooking fire and then only cooks at night.*

#### Constructing Meaning

After retreating to her hideaway in the cave, Ann realizes that in order to survive, she and Mr. Loomis will have to compromise and share the valley. What does she do to show she is willing to share the valley? What does Mr. Loomis do to show he is unwilling to share the valley?

*Willing to compromise, Ann tills the garden, brings supplies to Mr. Loomis, and gives him half the milk and crops she garnishes from the valley. Unwilling to compromise, Mr. Loomis takes the key out of the tractor, padlocks the store, ties up Faro, and shoots at Ann when she refuses to return to the house to live.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Literary Features** When Mr. Loomis burns Ann's things, she feels he has destroyed what was most precious to her - her books. Why are books so precious to her, and what could books bring to a person who is alone in the world? Have students think about the one book they would be most upset to lose and share their thoughts with the others. Further the discussion by also considering one item they feel is most precious to them and why.

**Understanding Characterization** Early in the

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story, Ann writes that a radio announcer had told people that "men should act with dignity even in the face of death." This is a very powerful message to people who are facing death, especially since the announcer himself is facing death. Discuss what the announcer meant and how a person could do this. Consider examples of people who face death with dignity. One good example of this is King Hussein of Jordan, who met with other leaders to help work out a peace agreement while he was in his own struggle against cancer.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** While Ann is alone in the valley, she tries to keep track of the specific date by measuring the length of the days. She learns this through a *Farmer's Almanack*. The *Farmer's Almanack* also provides information to help predict weather patterns and future events. Find this year's *Farmer's Almanack* and test some of its predictions against reality. Attempt to determine how the weather patterns are predicted.

**Making Predictions** One day Ann sits under the apple tree and dreams of her future in the valley. Though her dreams never come true, it is no doubt comforting to Ann to at least have them in her mind. Write a story that tells what you believe your life will be like in ten or twenty years or rewrite a portion of the story based on Mr. Loomis behaving honorably. Share the individual efforts with the class.