

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

26 Fairmount Avenue

by
Tomie De Paola

Book Information

Tomie De Paola, 26 Fairmount Avenue
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Children's author-illustrator Tomie De Paola describes his experiences at home and in school when he was a boy.

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Main Characters

Aunt Nell the aunt who teaches Tomie about guardian angels
Buddy Tomie's eight-year-old brother
Carol Crane Tomie's best friend and neighbor
Miss Burke the school principal
Mr. dePaola (Joe) Tomie's father
Mrs. Crane Carol's mother, who is afraid of storms
Mrs. dePaola (Flossie) Tomie's mother
Nana Downstairs Tomie's Irish grandmother
Nana Fall River Tomie's Italian grandmother
Nana Upstairs Tomie's Irish great-grandmother
Tom Tomie's Irish grandfather, who tells Tomie to call him "Tom"
Tomie dePaola the main character, who relates high points of his life when he is four and five years old

Uncle Charles the uncle who takes care of Tomie and Buddy on moving day
Viva Uncle Charles's girlfriend

Vocabulary

animated lively; in motion; descriptive of a movie with cartoon characters
contraption a piece of machinery that looks homemade
oilcloth a cloth that has been waterproofed
studs lengths of lumber used for the vertical supports in a wall

Synopsis

Tomie dePaola introduces us to his family and relates some highpoints in his life when he is four and five years old. It is 1938. The dePaolas live on the first floor of an apartment building in Meriden, Connecticut, while waiting for their house to be built. In the fall of the year they experience an unusual hurricane that hits Connecticut. The hurricane destroys a house near the one they are starting to build, but theirs is unharmed.

Tomie tells about his Italian and Irish relatives. He gives special attention to the Irish relatives whom they visit every Sunday in Wallingford, Connecticut, near Meriden. He refers to his grandparents as Nana Downstairs and Tom. His great-grandmother he calls Nana Upstairs because she spends all her time in Nana Downstairs and Tom's upstairs. Nana Upstairs is quite old, forgetful, and needs extra care. Nana Downstairs even ties her gently in a chair so she cannot fall out. One Sunday Tomie gets both himself and Nana Upstairs into a predicament. While looking for candy, he finds chocolate-flavored laxatives in the medicine cabinet. Together they eat them all and suffer the consequences.

Besides the new house and the hurricane, Tomie is most excited about seeing the animated cartoon movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. However, it does not take him long to realize that Walt Disney's version is considerably different from the book. He said Mr. Disney "didn't read the story

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right." Even though many other children in the theater create a commotion with their screaming and crying over the most frightening scenes, Tomie loves it.

Tomie continues relating events of his life, progressing from the tumultuous year of 1938 into 1939. His father fires the contractor who is building their house, so nothing is done during the remainder of the winter. One of the family's first concerns in the spring is that the city is working to create a real street, which causes the house to be elevated higher than what the dePaolas wanted. Mr. dePaola and his friends make wooden walkways through the mud to get to the house so they can finish constructing the roof and walls. Before the plasterers come to plaster the walls, Tomie's father lets Tomie draw on them with blue chalk. He sketches all his relatives.

The house is still not completed by the time school starts. Tomie's first afternoon kindergarten class is a bit awkward. He asks the teacher when the class will learn to read. When she says, "We learn to read next year," he leaves, sincerely believing that he will just skip kindergarten and return to school for first grade.

In the fall, work on the house is completed, and landscaping becomes a priority. Tomie's father arranges a work group for burning everything that is growing in the backyard. When the fire gets out of control, Tomie's mother, who is in charge of the garden hose, gets the fire out but also soaks the house and all the workers. Everyone is glad the house is saved.

A period of unusually heavy rain follows. Everyone is concerned about what the rain will do to the property. Tomie, who has just learned about guardian angels from his aunt Nell, prays to his. The rain stops and the weather turns cold. Tomie credits his guardian angel with the rescue.

After spending their last Christmas and New Year's holidays in the apartment, the dePaolas move into their new house. Tomie and his brother, Buddy,

spend the day with Uncle Charles in Wallingford during the moving of the big articles. After dark, Tomie's parents telephone to say that Uncle Charles can bring the boys to their new home at 26 Fairmount Avenue.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why are Mr. and Mrs. dePaola so upset when the city grades the road for a better street?

They are upset that so much dirt is being removed, making their house, once on a low hill, now a house on a high hill. The new street will mean more work for them to build a retaining wall in their front yard to hold back the earth. Instead of having a sidewalk from the street to their front door, they will have to construct steps up the new hill to the door. A steep driveway will have to be built to get into the garage. The city's improvements mean not only more work, but also greater expense than they had originally anticipated for the new home.

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Literary Analysis

What mood is created by Tomie's description of the hurricane?

The mood that is created is one of fear and anxiety coupled with humor. Tomie describes driving to the school with his mother to pick up his brother and other students because of the approaching storm. They rush to the school. On the way home from school, Tomie describes the drive as "scary" with all the children talking and screaming. Outside branches are coming off trees, and a sign flying off a building almost hits the car. Once they arrive at the apartment, the car has to be parked where there are no trees. Neighbors come to stay with them. No one has electricity, and all watch out the window as furniture, branches, and garbage cans blow across yards. The wind is described as roaring like a freight train. Within the feeling of fear is a subtle hint of humor as Tomie also tells of the boy at the school with the umbrella, who is lifted off the steps "like Mary Poppins." Another hint of humor is related in Tomie's story of Mrs. Crane's need to be sprinkled with holy water so she feels safe during storms.

Inferential Comprehension

Why does Tomie, at the young age of four and five years old, feel so excited about the new house that is being built?

Tomie's parents do a good job of making the new house construction a family project. They check the house regularly, taking note of each construction phase. Tomie is able to relate the parts of construction he sees: the steam shovel digging the hole, the cement truck pouring the foundation, and the builders constructing the frame. He feels that he has played a part in helping to get the work done on the house by praying to his guardian angel that the heavy rains will stop so work can continue. He is also allowed to draw on the walls before the plasterers come, thus making his creations a part of the house forever.

Constructing Meaning

How does the reader know that Tomie's family is important to him?

Tomie describes his extended family members in detail, giving them special names so he does not get confused. His favorite is his great-grandmother, Nana Upstairs, with whom he spends Sundays. He is very comfortable when he spends time with various aunts and uncles while the new house is being completed. He draws all of his family members on the new walls of the house, creating special and separate spots for immediate family, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. When he feels bad about the plasterers covering up his drawings, Tom, his grandfather, explains that the drawings will always be in the house. This makes Tomie feel better, and he claims Tom always makes him feel better.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Details Tomie complains that Mr. Walt Disney did not read *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* right. He thought some scenes should have been included, such as the wedding and the Evil Queen dancing to death in the red-hot iron shoes. Have the students draw one of the scenes that Tomie believes Mr. Disney got wrong in the movie.

Comparing and Contrasting As Tomie describes his life in the apartment building, the reader can tell there will be many changes once the family moves to their new house. Have the students create a chart identifying the positive and negative points of living in the apartment in town compared to the new house "in the sticks."

Responding to Literature Learning to read is so important to Tomie that when he hears he is not going to learn to read until first grade, he does not want to be at school. With the love of reading being so critical, have the students select a kindergarten "buddy" to whom they can read stories on a regular basis throughout the school year.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The story

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relates that a hurricane hits Meriden, Connecticut, in the fall of 1938, and that a hurricane had never before hit New England, so the residents are unprepared. Have the students research the customary paths of hurricanes to learn why New England rarely has trouble with hurricanes. They should then research the 1938 hurricane. Was it really the first hurricane to hit New England? Have the students write a brief paper on their findings.