

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Bringing Nettie Back

by

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Book Information

Nancy Hope Wilson, Bringing Nettie Back
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Book Level: 4.8
Interest Level: MG

Clara learns to deal with her best friend's disability of brain damage due to a cerebral hemorrhage.

Topics: Disabilities, Physical; Family Life, Illness; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship

Main Characters

Clara the principal character of the story and Nettie's loyal friend

Jubie Clara's adoring four-year-old sister

Miss Ziff Clara and Nettie's strict teacher

Mr. and Mrs. Knapp Nettie and Patty's loving parents

Mr. Nelson Clara's critical but loving father

Mrs. Nelson a loving mother of six children, including Clara

Nettie a fun-loving, young girl who suffers a brain hemorrhage

Oggie Clara's wise and supportive grandmother

Patty Nettie's twin sister and Clara's friend

Vocabulary

brazen bold and shameless

intravenous within or into a vein

tureen large, deep dish with a lid, for serving soup

Synopsis

The summer of 1958 is a joyous one for Clara Nelson. She and her mother and brothers and sisters are staying on her grandmother's farm. Clara revels in the freedom she finds there. She enjoys playing with her younger siblings, skinny-dipping, and berry picking. When two of her classmates, the twins, Patty and Nettie Knapp, come to the farm for a visit, Clara introduces them to the joys of country

life. While both the Knapp girls take to the farm and to Clara's family, Nettie especially delights in the experience and in Clara's friendship. At the end of the weeklong visit, Clara and Nettie declare each other best friends.

Nettie and Clara's relationship deepens during the fall of 1958. Both girls are in the same sixth grade class in a Newingham school. Despite her happiness in the friendship, Clara finds herself comparing the lifestyles of her own family members to the Knapps'. Clara admires the seemingly perfect Knapp household. Mr. and Mrs. Knapp always seem calm and pleasant; they don't argue as her parents do. Mr. Knapp is pleased with his daughters; Clara's father is openly critical of his children. Mrs. Knapp makes delicious breads and pies from scratch and serves elegant meals on Spode china; the Knapps' home is orderly and dust-free. Clara is also embarrassed about the box cake mixes her mother prepares and her cluttered, chaotic home.

An unfortunate occurrence, however, changes Clara's perspective on her own family. Nettie collapses one day while the girls are playing. A blood vessel breaks in the back of her brain. Through the long winter months, Nettie remains in a coma, hooked to life-support machines for survival. During this period, Patty and Clara develop a closer relationship. In an intimate moment, Patty tells Clara that Nettie liked the Nelson family better than her own. She adds that Nettie enjoyed the "Little Kids," "the globs of oatmeal," and even the yelling of the Nelson household. During the same scene, Patty shows a picture that Nettie had drawn of Clara playing the banjo surrounded by the "Little Kids." Nettie has sketched a likeness of Clara that is beautiful. Clara realizes that her friend saw her as both "beautiful" and "lucky." She sees herself and her family in a different light.

Clara begins to appreciate her family. Jubie's hugs and even the family messes take on new meaning. Most importantly, Clara discovers her father's love. One night, as she helps her mother with the dishes, her mother tells about the night Clara's appendix ruptured. She says that Clara's near-death

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experience was a nightmare for both herself and Clara's father. Clara, disbelieving her father could even care about her death, walks to the kitchen table and rips a newspaper from his hand. Instantly, she realizes that her father is remembering the traumatic night, and the memory is causing him much anguish. She understands that while her dad may be critical of her, his love for her is deep.

As the spring of 1959 arrives, Nettie comes out of the coma. At first, her friend is unable to do much for herself, and her memory and speech are limited. However, Clara remains a steadfast friend. As Nettie improves, Clara and her mother encourage Mrs. Knapp to allow the twins to make a summer visit to Oggie's farm. There, Clara comes to a painful realization that Nettie is indeed changed and takes her grandmother's wise words to heart: "We have to let go of what we've lost and move on with what we've gained."

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why did Patty hesitate to take the Christmas tree down when her mother asked her to?

Patty was reluctant to end the Christmas season without Nettie.

Literary Analysis

Clara's father is frequently unpleasant. Clara finds him to be critical, demanding, and insensitive. Life experiences sometimes shape a personality. What experiences did Clara's father have that may have hardened him?

His mother died when he was little. His father and brother taught him to be tough and work hard. The war interfered with his opportunity to go to Harvard. He almost died twice during the war when his plane crashed.

Inferential Comprehension

Before Nettie's illness, Clara loved to hear Nettie giggle. During Nettie's recovery, her giggle annoyed Clara. Why did Clara's feelings change?

Before Nettie's illness her laugh was rich and full of meaning. Afterward, however, she laughed at everything in a silly and empty way.

Constructing Meaning

Clara becomes angry with Mr. and Mrs. Knapp for not informing Patty about Nettie's condition. Why do you think they chose to keep her in the dark?

Most likely Mr. and Mrs. Knapp wanted to protect Patty. They didn't want her to be more worried than she already was. They wanted her life to be as normal as possible.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Clara has negative feelings about her dad. She thinks he is too critical of his children. He frequently complains that they are irresponsible and lazy. Clara finds him to be overbearing and insensitive as well. She avoids going on family ski outings with him because he expects too much from his children, and the fun of the experience is lost. Eventually, Clara does begin to see her dad in a different light. She recognizes his anguish when Clara's mother recalls Clara's near-death experience. At that point, Clara realizes that his love for her is deep. Discuss Clara's negative feelings about her dad. Then ask the children to skim the book to find examples of the father's good qualities and discuss the following: Did Clara recognize her father's strengths? Had she tried to get to know him? How sensitive had she been to him? Was she fair in her evaluation of her father?

Comparing and Contrasting Clara admires the orderliness and pleasant atmosphere of the Knapp household. She is embarrassed about her own chaotic home, and consequently, is reluctant to have Nettie visit. Later, when Nettie is in a coma, Patty tells Clara that Nettie liked Clara's

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family better than her own. She enjoyed the little children and the liveliness of the Nelson household. Patty comments that Nettie even liked the yelling. Clara, for the first time, begins to appreciate her family and sees herself as "lucky." Discuss how every family is special. Assign a story starter based on this theme. Example: I am lucky to be a member of my family because ---.

Responding to Literature Nettie suffers a broken blood vessel at the back of her brain. When she comes out of a coma, she has lost many of her functions. For example, she has to relearn how to walk, feed herself, and talk. Much of her memory is lost as well. Show the students a simple diagram of the brain and explain that different areas of the brain control different functions. For instance, show where memory, language, and vision are located. Have the students label their own individual brain diagrams.

Responding to Literature Nettie was a talented artist before her illness. However, after coming out of her coma, Nettie is not only unable to draw, she is unable to recognize her own work. Clara is greatly saddened by her loss of talent. Discuss with the students how talent is something to be celebrated. Encourage students to make a list of their own talents, and stress that everyone has special gifts. Organize a time when children can share their talents with the class--a talent day! Students may be interested in demonstrating juggling, a musical talent, needle crafts, etc.