

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Christina's Ghost

by

Betty Ren Wright

Book Information

Betty Ren Wright, Christina's Ghost
Quiz Number: 257
Scholastic, Inc, 1985
ISBN 0-590-40284-6; LCCN
105 Pages
Book Level: 4.1
Interest Level: MG

Christina's summer in a spooky, isolated Victorian house with her grumpy uncle turns into a ghostly adventure.

Award: State Award

Topics: Family Life, Uncles; Horror/Thriller, Ghosts/Spirits

Main Characters

Christina (Chris) Cooper an intelligent tomboy forced to spend time with her uncle, whom she believes dislikes her

Grandma Chris and Jenny's grandmother and Ralph's mom

Jenny Chris's younger sister

Mr. and Mrs. Cooper Chris and Jenny's parents who are in Alaska

Russell the ghost boy who haunts the old house

Uncle Ralph Chris and Jenny's uncle who is rather strict and businesslike, but who eventually helps Chris solve the mystery

Vocabulary

independent not relying on someone or something else

inherited received from one's relatives

reluctantly holding back, as from acting

reputation one's character or public esteem

retorted quick or witty answer

Synopsis

Christina (Chris) Cooper is looking forward to spending a summer at her grandma's farm while her parents are in Alaska. When she arrives, however, she learns that her grandma is in the hospital, so

she must stay with either her Aunt Grace or her Uncle Ralph. Chris is hurt and feels unwanted when both relatives fight over who will take her--neither wants her. Reluctantly, Ralph takes her to his home.

As a favor for a friend, he is watching an old house, nestled near a northern Wisconsin lake. Chris thinks the place looks creepy. She does not look forward to living with her uncle, for he makes it clear that he does not approve of the way she dresses and acts. Chris is a tomboy and Ralph is old-fashioned.

Chris decides to practice her swimming in order to take away her boredom. One day at the pier, she notices a ghost boy. Later, she finds out there was a murder in the house during the 1950s. Having fled from his partners in crime, stamp thief Thomas Dixon, in the guise of a tutor, hid out at the Charles house. Dixon was killed, and so was young Russell, because he knew too much. Chris decides Russell is trying to gain her help in solving the crime, and she concludes that the frightful presence in the attic must be Dixon. Chris, afraid to go to her uncle with the news about the ghosts, is determined to solve the mystery herself.

Chris is gaining ground with her uncle, and she credits his change to the jokes she shares with him from her joke book. Meanwhile, Russell is appearing more often, and Chris realizes that he comes around when she is happy and laughing. One evening when Chris and Ralph are laughing and joking by the fire in the study, Russell appears. At first incredulous, Ralph soon comes around and admits that there is a ghost.

After some discussion, they realize that the presence in the attic must be looking for the stamps, and they begin to search the house for them. As the two near the end of their search, the ghostly presence comes down from the attic. When Chris accidentally stumbles on the stamps, which were hidden in a comic book, a chase ensues.

Chris and Ralph get away, and Ralph turns in the stamps to the local sheriff. When they return to the old house, they find Aunt Grace and Jenny waiting

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there. Grandma will be coming home from the hospital. Upon entering the house, it is apparent that the ghosts are no longer there. Chris and her uncle have become good friends, but she decides to stay with her grandma.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why do you think Chris dressed like a tomboy?

Answer could reflect that her lifestyle and activities were better suited to worn-out or more comfortable clothes. She enjoyed the outdoors, and delicate dresses were hardly appropriate for that. Plus, she was simply being who she was, in spite of negative opinions from others. She refused to change who she was just to please others.

Literary Analysis

Find two or three symbols used in the book. What do they represent?

The correct response might include Russell, the attic presence/ghost, and the attic itself. Russell represents joy, light and truth, or the quest for truth. The attic presence/ghost represents fear, darkness and terror. The attic represents secrets, guilt, and the past.

Inferential Comprehension

Explain what kind of person Ralph was in the beginning of the book. How does Ralph change? Show instances where you can see changes occurring in Ralph.

Answer should reflect that Ralph was a businesslike individual, old-fashioned and set in his ways. He was rather unfriendly, especially toward Chris. By the end of the story, he has gained a sense of humor. He allows himself to be open-minded, and to say he cares for others. One example is when he crawled out on a limb to examine the swing in spite of his fear. Others include when he spent the afternoon contemplating Chris's riddle, and when he told Chris he would miss her.

Constructing Meaning

Ralph and the man in the newspaper store have very concrete ideas about how women should be. What are their beliefs about people? What insight does the author give us about these misguided views?

Answer should reflect that they both expect people to conform to certain roles. To them, acceptance is based on conforming to those idealized roles. The author shows that when we judge and stereotype people, we are usually wrong. The best way to learn about someone is to get to know that person as an individual, not to just assume things.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The resort area of northern Wisconsin is rich in history and can be the basis for a variety of projects. At first it was home to a variety of Native American tribes, and then it became a popular vacation spot for city dwellers from Chicago. Children will find it interesting to research such areas as Hayward and its lumberjacks, St. Germaine, Eagle River, Minoqua or Manitowish Waters. An interesting topic might be the comparison between "roughing it" in the early 1900s and present day camping. Students might also find it fascinating to learn about a famous outlaw named John Dillinger, who fled

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the federal authorities in Illinois and hid out in a resort called Little Bohemia in Manitowish Waters.

Understanding Literary Features One of the themes of this story is that people should not be judged by exterior qualities, such as the way they dress or the color of their skin. In the beginning, Ralph is committed to the idea that girls should dress like girls and act like girls are "supposed" to act. The man in the newspaper office believes that women should not have careers. These attitudes are not only directed at women, but also minorities. For a project, have students examine the attitudes and stereotypes we have of people who are different in any way. Have students make a clear connection that stereotypes are just myths and are untrue.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In this story two murders were committed involving the theft of some very valuable stamps. It turns out the hidden stamps were very valuable because they came from the very first stamps ever printed by the United States Government. According to the book, those stamps were printed in 1847, and they were distinct because they lacked the perforations that current stamps have. For a project, have students research the history of stamps and stamp-making in America. See if they can find pictures of the stamps mentioned in this story to bring in to class. Also, this might be a good opportunity for students who collect stamps to bring in their collections and tell the class about their hobby.

Extending Meaning In this story, neither Ralph nor Aunt Grace wanted to take Chris. After some discussion, however, Ralph consented to taking her. For a project, it might be interesting for students to write about, or discuss, what might have happened if Chris had gone to live with her aunt instead of with Ralph. How might things have been different for Chris? Would she have been happier? Would she have spent time with her sister, Jenny, or would she have been alone most of the time? Would she have grown close to Aunt Grace as she did to Uncle Ralph? Why or why not?