

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Crazy Jack

by  
Donna Jo Napoli

### Book Information

Donna Jo Napoli, Crazy Jack  
Quiz Number: 2476  
Delacorte Press, 1999  
ISBN 0-385-32627-0; LCCN  
134 Pages  
Book Level: 3.5  
Interest Level: MG

In this version of the traditional tale of the young boy who climbs a beanstalk, Jack searches for his father, falls in love with Flora, and learns the value of real treasure.

**Award:** Misc./Other; Smithsonian's Notable Book

**Topics:** Adventure, Trials/Tribulations; Emotions, Love; Folklore/Fables/Myths, Folklore/Fables/Myths (All); READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; Recommended Reading, Junior Library Guild Selection

### Main Characters

Beth Flora's mother, a generous woman who dies in childbirth

Flora Jack's childhood sweetheart and neighbor of Spanish origin; she becomes frustrated with Jack's craziness and becomes betrothed to William

Gonzalo Flora's father; a dairyman who is kind to Jack and his mother

Jack a boy who becomes obsessed with his father's disappearance and has an unbelievable adventure on a magical beanstalk

John (Father) Jack's father, a hardworking farmer who loses the family farm through a bet, then loses his life in an attempt to bring some prosperity back to his family

Meg (Mother) Jack's mother, a resourceful woman who cooks and sews tirelessly to keep her family from going hungry

the giant a cannibal who robs people of their treasures and who lured a woman from her husband by offering her riches

the woman a materialistic woman who lives with the giant and asks Jack to take her away with him

William a practical man who tries to win Flora's heart with promises of a good life

### Vocabulary

**blight** a disease of bacterial, viral, or fungal origin that causes plants to wilt and die

**coney** a European rabbit

**dolt** a stupid person

**harrow** a farm implement used to break up plowed ground

**skink** a smooth, shiny lizard

### Synopsis

Nine-year-old Jack and his father are farmers. Jack reflects on the way the family survives the hardships of farming, with Father finding odd jobs or wagering and with Mother sewing and cooking. The summer brings drought to the region and, in order to buy seeds for planting, Father wagers the family's wagon. He is successful and Jack and Father plant seeds. The drought continues, however, and the crop is lost. Father provides for his family by gambling.

When the August fair comes, Jack attends with his neighbor Flora and her father. He had previously agreed to meet his father at noon at the wheelwright's booth, but he arrives late and his father is not there. When Jack returns home, his mother tells him his father lost all their fields in a wager.

Mother and Father, once so loving and carefree, now fight constantly. Jack feels guilty, thinking he may have prevented the wager if he had met his father on time. Rain finally comes to the area, but more bad news follows. Flora's mother dies while giving birth. Mother and Father argue over the chickens Father receives for digging the graves, and again Jack feels caught in the middle. When a fox eats a chicken, Father kills and brings home the fox's kits. Father then storms out of the house in a rage and heads for the nearby cliff. Jack thinks he is joining the robbers who live there, but instead he climbs the cliff. Jack pleads for him to come back,

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but his father never returns.

Seven years later, Jack is having nightmares about his father. He hurts himself after running and jumping onto the sheer face of the cliff trying to find a foothold and knowing that his father had managed to climb it seven years before. Flora comforts him and tells him he must grow up and not act insane every year on the anniversary of his father's death. Jack's obsession makes people begin to think he is a lunatic.

Jack and his mother still live in poverty, and so to get money to start a new life, Jack's mother asks him to sell their cow for a large purse. Jack, however, meets a man along the road who somehow knows Jack's every thought. He is wearing Jack's father's clothes and offers him beans for the cow. Jack accepts the trade after learning they were in his father's pocket. The man blows on them, and they take on the colors of the rainbow. Jack's mother despairs when she sees the beans. Jack plants the beans by the cliff his father climbed. By the next day, Jack senses the beans have grown. Jack goes to the cliff with Flora. The beanstalk is huge, and as Flora goes to find a basket for the pods, Jack climbs.

At the top he encounters a woman who invites him into a castle and gives him food. As Jack is savoring his meal, a cannibalistic giant enters the castle and smells Jack's presence. Jack hides as the woman diverts the giant's attention with food. Before going to sleep, the giant orders his hen to lay eggs. The eggs are pure gold. When Jack is able to escape, he steals the hen to take home with him. Flora is still there when he descends. The chicken's colors look different, and when the chicken is asked to lay, the eggs are ordinary brown. Also, the beans that looked so large on the vine are of normal size. Flora says Jack is blessed, for he and his mother will now have food.

Within a month, Jack and his mother buy a horse and have begun to purchase back their fields. Jack decides to climb the beanstalk again to discover his father's fate. This time the woman greets Jack and

shows him the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. He notices she has a bruise. After feeding Jack again, the woman asks him to take her away with him. He asks her if another man had climbed here once. She states that one had, explaining that he had taken the giant's beans. Before he can find out more, the giant returns and recognizes Jack's smell. Again, the woman distracts him, and the giant falls asleep on top of her. Unable to take the woman along, Jack takes the pot of gold and climbs down the beanstalk.

When Jack reaches the ground, he discovers that the pot contains stones instead of gold. Within a month, Jack is building a house from the pot of stones which never empties. Each stone he reaches for is exactly right. Flora admires the house, but refuses Jack's pleas for her to marry him. As a foreigner, she is concerned that the prejudice she and her future children face will be magnified if she were to marry a madman. She prefers the safety of another suitor, William.

A week later, Jack decides to climb the beanstalk for the third time. He brings an axe to kill the giant, but sets it aside before he climbs the beanstalk. Jack promises to take the woman with him, and she completes the tale of the man who had once before visited the castle and was eaten by the giant. Jack now knows the fate of his father. The giant arrives, smells Jack, but is again distracted by the food. He calls for his lyre that plays songs for him on command. When the giant dozes, the woman frees herself but, before going with Jack, she insists on gathering all her jewelry. Jack discourages her, but she insists it is her treasure and encourages Jack to take the lyre. Jack grabs it, and the lyre calls for help and awakens the giant. The giant grabs the jewelry box and crushes the woman's skull. Jack barely escapes down the stalk, with the giant in close pursuit. Jack chops the beanstalk when he arrives at the bottom, and the giant falls to his death. Jack buries the giant and is free from his "craziness." Jack learns to play the lyre, and his abilities attract the attention of Flora, who has visited his house on the eve of her wedding. When Jack plays for Flora the songs of herself, she realizes she loves Jack and cannot marry William. Jack and Flora embrace.

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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 is Mother so exasperated with Jack when he brings home beans as a trade for the cow?

*Mother sees this as her last chance of having a better life gone awry. She had hoped that, with the money from the cow and the sale of their house, she and her son would have the money to move and start a new life. Now her hopes are dashed. She possibly recalls the day her husband came home and told her he had lost all their fields in a wager. She might also feel that she is now doomed to poverty, raising a son everyone thinks is crazy.*

**Literary Analysis**

The story makes a large jump in time, from Jack as a boy of nine to his young adulthood at sixteen. How is this an effective literary tool?

*The author ends the early scene after introducing all the critical characters and explaining their relationships to one another. They face struggles of poverty and death. Since the resolution of the problems is to occur years later, making a jump in the story's chronology is an effective literary decision because it spares the reader unnecessary information. Instead, the reader is shifted to a time seven years later and is quickly made to understand that Jack has been tormented with nightmares since his father's disappearance and that poverty has continued to plague them. The action of the story continues to rise using this technique, instead of leveling off.*

**Inferential Comprehension**

After climbing the beanstalk, Jack recalls that the fairy had said, "Take the risk." What is Jack risking?

*Jack is risking both physical and emotional injury. He risks his life by stepping onto the cloud, not being certain if it would hold him. He also risks his reputation, for people would think him crazy when he returns with a report of what he saw. He decides to take the risk, for his life would be full of torment without finding the knowledge he is after.*

**Constructing Meaning**

How does the reader know that Flora continues to care about Jack, even when she is seeing William?

*Flora never seems to be able to abandon Jack. She has to muster all her composure to ignore Jack in William's presence. Flora blushes when Jack says he saw her watching him one time. She follows him to the beanstalk as a witness, despite the mark it may leave on her reputation. She only half spurns Jack's romantic advances. Her desire to live in the house Jack is building demonstrates she wants Jack to be, in some way, always part of her life.*

**Teachable Skills**

**Understanding Characterization** *Crazy Jack* uses the basic plot of *Jack and the Beanstalk* and further develops it by adding new themes and characterization. Encourage the students to choose a favorite children's fable and embellish the narrative with new life and meaning by developing the characters. They may wish to read their newly written fable to the class.

**Extending Meaning** Symbolism abounds in *Crazy Jack*. Have the students review the story and identify various objects, animals, and people in the story and comment or speculate as to the symbolic meaning of them. For example, the heart-shaped leaves of the beanstalk symbolize love, the sheer cliff face symbolizes a barrier, and the name Flora symbolizes the beauty of womanhood. After completing this exercise, have the students discuss the story on the symbolic level. How does it differ from the traditional fable

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*of Jack and the Beanstalk?*

**Recognizing Details** Have the students reread the section of the story describing the August fair. They should note the various occupations represented at the booths. Have them choose one occupation and research it. Then, have them give a demonstration speech about that occupation to the class.

**Responding to Literature** Jack's "madness" is similar to the torment that people go through when a close friend or relation is classified as missing in action or disappears without a trace. Look into the psychological profiles of people who have dealt with the disappearance of a loved one. What type of grieving process do they go through and how do they come to accept the situation?