

Dacey's Song by Cynthia Voigt

Book Information

Cynthia Voigt, Dacey's Song
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Left without their mother, Dacey shepherds her young siblings from Provincetown to Chesapeake Bay for a new beginning with their grandmother.

Award: Margaret A. Edwards Award; Newbery Medal

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Emotions, Love; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 6-8 (Theme: Surviving); Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Series, Tillerman Family Cycle

Main Characters

Dacey Tillerman a thirteen-year-old girl who is the oldest of four children living with their grandmother

Gram the children's grandmother; she takes them in and adopts them

James Tillerman a ten-year-old boy who tries to help his sister, Maybeth, learn to read

Jeff a tenth-grade boy who likes Dacey

Maybeth Tillerman a third-grader who struggles with reading but has incredible musical talent

Millie Tydings a grocery-store owner who gives Dacey work after school

Mina Smiths a classmate and friend of Dacey

Miss Eversleigh Dacey's home economics teacher

Mr. Chappelle Dacey's English teacher

Mr. Lingerle a man who gives Maybeth piano lessons; he becomes a good family friend

Sammy Tillerman a seven-year-old boy who is the youngest of the children; he has a violent side that he tries to control

Vocabulary

contradictory not in agreement, opposite

gunwale the upper edge of the side of a boat or ship

massive huge

phonemes the smallest units of sound used to distinguish one word from another

plagiarism using someone else's ideas or words as your own

urn a vase used to hold the ashes of a cremated body

Synopsis

Thirteen-year-old Dacey Tillerman has successfully moved her younger brothers and sister from Massachusetts to Maryland to live with their grandmother after their mother was sent to an institution. Gram, her maternal grandmother, has taken the children into her home. The family faces many challenges, and Dacey plays a large role in keeping her siblings on track.

Dacey gets an after-school job at Millie Tydings's store to help Gram with the cost of having more people in her house. Dacey also finds time to help James, Maybeth, and Sammy with their lives. James is ten and seems to fit in at school. He is quite intelligent about some things and takes it upon himself to help Maybeth, who is in third grade, learn how to read better. Sammy is the youngest and has a hard time controlling his temper. Along with her siblings' school challenges, Dacey has some of her own. She hates home economics and would have rather taken mechanical drawing. She has always done well in English, but she is accused of plagiarism after writing an essay about her mother. In her spare time, Dacey repairs a boat with loving attention.

Meanwhile, Gram is dealing with the unexpected challenge of having four children in her home. She takes steps to adopt the children and succeeds. She has a history in town of being a little crazy, but her grandchildren defend her, as is the case when

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Sammy renews his fights with classmates. Gram takes care of that by going to school and playing marbles with Sammy and his friends. And when Mr. Lingerle tells her about Maybeth's talent on the piano, she accepts his offer to give Maybeth lessons. In spite of all the attention she shows her grandchildren, she does, however, refuse to open up to them about the past and forbids them to go into the attic. The children are curious as to what is up there that they are forbidden to see. Gram also takes special notice of Dacey and tries to persuade her granddaughter to "let go" of things she cannot control.

During the Christmas holiday, Gram takes Dacey to Boston to see Momma. Both she and Dacey are not prepared to see Momma so unresponsive as they sit by her in the hospital room. The doctor tells them Momma is dying, and shortly thereafter, she passes away. The expense of transporting and burying the body prompts Gram to have Momma cremated, and they put her ashes in a beautiful wooden box Dacey had found earlier in a store. They take Momma's ashes, return home, and bury them under the paper mulberry tree at the front of the house. Momma's death appears to have opened a door for Gram, as the story ends with her sharing pictures from the attic with her grandchildren.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Gram want the children to stay out of the attic?

Gram most likely does not want her grandchildren to question her past. There are rumors of Gram being a little bit crazy. She has lost one son in Vietnam, has not seen her son John for years, has lost touch with Momma, and does not speak very highly of her husband. The children might find things in the attic that would bring up painful memories for her. She is also likely to be protecting her grandchildren from the pain surrounding their Momma's life.

Literary Analysis

Gram and the Tillermans befriend Maybeth's piano teacher, Mr. Lingerle. What draws Gram, the children, and Mr. Lingerle together?

Initially, they are thrown together when Mr. Lingerle begins to give Maybeth piano lessons. However, it is not long before he is invited to dinners and holiday events. He also takes care of the remaining Tillermans when Gram and Dacey go to Boston. Students should indicate that Mr. Lingerle and Gram are both considered unusual. Gram is labeled crazy by townspeople, while Mr. Lingerle's large size makes him somewhat of a spectacle. Gram and her grandchildren are, more or less, a family that minds its own business and does not judge others. Mr. Lingerle is a bachelor who most likely needs some family attention. It is also likely that Gram and the children enjoy having an adult male around the house. Gram can use another adult to help her with decisions regarding the children, and the children need a father-type role model.

Inferential Comprehension

What kind of person is Dacey beneath the surface? Support your response with evidence from the story.

Dacey is a very courageous, caring and responsible young girl. This is shown by how she was able to bring her siblings to Gram. There is a sentimentality to her that is seen when she is working on the boat or thinking and writing about Momma. She is a loner in school and avoids drawing attention to herself. Dacey has a hard time letting go of her responsibilities at times. For example, she notices each time one of her siblings does not need her. She is also stubborn and quick to anger. This is evident when her English teacher accuses her of plagiarism.

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Choose one part of the story that made you feel happy, sad, angry, excited, etc. What, in the literature, brings out this personal response? Is it the situation? certain characters? the way the author wrote the passage?

Student responses will vary.

characters of the story on the blackboard. Have students choose one of the characters and find four facts and four opinions about this person from the story. Using those facts and opinions, have them write a short character biography.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Gram lives in Maryland near the Chesapeake Bay. Have students research Maryland's history and prepare a small float, using a child's wagon for a base, that represents what they have learned. Examples of what students may include on their float are state flower, bird, motto, capital city, current governor, animals commonly found, industries, etc. Students can display their floats as a special presentation.

Making Predictions The story shows how the Tillermans celebrate Thanksgiving, and the story ends during the Christmas season. Have students work in small groups to prepare a short skit depicting the family on Christmas Day. They should keep in mind the gifts Dacey thoughtfully chose for each family member, the probability that Mr. Lingerle will be there, the recent death of Momma, and Gram's willingness to talk about the past while showing them pictures. How will they react? Will they include a special moment in remembrance of Momma? Perhaps Maybeth will sing a special song? Might Dacey read her essay about Momma?

Recognizing Feelings Dacey visits a store in Boston that contains items made of wood. She later returns to the store with Gram to find an urn for Momma's ashes because she feels they will find something special enough there for her Momma. She and Gram choose a small box with a band of black walnut running through it. Have students write a short story about a gift they received or purchased that gave them "a good" or "the right" feeling. How was the gift special?

Differentiating Fact and Opinion List the major