

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

I Am the Cheese

by
Robert Cormier

Book Information

Robert Cormier, I Am the Cheese
Quiz Number: 5270
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220 Pages
Book Level: 5.2
Interest Level: UG

A young boy desperately tries to unlock his past yet knows he must hide those memories if he is to remain alive.

Award: Margaret A. Edwards Award; Misc./Other; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Phoenix Award/Honor; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Adventure, Life Changes; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Sons

Main Characters

Adam Farmer (Paul Delmonte) the main character of the story; a teenage boy who is in a mental hospital after the tragic death of his parents

Amy Hertz Adam's girlfriend with whom Adam plays harmless tricks on people

Brint a man who questions Adam in the hospital and most likely works for the Department of Re-Identification

Dave Farmer (Anthony Delmonte) Adam's father, who is part of the Witness Re-Establishment Program, and whose testimony revealed government corruption

Dr. Dupont the doctor at the hospital where Adam is staying

Mr. Grey a man employed by the U.S. Department of Re-Identification, whose job is to ensure the Delmontes' safety, but who may have betrayed them

Mrs. Farmer (Louise Delmonte) Adam's mother, who seems sad most of the time and worries about being discovered by the people against whom her husband testified

Vocabulary

claustrophobic fearing closed-in spaces
obliterates is destroyed or dies
surveillance close observation
tooks old-fashioned caps or hats

Synopsis

The story begins with Adam Farmer setting out on a bicycle journey to a hospital in Rutterburg. He is taking a package to his father who, he believes, is in the hospital. This part of the story is written in the first person, narrated by Adam. As the story progresses, the reader witnesses interview sessions between a man named Brint and Adam. This part of the story is written in the third person and also contains flashbacks into Adam's past. The setting seems to be a hospital or institution, and Adam receives medication of some sort, supposedly to help him relax and remember his past.

The reader learns that Adam and his parents have been given new identities and have moved to a new place as part of a witness protection program. Adam's father had given testimony in a case involving government corruption and syndicates, and his life was in danger. They had moved when Adam was very young, and Adam was unaware of his former identity until he was in his teens. Certain things he called "clues" caused him to be suspicious of his family's life.

His father finally confides in him, and Adam, who has always been rather shy, now feels even more set apart from his classmates. He does have one friend, Amy Hertz. They met at the library. Amy often comes up with tricks, which she calls "Numbers," that she and Adam play on people. Adam often wishes he could tell Amy about his past life, but he knows it is important to keep it a secret. A man called Mr. Grey, who works for the U.S. Re-Identification Department, often comes to check up on the Farmers. He makes sure the Farmers are still safe and also questions Mr. Farmer to see if he has thought of any new information that could help them in the case.

One day they receive a call from Mr. Grey telling

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them that their true identities could be known by the wrong people. They are to take a "vacation" until the danger has passed. While traveling to their destination, the Farmers are followed by another car. Mr. Farmer pulls off to the side of the road, allowing the other car to pass. Mr. Farmer can tell that the men in the car work for Mr. Grey. The family gets out of the car to look at scenery, and another car comes around the curve, purposely hitting the family. Adam's mother is killed and his father is injured, but manages to get away. Mr. Grey arrives on the scene, and his men take Adam away. Adam later learns that his father is also dead. The reader also learns that Mr. Grey probably betrayed the Farmers and is responsible for their deaths.

At the end of the story, the reader learns that Brint works for the Re-Identification Department and is questioning Adam to discover if he knows any details about the information his father knew. He is being kept in an institution and given medication to keep him confused and to make him forget his past. The reader discovers that Adam's bike trip is actually taking place on the hospital grounds. Adam will probably be kept there until the Agency can terminate him or until he dies naturally. The author ends the story by repeating the first paragraph of the book--the beginning of Adam's bike trip.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Explain why Adam doesn't fully trust Brint.

Because of his past experiences, he doesn't know whom to trust. Brint seems to always lead him toward discussions concerning information his father knew. Sometimes Brint seems to look at him as though he were the enemy. He doesn't look or sound like a doctor.

Literary Analysis

The plot of the story is somewhat confusing to the reader. It is not always easy to follow what is happening. The loose ends are finally tied up at the end of the book. What was the author's purpose in writing in this way?

Perhaps the author wanted the reader to experience Adam's confusion. He also used this method to create suspense in the story. The reader is forced to piece the story together, and the ending comes as a shock.

Inferential Comprehension

At the end of the book, the reader realizes that Adam's bike trip has actually taken place on the grounds of the hospital where he is staying. Give two reasons using evidence from the book that support this conclusion.

The author, in Adam's voice, says, "Someday I will ride my bike out there." This lets us know that Adam has not ridden his bike outside the gates of the hospital. Many of the people Adam meets on his "bike trip" throughout the book are actually residents in the same hospital. For example, the old man at the gas station who gives Adam advice and a map is actually Mr. Harvester, the maintenance man. Both called Adam "Skipper," had red veins on their faces and liked maps.

Constructing Meaning

How does the book make you feel? Does it raise questions in your mind?

Student responses will vary. Some may be confused by the way the story is written. It may take a discussion session for all students to understand what they have read. They may have been shocked by its ending. Students may wonder if it would be easy for the government to keep someone in a hospital under the control of drugs and if something like this could really happen.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting In the story, Adam mentions

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that the Re-Identification Program was in the beginning stages at the time his father testified. Students could research the beginnings of the program, as well as the time in American history when syndicates and government corruption came under fire. Students may also find it interesting to learn about the current Witness Protection Program.

Understanding Literary Features The theme of the story is man versus organization. It is ironic that the very program meant to ensure the safety of Adam's family destroyed it. Discuss with students why they think the agency in the story was keeping Adam in the hospital. Why did the author write a book with this theme? Discuss other programs that have sometimes done more harm than good. Students might also enjoy reading the book *1984*. This book deals with the effects of government control on people's lives.

Understanding Characterization Adam and his family were given new identities in the story. His mother and father changed their lifestyles in many ways. Students might enjoy creating a new identity for themselves. They should pay close attention to details. Where would they live? What would they do? How would their appearance and habits change?

Understanding the Author's Craft Discuss with the students how the author creates suspense in the story. He reveals the story little by little to the reader. The ending is a surprise, yet it is believable. Have the students write a short story that has a surprise ending. They should try to make the story believable.