

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Moving Mama to Town

by

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Book Information

Ronder Thomas Young, Moving Mama to Town
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Freddy James Johnson becomes the man of the family when his Dad decides to leave.

Topics: Adventure, Life Changes; Family Life, Divorce; Family Life, Growing Up

Main Characters

Big Kenny Freddy's father, who leaves his family and a large reputation behind him

Custis Fullbright a man Freddy's mother dates for a while whom Freddy does not trust

Dorothea the cook for Fenton's Fine Establishment, who looks out for and feeds Freddy

Eleanor Johnson Freddy's mother, who seems to take to city living fairly easily

Fenton Calhoun the owner of a saloon in Elderton who hires Freddy to do odd jobs in his establishment

Freddy James Johnson a thirteen-year-old boy who must become the man of the family when his father leaves

Kenneth Lee Freddy's younger brother, who enjoys the life of a farmer

Minnie Tower the best friend of Freddy's mother

Miss Precious Doolittle the richest woman in Elderton, who seems to control the lives of many in town

Susannah Doolittle the adopted daughter of Miss Precious, who lives in the same house with Freddy and his family

Vocabulary

collateral property used as security for the repayment of a loan

dispensation an exemption from a rule, vow, or oath

folderol a useless trifle, nonsense

gumption shrewd common sense; initiative

rambunctious unruly

Synopsis

Freddy James Johnson finds himself in the role of the man of the family when his father, Big Kenny, leaves. For a while another man, Custis Fullbright, spends time around the farm as a hired hand, but Freddy knows that Custis is dating his mother, and he doesn't like it. Eventually Custis runs off, and Freddy decides it's time to move the family off the farm and into town.

Freddy arranges to borrow a truck and drives into Elderton. He manages to land a job at Fenton Calhoun's saloon and rent an apartment from Miss Precious Doolittle. Freddy is surprised to discover his mother needs no persuading in order to agree to the plan, and Freddy, his mother and little brother, Kenneth Lee, move into town.

Freddy quickly adapts to working for Fenton Calhoun, and his mother finds work washing laundry for Hennie Crenshaw, the dress shop owner. Though he negotiated a good wage, Freddy keeps a little money back from his mother each time he is paid. Working at Calhoun's, Freddy learns about life, his father, and Miss Precious's influence on life in Elderton.

Freddy learns that Big Kenny gave the deed to their farm to Miss Precious as collateral for a debt. When Big Kenny doesn't return, she sells the farm but ends up giving the money to Freddy. Freddy never tells his mother about the money.

Just as things are looking good for Freddy and his family, Custis Fullbright shows up and offers to take Mama and the boys to Charleston to see her parents. Mama and Kenneth Lee go with Custis, even though Freddy tries to talk them into taking the bus. On the way to Charleston, the three are involved in a car accident. Susannah takes Freddy to see them, but they arrive too late; Mama is dead.

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Freddy decides to take the money from Miss Precious and buy a proper headstone for Mama's grave. With the remaining money he heads out to start his life again.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

When did Freddy begin to dislike being Big Kenny's son and why?

When Miss Precious explained how Big Kenny gave her the deed to the farm as collateral for a loan, Freddy began to see that his father didn't have the best intentions and really only looked out for himself.

Literary Analysis

What factors caused Freddy to leave the farm and move to town?

His father had left the family; the farm was too much work for them. Freddy decided it was time to take control of his destiny.

Inferential Comprehension

When trying to decide whether to stay with Mama or run away, Freddy compared his decision to choosing between adventure and literature. Explain what he meant by this comparison.

A story that was considered literature had a principle behind it (like helping Mama and Kenneth Lee make something of themselves), but an adventure just had lots of different action (like running away just to see new things).

Constructing Meaning

Freddy revealed his opinion of Miss Precious when he compared her to the Greek goddess Athena. What did he think of her?

He felt she was wearing a disguise of her true self, and he didn't think she could be trusted.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting This story is set in the southern United States in 1947. Clearly times are different now, and some of what happened then could not or probably would not happen now. Have the students study the history of the South in the 1940s so they can better understand how Freddy's life could be the way it was. Have them take note of the country's history and how that also influenced life at the time.

Extending Meaning Before Freddy could go on with his life, he needed to buy his mother a proper gravestone and make sure it said just the right things about her. A gravestone is a symbolic marker of remembrance about a person and what his or her life meant to others. Have the students think about quotes or statements to symbolize their lives.

Extending Meaning Ultimately, Mama lost her life because she was too proud to take the bus, which may have been safer. She didn't want her family to see her arriving on a bus and felt it was more presentable to ride in a private vehicle. Mama probably knew that she should not have trusted Custis, but her pride drove her to ride with him. Have the students discuss other fictional characters or people whom they have known who have made unwise decisions simply because they wanted to keep up impressions. Have them discuss how the people's lives would have been different had they made better decisions.

Responding to Literature Freddy enjoyed eating the tomatoes that Kenneth Lee grew outside the back door of the house where they lived in Elderton. He said it made the place seem more like home. Everyone has a different item or activity that makes a home feel like his or her own. Have the students reflect on what they would miss from their homes if they were to move; what makes home feel like home?