

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Ordinary People by Judith Guest

Book Information

Judith Guest, Ordinary People

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Ballantine Books, Inc, 1989

ISBN 0-345-33505-8; LCCN

245 Pages

Book Level: 4.1

Interest Level: UG

A powerful, engaging story about a suburban family coming apart after the death of one son and the attempted suicide of another son.

Topics: Community Life, Ethics/Morality;
Community Life, Suicide; Family Life,
Death; Family Life, Misc./Other; Popular
Groupings, College Bound

Main Characters

Beth Jarrett Conrad's mother, a perfectionist

Calvin Jarrett Conrad's father, a tax attorney

Conrad Jarrett the main character; a
seventeen-year-old boy who has attempted suicide

Dr. Berger Conrad's psychologist

Howard and Ellen Beth's parents; Conrad's
grandparents

Jeannine Pratt Conrad's girlfriend

Joe Lazenby a longtime friend of Conrad and Buck

Jordan (Buck) Jarrett Conrad's older brother who
died in a boating accident

Karen Aldrich a friend Conrad met while in a
mental hospital

Kevin Stillman a boy on the swim team, who is not
understanding of Conrad's problems

Vocabulary

manipulate to control by devious means for one's
own purpose

mentor a trusted teacher or guide

petulant insolent or rude

slander to speak falsely about another

Synopsis

Conrad Jarrett, age seventeen, is the main character of this story. He is repeating his junior year of high school because he spent eight months in a mental hospital after a suicide attempt. Conrad's father, Calvin, worries about him. Conrad's mother, Beth, is a perfectionist. She is concerned about the "appearance" of the family and does not discuss the family's problems.

Conrad struggles with many issues: re-establishing friendships, meeting girls, finding his place in his family, understanding himself and the things he has done in the past. He begins to see a psychologist, Dr. Berger, whom he comes to trust and view as a friend. Most of the ties with old friends were broken while he was in the hospital. Conrad begins to date a new girl at school, Jeannine Pratt. The relationship helps Conrad see himself in a more positive light.

Much of the book details the inner struggles of Conrad and his father. Through their thoughts, it is revealed that Conrad once had an older brother, Jordan, nicknamed Buck. Conrad and Buck were caught in a storm while alone on a sailboat. Conrad survived, but Buck did not. In the months that followed, the remaining family members each grieved in their own way, but became emotionally distant from each other. Conrad attempted suicide by cutting his wrists with a razor blade. Calvin feels responsible for not recognizing his son's problems and is often caught in the middle of the tense relationship between Conrad and Beth.

Conrad grows in confidence and knowledge of himself. While his parents are out of town, he learns that Karen Aldrich, a friend from the hospital, has committed suicide. This event and a subsequent meeting with Dr. Berger, force Conrad to face his brother's death and the reasons for his own suicide attempt. Also contributing to Conrad's improving emotional health is his relationship with Jeannine. When he is with her he feels strong and needed. He is able to share his past and his feelings with her. (Teachers may want to be aware that in Chapter 30 Conrad and Jeannine have a sexual encounter. The text has graphic descriptions of touching, and it is clearly implied that they have just finished having

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intercourse.)

While they are out of town, the tension between Calvin and Beth comes to a head. Beth feels that Conrad tries to manipulate her and that Calvin accepts everything Conrad does, siding with Conrad against her. Calvin feels very responsible for his son, but shut out of his wife's emotions. Soon after they return home, Beth packs and leaves without saying good-bye to Conrad. Calvin is left to tell his son. Conrad is very angry with his mother, but Conrad and Calvin are emotionally closer.

In the Epilogue, the reader learns that Conrad and his father have moved to a smaller house. Conrad is doing well. He is attempting to rekindle his friendship with Joe Lazenby, an old friend. He realizes that he and his mother both made mistakes. They do love each other, although imperfectly.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How might the attitudes and beliefs of the people who lived in Conrad's neighborhood have affected the way the Jarretts dealt with their problems?

In describing the neighborhood and Conrad's mother, Beth, the author uses the words "good taste" several times. The neighborhood was wealthy and proper. The people there looked perfect, like people who should not have any problems. Beth was especially concerned that their family look good in their society. These attitudes seemed to lead the characters to hold their feelings and problems inside.

Literary Analysis

Buck's death and Conrad's suicide attempt are two key events in this story. However, the story does not begin with them, and the reader does not learn about them in any detail until quite late in the story. Why did the author choose to reveal them in this way, rather than start the book with one of these events?

As the story progresses, Conrad comes to know himself better. The reader also learns more and more about Conrad as he learns about himself. The reader learns of these important events as Conrad confronts his past, learning details as he is ready to face them and deal with them. Conrad's growth in understanding of himself is paralleled by the reader's growth in understanding him.

Inferential Comprehension

How was Joe Lazenby different from Stillman, Van Buren, and the other boys on the swim team? Why do you think he was different?

The other boys gave Conrad a hard time and had little regard for the problems he was facing. Lazenby showed concern for what Conrad was going through and attempted to get the other boys to stop teasing Conrad. Lazenby may have done this because had been Conrad's best friend. Lazenby had also been Buck's good friend, so he better understood Conrad's feelings of loss.

Constructing Meaning

Which character in the book was most helpful to Conrad in his emotional growth? Why?

Answers may vary. Likely choices are Dr. Berger and Jeannine. Dr. Berger helped Conrad get in touch with his feelings about Buck's death and his own suicide attempt. Jeannine offered friendship and made Conrad feel strong and needed.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization The author of the book often describes the thoughts of Conrad and Calvin. In this way, readers get to know these

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two characters very well, and are able to understand why they behave the way they do. Readers get to know Conrad and Calvin "from the inside out." The author reveals Beth's character very differently, however. Never are Beth's thoughts detailed the way Conrad's and Calvin's are. Readers get to know Beth through her actions and through what other characters think and say about her. Beth is an emotionally closed character and her thoughts are closed to the reader. Beth's character and the story might have been very different if the story were told from her point of view. Have students write a letter from Beth to Conrad or Calvin explaining her feelings and actions.

Understanding the Author's Craft The author titled this book *Ordinary People*, although the family in the book appears anything but ordinary at first glance. They live in a wealthy suburb of Chicago. Dad is an attorney. Mom is beautiful and socially active. The son is handsome, intelligent, and athletic. They look "better" than ordinary. On the other hand, the family has experienced the loss of one son and the suicide attempt of another. They have serious difficulties in communicating and working together on their problems. These factors seem "worse" than ordinary. Have students discuss the author's purpose in titling the book *Ordinary People*. Discuss whom the author would consider to be "ordinary" and what meaning the title brings to the story.

Making Predictions After reading the book, readers know these characters very well. They have watched them interact, make decisions and grow, and have even listened to some of their thoughts. In the Epilogue, Conrad thinks about his mother. He realizes that, in the past, he intentionally said things to hurt her. He thinks about what their next meeting will be like. He considers driving over to his grandparents' house just to say hello. Using what they know about Conrad and Beth, have students predict what their next meeting will be like. Have groups of students write a script and dramatize the encounter.

Responding to Literature Two key events in this story are Conrad's suicide attempt and the death by suicide of his friend, Karen. Characters surrounding these two events question what they might have done to prevent them. Virtually every community has organizations, hospitals, or mental health agencies working for suicide prevention. Contact a local agency and arrange to use their resources to present students with suicide prevention information.