

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Summer of the Swans

by
Betsy Byars

Book Information

Betsy Byars, The Summer of the Swans
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142 Pages
Book Level: 4.9
Interest Level: MG

A fourteen-year-old girl gains new insight into herself and her family when her mentally handicapped brother gets lost.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Medal; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Disabilities, Learning; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 10, 90%; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

Main Characters

Aunt Willie Sara's aunt, who has been taking care of them for four years since Sara's mother died

Charlie Godfrey Sara's ten-year-old brother, who suffered brain damage after a childhood illness

Joe Melby a classmate of Sara's who turns from enemy to friend when Sara sees his true personality

Mary Weicek Sara's best friend

Sara Godfrey a fourteen-year-old girl who learns to look beyond herself when she searches for her lost brother

Sara's father a minor character who is physically and emotionally distant from his children

Wanda Godfrey Sara's beautiful, nineteen-year-old sister whom Sara affectionately envies

Vocabulary

impetuous acting too quickly, without enough planning or thought

puce deep red to dark grayish purple

ravine a deep, narrow valley

record player phonograph; a machine that reproduces music or sounds from discs called records

Synopsis

The Summer of the Swans is a story about Sara, a fourteen-year-old girl who is confused by the changes the present summer has brought. Sara finds herself moody, lacking in confidence and discontented with herself, her life and her family.

Sara lives with her sister Wanda, her mentally challenged brother Charlie, and her Aunt Willie, who has taken care of them since their mother died in a car accident. A few days after a group of swans unexpectedly arrives at the lake near their home, Aunt Willie tells Sara to take Charlie to see the swans. Charlie likes the swans, and Sara has a difficult time persuading him to leave.

That evening, while Charlie is restlessly trying to sleep, he hears a noise outside his bedroom window. Thinking the swans have come to find him, Charlie leaves the house to search for them and becomes lost in the woods near their home. When Sara discovers that Charlie is lost, her attention is turned from her own problems, and she realizes how much she loves him. Aunt Willie is very worried about Charlie, and many volunteers prepare to look for him. Sara is disappointed when her father does not rush home from his job out of town to look for his son.

Surprisingly, it is Joe who is most helpful in finding Charlie. Sara had once considered Joe to be her worst enemy because she mistakenly thought he had stolen Charlie's watch. Joe is familiar with the woods and searches with Sara until they find Charlie. As they return home, they see the swans returning to their home. Joe invites Sara to go with him to a party, which surprises Sara because she did not think any boy would like her.

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The story ends with Sara talking to her father on the phone. Because Charlie has been found, he decides to wait until the weekend to come. While she talks with her father, Sara sees life as a series of steps and herself as just having taken a big step out of the shadows. She sees her father sitting at the bottom of his own steps, not trying to go further. Then, Sara prepares for the party.

Through her experiences, Sara learns how much she loves Charlie and that the things she had cried about at the beginning of the summer are not very important.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

While she speaks on the phone with her father, Sara realizes life is like climbing stairs, and everyone has his or her own set and reacts to them differently. Charlie is on a small but difficult flight of steps. What does this mean? What does it mean when Sara's father is at the bottom of his steps, just sitting and not trying to go further?

The challenges that faced Charlie seemed small in comparison to the challenges of others, but they were difficult for Charlie. Sara's father does not seem interested in overcoming the challenges in his life.

Literary Analysis

Mary is also Sara's age. Does she seem troubled at this age at all? Support your answer.

Mary seems to be unusually focused on her appearance. She thinks about the party and worries over her hair, even when looking for Charlie.

Inferential Comprehension

We know this book takes place in the 1960s because of references to Jackie Kennedy Onassis, specific television shows, the record player and a watch that needs winding. Aside from the details that date the story, could it have occurred in the present? Is Sara different or similar to a fourteen-year-old girl today? Support your answer.

This story could have occurred in the present. Sara has the same insecurities of many fourteen-year-old girls today. For example, she is worried about her appearance, the size of her feet, and her hair.

Constructing Meaning

Sara realizes how much she loves Charlie when he is lost. How could the reader tell Sara loved Charlie before he became lost?

Sara helps Charlie with many things. Sara seems to base her opinion of the other characters on how they treat Charlie. For example, she does not like Frank, Joe Melby, Jim Wilson and Gretchen Wyant because she feels they do not like or have hurt Charlie. Sara is also upset that her father became distant after Charlie's illness.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft Ask students to write about Charlie's disappearance from the point of view of a news reporter. They may write as though the search is still on for Charlie, or they may recap the search after he was found. Students should "interview" or include quotes from one or more characters from the story. They should be encouraged to include all the facts and details that would interest a reporter. They should have answers to who, what, when, where, why and how. Students can write in paragraph form or in a question and answer format.

Comparing and Contrasting Sara's opinion of herself changes substantially from the beginning to the end of the book. Ask students to list the things that bother Sara in the beginning of the book. How many of these things still concern her at the end of the book? Estimate Sara's opinion

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of herself, on a scale from one to ten, at the beginning and end of the book. Compare these estimates. Point out that Sara did not change physically, but that her attitude changed when she realized what was important in life. Discuss or ask students to make posters of things that really matter in life. They may choose to divide their posters in half and include things that seem important but are really not on one side, and things that are truly important on the other.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning At the end of the book, Sara sees the challenges in life as a series of steps. Ask students to draw a series of steps and mark challenges they have overcome. They can include learning how to walk, talk, tie shoes, ride a bike, or play an instrument. Ask students to project challenges they will have to accomplish in the future, like graduating from high school, and mark those on higher steps. Students should mark where they currently are on their steps.

Responding to Literature Take the opportunity to teach the students about cognitively or physically disabled people. Discuss the fact that ability does not determine a person's worth. Invite a person knowledgeable about cognitively or physically disabled people to visit the classroom. View a film on the subject. Contact organizations such as Special Olympics for information.