

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Up a Road Slowly

by
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Book Information

Irene Hunt, Up a Road Slowly
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Julie lives with Aunt Cordelia and forms an attachment with both her aunt and her new home.

Award: Newbery Medal

Topics: Emotions, Love; Family Life, Aunts; Family Life, Growing Up

Main Characters

Aggie Kilpin a mentally handicapped girl who attends Julie's school

Aunt Cordelia Bishop Julie's rigid but loving aunt, who was unable to marry her true love because of family responsibilities

Brett Kingsman Julie's self-centered high school boyfriend

Daniel "Danny" Trevort Julie's childhood friend who develops a romantic interest in her

Dr. Adam Trelling Julie's scholarly father, who asks Cordelia to care for Julie until she is old enough for him to manage on his own

Julie Trelling a strong-minded young girl who is being raised by her spinster aunt

Laura Trelling Julie's doting sister, who leaves Julie to get married

Uncle Haskell Bishop Cordelia's weak alcoholic brother, who has spent a lifetime shirking his responsibilities

Vocabulary

beau boyfriend

chagrined overcome with embarrassment and disappointment

discomfiture a state in which one feels uncomfortable

inflexibility the inability to change or adapt

pathetic sad or pitiful
sufficient adequate

Synopsis

Up a Road Slowly is a coming-of-age story about Julie Trelling, a seven-year-old girl who is sent to live with her spinster relative, Aunt Cordelia, after her mother dies. Julie is devastated at being separated from her father and her beloved elder sister, Laura. She does not like Aunt Cordelia, but she finds some comfort in the fact that her older brother, Chris, has also been taken into Aunt Cordelia's house.

Julie and Chris are also under Aunt Cordelia's care at school because she is the teacher at the local country school. When Julie punches Aunt Cordelia's favorite student, Danny Trevort, for kissing her, Julie is reprimanded. Cordelia's brother, Uncle Haskell, who lives behind Aunt Cordelia's house and has a reputation for being an alcoholic and an egomaniac, tells Julie that this is exactly how his mother treated Cordelia when they were children. Julie realizes how much her aunt resented this treatment when Cordelia acknowledges that Danny was partially responsible for Julie's actions. Eventually Julie develops a long-term friendship with Danny, but Chris's stay at Aunt Cordelia's home and school is short-lived. Chris is sent away to boarding school when the family decides that Uncle Haskell is setting a bad example for Chris.

When Julie's sister Laura marries, Julie suffers another loss. When visiting her, she discovers that she is no longer the center of Laura's attention. She deliberately says hurtful things to Laura to punish her for her "betrayal." On the way home, a train conductor points out to Julie that she is being selfish, and Julie attempts to make up for her actions by helping Laura out after her first child is born.

While Julie comes to accept her new relationship with her sister, nothing Aunt Cordelia says or does can make Julie accept the friendship advances of a mentally handicapped girl named Aggie. Julie invents a game which keeps Aggie from sitting by

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her at lunch, cancels her birthday party when she is told she must invite Aggie, and humiliates Aggie by publicly refusing to have Aggie come near her. When Aggie dies a horrible death due to neglect from her parents, Julie begins to understand how unkind she has been to her.

After Aggie dies, Julie finds out that Jonathan Eltwing is coming back to town. There are rumors that Aunt Cordelia was once in love with Jonathan, but had to break off her relationship with him because she was forced to carry the full burden of her family on her shoulders when Uncle Haskell shunned his own family responsibilities. Jonathan instead married Katy, a beautiful pianist who is suffering from a mentally debilitating disease.

When the much-anticipated visit from Jonathan finally occurs, Uncle Haskell unnerves the entire family by arriving uninvited to compliment Katy Eltwing on her beautiful tempestuous playing. There is obvious resentment from everyone in the room except Katy, who admires "the beautiful golden man" after Uncle Haskell exits. It is Julie, however, who ultimately embarrasses her family this evening. As Jonathan is leaving, he attempts to compliment Julie by comparing her to Aunt Cordelia. Julie's face becomes flushed with anger, and everyone is appalled at Julie's obvious lack of consideration for her aunt. After the guests have left, Julie is filled with remorse at the hurt she has inflicted on her aunt. She tries to show her regret by showering her aunt with kindness, but Aunt Cordelia needs some time alone in the back yard before she is ready to deal with Julie. She shows Julie a picture of herself when she was young, and Julie realizes that Aunt Cordelia was once a very pretty woman.

Julie has been promised that she can return to her father's house when she is finished with elementary school. Shortly before this event, however, her father remarries. At first Julie likes doing things with her new stepmother, Alicia Allison, but she soon begins to feel alienated from her home when Alicia redecorates the house. Julie is upset to see the home she loved altered, but her worst discomfort comes from walking in on her father and Alicia when

they are kissing. She begins to realize that she feels a greater sense of belonging when she is with Aunt Cordelia and decides to stay with her until she graduates from high school.

In the meantime, Jonathan Eltwing is struggling to care for his rapidly declining wife. Katy is losing her mental faculties and frequently wanders off only to become hysterical when she loses her way. Since she refuses to be touched by anyone but Jonathan, it is difficult for Jonathan to find a caretaker who can keep her safe at home. When Uncle Haskell finds her standing in the middle of a creek crying, he brings her to Julie. For some reason, Katy has emotionally attached herself to Uncle Haskell and allows him to help her. In an extremely uncharacteristic move, Uncle Haskell offers to assist Jonathan with Katy. Jonathan sets aside his dislike for Uncle Haskell and accepts his aid for the remaining months of Katy's life. He also forgives Julie for insulting Aunt Cordelia when he sees how kind she has been to his wife.

When Julie decides to stay with Aunt Cordelia and commute to school, she finds herself socially isolated from most of her classmates. As a result, it is difficult for her to get dates. She settles for the attractive but opportunistic Brett Kingsman, whose main interest in her is her willingness to write his English papers for him. When she finally refuses to write his papers because her stepmother, who is also her English teacher, warns her that she is getting herself into trouble, Brett makes one last attempt to seduce her. Uncle Haskell breaks up this seduction by pretending to stumble across the couple while he is out for a walk, and Julie's romance with Brett ends soon afterward, much to the relief of her family and her friend Danny.

Later Julie finds out that Brett has impregnated her childhood friend Carlotta. While Danny is driving Julie home one night, they are both struck with nostalgia as they pass Carlotta's house. When they arrive at Julie's home, Danny confesses his love for her, and Julie realizes how superficial her relationship with Brett actually was.

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Julie's happiness is soon marred by Uncle Haskell's announcement that he is dying of sclerosis of the liver. She helps distract him in his final days by asking him for help with her writing. Uncle Haskell proves to be an excellent writing teacher and helps Julie get a story published shortly before he dies.

The story comes to a close with Aunt Cordelia realizing that Julie will soon develop the same inflexibility that she has assumed over the course of her life unless Julie is forced to broaden her horizons. She urges Julie to attend a separate college away from Danny that will also provide her with some distance from her family. Julie slowly accepts the truth of Aunt Cordelia's words and decides to go to the state university. The book ends with Julie giving the graduation speech at her high school while her loved ones watch her with great pride.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why is it so important that Julie asks Uncle Haskell for help with her writing when she discovers he is dying?

Uncle Haskell seems to feel he has wasted his life and his talents. He also senses he was spoiled by too much praise and too little guidance when he was at the same stage of development as Julie is now. When he helps Julie develop self-discipline and an ability to evaluate her work realistically, he feels as if he is undoing some of the wrongs that were done to him when he was young and impressionable. It also gives him the feeling that he is able to accomplish something significant before he dies.

Literary Analysis

Throughout the novel, Uncle Haskell's relatives usually expect he will act in a disappointing manner. But Uncle Haskell does not quite live up to the image of selfishness that some attribute to him. What moments show Uncle Haskell is a better man than he is given credit for being?

There are several times when Uncle Haskell battles his selfish tendencies in order to do what he knows to be the decent thing to do. When Katy Eltwing is ill, it is obvious that Uncle Haskell would rather not be around her, but he surprises everyone by offering to take care of her. When Julie seeks comfort after Aggie dies, Uncle Haskell revises his original callous response with a letter that helps Julie cope with her emotions. In addition, he rescues Julie before she completely succumbs to Brett's charms.

Inferential Comprehension

How are Julie and Aunt Cordelia alike by the end of this novel?

Julie has adopted many of Aunt Cordelia's codes of etiquette and attitudes about proper conduct. She does not welcome change and is settling into a way of life which does not challenge her comfortable world. She also shows a tendency to sacrifice herself for what she believes to be the good of her loved ones when she shows a reluctance to go away to college. Aunt Cordelia shows evidence of being influenced by Julie when she becomes more willing to discuss her feelings about love and her childhood.

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Constructing Meaning

Julie refers to her father and stepmother as "holiday parents." What does she mean by this?

Adam Trelling has given most of the serious responsibilities of parenthood to Aunt Cordelia. He has left all discipline up to her and is not there when Julie is struggling with problems. For the most part, his interactions with Julie since her mother died have consisted of taking her out to dinner and events and giving her birthday presents. He has not been involved in her life for either the mundane or the significant events of growing up.

Have the students consider a close relationship that they had with an adult relative or friend. What was significant to them about that relationship? Did there come a time when they realized that they did not command the full attention of the adult in question? Have the students write a short story about their experiences.

Teachable Skills

Differentiating Fact and Opinion Uncle Haskell is a man who seems to evoke a lot of strong feelings from his family. While much of what they feel about him has some basis in fact, they sometimes overgeneralize when they are assessing his qualities as a human being. Have the students look for examples in the text where the family makes a remark about Uncle Haskell, and have them decide whether the comment is based on fact or opinion. Have the students use text to support their answers.

Recognizing Feelings This story slowly reveals many details about the love affair between Cordelia Bishop and Jonathan Eltwing, but Cordelia's feelings are only implied and never directly stated. So that the students may grasp the depth of Cordelia's emotions, have them imagine what Cordelia might have written to Jonathan when family obligations kept her from joining him. Have them write the letters and possibly a letter of response from Jonathan.

Understanding the Author's Craft The story of Aggie Kilpin is perhaps one of the most graphic episodes in the book. Have the students consider how the author made the condition of Aggie come to life for the reader by creating a diorama based on the author's description of a particular scene.

Responding to Literature When Julie realizes that she is not the most important person in Laura's life, she feels she has been betrayed.