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Study Guide

for

Missing May

by Cynthia Rylant



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McGraw-Hill**

New York, New York Columbus, Ohio Woodland Hills, California Peoria, Illinois

Meet Cynthia Rylant



They say that to be a writer you must first have an unhappy childhood. I don't know if unhappiness is necessary, but I think maybe some children who have suffered a loss too great for words grow up into writers who are always trying to find those words, trying to find a meaning for the way they have lived.

—Cynthia Rylant in her autobiography,
But I'll Be Back Again: An Album

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In *Missing May*, Cynthia Rylant portrays a childhood that is much like the one she experienced—a childhood marred by loss and neglect but redeemed by love.

Rylant's parents divorced when she was four years old. After the divorce, she never saw her father again. Rylant suffered another loss when her mother sent her to live with her grandparents in rural West Virginia. Rylant's mother had enrolled in nursing school and was unable to take care of the child. Although Rylant suffered terribly over the loss of her father and the separation from her mother, she grew to love her grandparents, whom she describes as kind and loving. In the speech she delivered in acceptance of the Newbery Medal, an honor awarded to

outstanding authors of fiction for children, Rylant said:

My grandparents gave me a small, warm, quiet house. They gave me faith in breakfast every morning and supper every night. They gave me a garden rich with the smell of carrots and potatoes and beans. They gave me the sacrifice of all their work on my behalf, and from them I learned steadfastness . . .

As a child, Rylant was not a particularly avid reader. In fact, she read only comic books. Neither her school nor her town had a library, and so she had little access to serious literature for children. Nevertheless, she went to college and after graduation became a clerk in the children's department of a public library. She made up for lost time by reading as often as possible. Soon, she was writing her own stories as well. Her first published book, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, came out in 1982. Since then, she has published over forty books, including picture books, novels, autobiographies, and a book of poetry.

Rylant likes writing about people who receive little attention in the real world and “making them . . . absolutely shine with their beauty.” She certainly achieves this goal in the character of May, an elderly, poor, unhealthy, isolated woman who—with the power of her loving heart—transforms a trailer in the mountains into paradise and a lonely little orphan into a confident, joyous young woman.

Introducing the Novel

*There is much to ponder [in *Missing May*], from the meaning of life and death to the power of love. That it all succeeds is a tribute to a fine writer who brings to the task a natural grace of language, an earthly sense of humor, and a well-grounded sense of the spiritual.*

—Marcia Hupp, *School Library Journal*

Can twelve-year-old Summer learn to accept the death of her beloved Aunt May? Can Summer's Uncle Ob come to terms with May's death?

Missing May begins six months after Summer loses her aunt and guardian. Summer grieves the loss of May and is troubled by her Uncle's grief. Uncle Ob seems to be losing interest in life, and Summer fears that soon he, too, will die.

Summer is forced to grow up and take care of Ob when she herself really needs to be taken care of. She wishes that she had an adult to give her advice, but again and again the only person to whom she can turn is Cletus, a strange classmate of hers.

Missing May is full of sadness and loss. In addition to describing May's death, the book relates how May lost her own parents when she was little and how Summer was passed from relative to relative after her mother died. Even meeting Cletus's parents saddens Summer. She sees how old and unhealthy they are and fears that they, too, will die soon.

Missing May paints a picture of physical and financial struggle as well as emotional distress. Ob and May are poor, their home is small and isolated, and even everyday acts like getting Summer to school are complicated by the isolation in which they live.

Yet the story is not all sadness and tears. Summer narrates the story, and her observations are often original, witty, and biting. For example, she comments that her relatives used to treat her "like a homework assignment somebody was always having to do," and she describes May and Ob's trailer as "a toy that

God had been playing with and accidentally dropped out of heaven."

Moreover, as she struggles to accept May's death, Summer learns several important lessons about life. For every loss she suffers, Summer gains a little more knowledge about herself and about those closest to her.

THE TIME AND PLACE

Missing May is firmly rooted in West Virginia, in the heart of the region known as Appalachia. Early European settlers—many of them Protestant immigrants from England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, or France—came to the region over three hundred years ago. They had few possessions, so they had to be tough to survive on the frontier. They loved the natural beauty of the mountains, and they were proud to own land there. The twisting mountain roads made travel difficult, and many generations of families were born, grew up, and died in the same place. Even today, according to Rylant, "Those who do go off, who find some way to become doctors or teachers, nearly always come back to the part of Appalachia where they grew up."

The culture of Appalachia places a high value on family. Strong ties connect the different generations. Relationships are more important than possessions, community ties are greatly valued, and cooperation is seen as preferable to competition. When Ob and May adopt Summer, they reflect the Appalachian value system. According to one study, "For a mountain family not to take in relatives who need help is unthinkable."

Widespread poverty exists in Appalachia. In 1996 unemployment in West Virginia was 7.5 percent, compared with 5.4 percent for the United States as a whole. Isolated, poor families often experience many health problems, and medical care is either far away, too expensive, or simply unavailable because of a shortage of trained medical staff.

Appalachia is known for its vibrant music and traditional craft works such as baskets, rugs, quilts, carvings, folk toys, furniture, and musical instruments. In *Missing May*, the main characters visit a gift shop that sells items handmade by West Virginians. In real life, organizations have been created to help Appalachian craftspersons sell their goods to a larger market.

Like Summer in *Missing May*, many Appalachian children have to get up before sunrise to catch school buses that travel long distances along steep, winding roads. According to photographer Wendy Ewald,

who worked with Appalachian schoolchildren between 1975 and 1981, these children keenly observe their world. Tied to the earth through gardening, hunting, and tending animals, they are aware of the rhythms of the seasons. The photographs and writings that Ewald has published in her book *Portraits and Dreams* resemble the descriptions of the world of *Missing May* in many ways. They portray a sense of humor and an awareness of death, small houses and children posing with their grandparents, a sense of vulnerability, and the incredible beauty of nature.

Did You Know?

Some people see similarities between the way the inhabitants of Appalachia speak English and the way it was spoken in England when Shakespeare was alive and Elizabeth I was queen. Other scholars disagree, pointing out that most of Appalachia wasn't settled until long after Queen Elizabeth died. Most language experts agree, however, that the mountainous

region of Appalachia is home to a dialect that is made up of many old words and phrases.

Some words, such as the use of *yourn* for "yours," and *hisn* for "his," do, in fact, date back to Elizabethan England. Other phrases, such as somebody with *an axe to grind*, probably originated on the Appalachian frontier.

Before You Read

Missing May Chapters 1–5

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Recall a time that you lost someone or something that was very important to you. How did you cope?

Think-Pair-Share

With a partner, discuss how a person might feel after losing someone or something dear. Identify reasons why these feelings might occur, and discuss which feeling might be the most difficult to cope with.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how a twelve-year-old girl and an old man react to a great loss.

BACKGROUND

Love and Self-Esteem in Children

Is it realistic for Summer to assume that the love her mother gave her as a baby protects her from neglect later in her childhood? Child experts believe that infants are sensitive to the moods of their caregivers. Psychologists have studied the importance of early experiences in a child's development and believe that babies who are loved and cuddled will grow up to have positive feelings about themselves. The technical term for the overall view a person has of her or his own worth is *self-esteem*. A child who has been made to feel unwanted will probably have low self-esteem, as does Summer when none of her aunts or uncles seem to care about her. Yet psychologists believe that low self-esteem can be boosted by positive experiences. A child such as Summer, who begins life with lots of love and, therefore, high self-esteem, has a good chance of benefiting from positive experiences later in life.

Did You Know?

The character Ob in *Missing May* makes whirligigs—woodworked, wind-driven sculptures. A simple whirligig might show a man waving his arms, while a more complex whirligig might show a collection of related figures, such as a fisherman raising and lowering his fishing rod while an open-mouthed whale looms nearby.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

bereavement [bi rēv' mənt] *n.* sadness, as the grief someone feels over another's death

collaborate [kə lab' ə rāt'] *v.* to work together

constitution [kon' stə tōō' shən] *n.* a person's physical or mental make-up or being

covet [kuv' it] *v.* to want something in a greedy way

revelation [rev' ə lā' shən] *n.* the sudden understanding of something mysterious or hidden

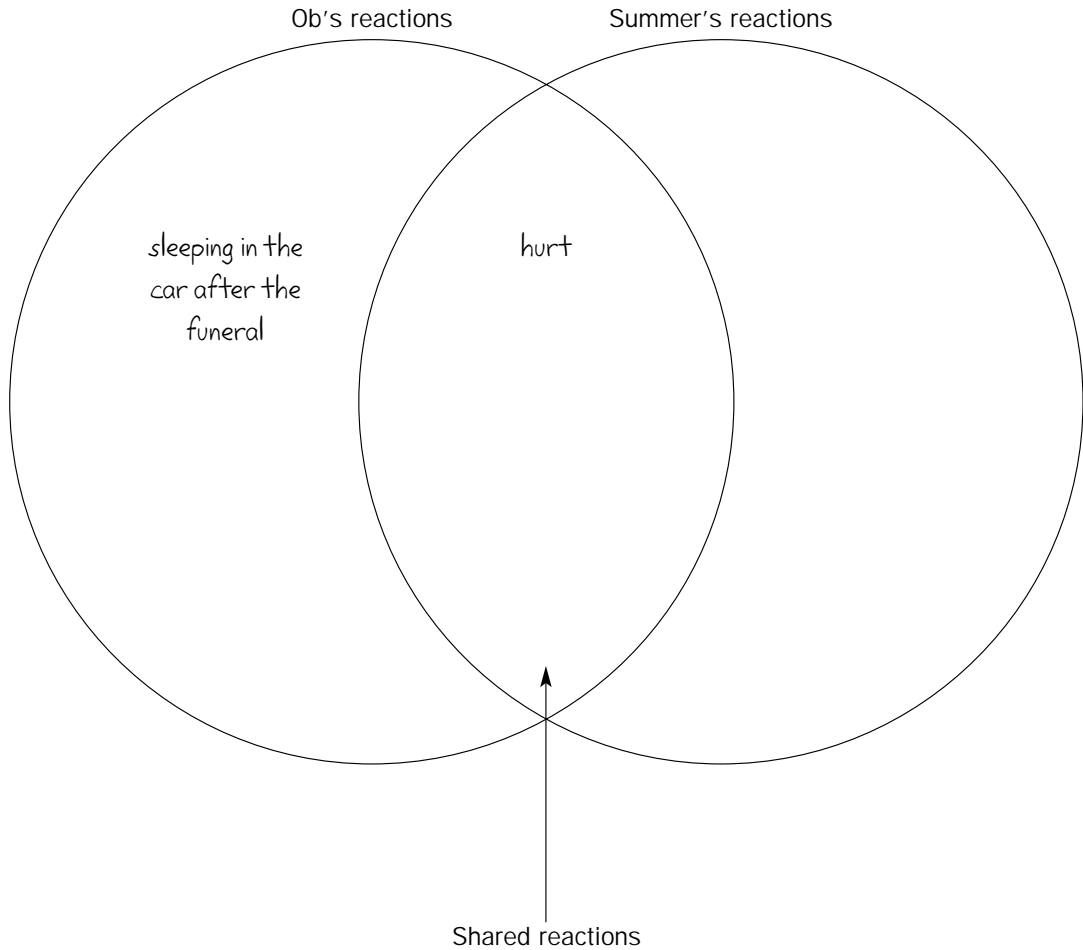
stupefaction [stōō' pə fak' shən] *n.* amazement or total bewilderment

surreal [sər rē' əl] *adj.* unreal in a dreamlike way

Active Reading

Missing May Chapters 1-5

Both Ob and Summer have strong reactions to losing May. Use the Venn diagram below to chart the similarities and differences in their reactions.



Responding

Missing May Chapters 1–5

Personal Response

Do you think Summer will continue to feel lost? Why or why not?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. How old was Summer when she came to live with Ob and May? Why did they decide to bring her home with them?

2. Why does Ob think that May has returned? How does Summer react to the news? What does her reaction tell you about her character?

3. How does Summer's opinion of Cletus change during the months after May's death? What causes this change?

Responding

Missing May Chapters 1–5

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Do you think that May is really trying to make contact with Ob? Why or why not?

5. What lessons has *Missing May* taught you about how to deal with people who are suffering from a serious loss?

Literature and Writing

Analyze Humor

Find examples of humor in the first five chapters of the book. Then write a paragraph or two analyzing the effect of humor in an otherwise sad and serious story. How does humor help to keep the reader interested in the story? What message about life does the use of humor convey?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

In the first part of this novel many questions are left unanswered. Take a few minutes to review Chapters 1–5 and to jot down a list of questions. Note page numbers next to your questions. Then discuss your questions with a small group of classmates. Predict what you think the answers will be in the chapters ahead. Base your predictions on information you have already read in the book and also on your own common sense and past experience.

Art Connection

Choose one of the major characters—May, Ob, Summer, or Cletus—and use magazine photographs, computer clip art, or your own drawings to create a collage that expresses what the character is like. Include pictures of the character's prized possessions and favorite activities, or express the character's personality through the use of colors and abstract shapes. After you finish your collage, display it in your classroom and describe the process you went through to decide what objects, shapes, or colors to use in your collage.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

Missing May Chapters 6–8

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Whom do you turn to in times of trouble? Why?

Journal

In your journal, describe the person you rely on during difficult times. Provide reasons why you rely on that person for support.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out about whom Ob, Summer, and Cletus turn to for help.

BACKGROUND

Bereavement and Depression

When someone dies, family and friends who were close to the deceased often suffer intense emotional pain. The survivors may also suffer a loss of self-esteem and begin to feel that they cannot cope with life. Bereavement can even lead to physical problems. To cope with bereavement, a person needs to go through a mourning process. In the early stages of the process, the mourner may be torn between feelings of hope (that the loved one will somehow return) and feelings of despair (that the loved one will not return and life will be unbearable). Later the mourner usually begins to separate emotionally from the person who has died and comes to terms with the loss of the loved one.

Did You Know?

Spiritualism is the belief that the dead can communicate with the living, usually with the help of a living person known as a medium. In *Missing May*, Cletus locates a medium who he thinks can help Ob receive a message from May. A medium is thought to have psychic abilities—abilities that are beyond those of normal physical and mental processes. One of these abilities is usually ESP, or extrasensory perception. ESP is perception that comes through a source other than the five senses. Mediums may hold special meetings, known as séances, designed to contact the spirits of the dead. Scientists have devoted years of study to psychic research. Some mediums have been exposed as fakes who deliberately trick the public into paying money for their “services.” Others may be sincere, but produce words and images from their own unconscious minds, rather than receiving messages from spirits.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

deterioration [dī tēr' ē ə rā' shən] *n.* the process of getting worse

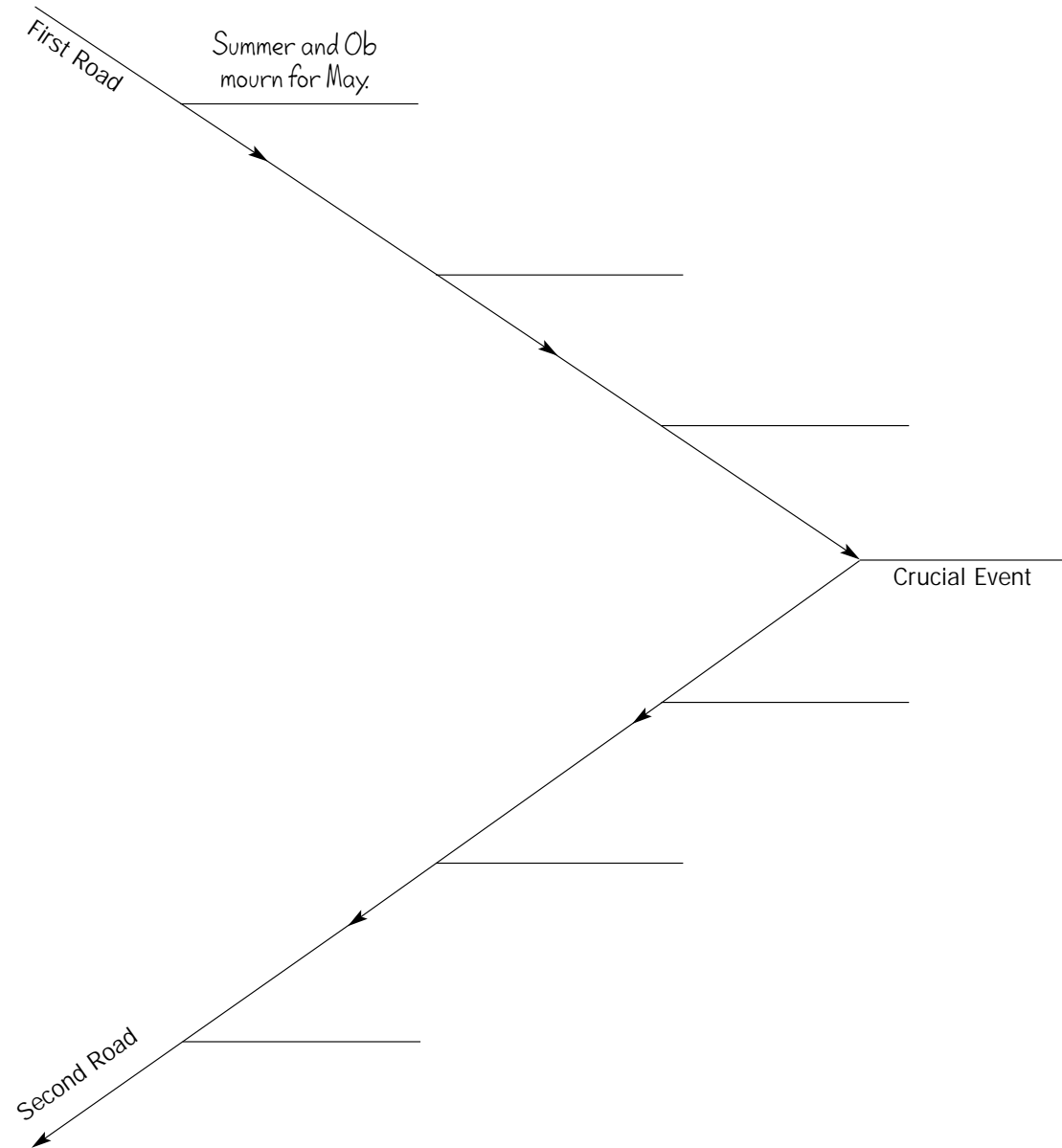
exhilarated [ig zil' ə rāt' əd] *adj.* very cheerful and happy

flabbergasted [flab' ə r gəst' əd] *adj.* completely amazed

Active Reading

Missing May Chapters 6-8

At the beginning of Chapter 6, Summer says that what happened the day after May failed to reappear in the garden was the **dénouement**, or the action following the climax of her story. She says that the characters were all on one “road” and then were put on another. On the diagram below, describe some of the events on the first road, the event that changes the characters’ direction, and the events on the second road.



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Responding

Missing May Chapters 6–8

Personal Response

What is your reaction as Cletus, Ob, and Summer prepare to set off on their journey? Are you excited and hopeful for them, or are you concerned? Explain why.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Explain what happens the morning after May fails to send Ob a message. What does Ob do that is so unusual? How does Summer react? Why?

2. Contrast Summer's reaction to Cletus's suggestion that they visit the Bat Lady with Ob's reaction to the same suggestion. What does the difference in their reactions say about them?

3. How does Summer's attitude toward Cletus change after she visits him at home? What does this visit reveal about Cletus's true character?

Responding

Missing May Chapters 6–8

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. In your opinion, why does the author describe how May saved bats? How does this detail help characterize May?

5. How might Summer, Ob, and Cletus answer the **Focus Activity**? How does their answer compare with yours?

Literature and Writing

Character Sketch

Pick one of the characters from Chapters 6–8 and write two paragraphs about the character. In the first paragraph, describe the character’s physical appearance, clothing, and behavior. In the second paragraph, describe the character’s inner thoughts, dreams, and emotions.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Summer is extremely worried about Ob’s fragile emotional state. At first, she thinks Cletus’s idea about visiting the Spiritualist Church is a crazy one. But when Ob perks up at the notion, she stops voicing her objections. With your group, discuss the pros and cons of Summer’s decision. Should you ever go along with a plan that you feel is foolish? Is it better to give someone who is desperate some kind of hope, even though it may be a false hope? Are there other valid reasons for doing things that may seem irrational at first glance?

Learning for Life

Cletus loves the headline “The Reverend Miriam B. Young: Small Medium at Large.” Write your own headlines for the following events from Chapters 6–8: Ob fails to get up in the morning; Cletus shows up with his suggestion; Ob decides to take the journey; and Ob and Summer meet Cletus’s parents. Try to make each headline short, factual, and punchy, using clever plays on words.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

Missing May Chapters 9–12

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Think of a time when you had a sudden, dramatic change of mood or attitude. What happened to cause the change?

Journal

Write a brief journal entry describing a time when you had a change of mood. Use vivid words to describe the initial situation, and then tell exactly how your emotions changed and why.

Setting a Purpose

Read to discover the changes that Summer, Ob, and May undergo.

BACKGROUND

The Time and Place

In the last section of the book, the three main characters take a journey that includes a stop in Charleston, the capital of West Virginia. Summer is entranced by the gold-domed capitol. It makes her proud of her state, which is often stereotyped as full of old, shut-down coal mines.

First settled in 1788, Charleston is located in central West Virginia. Today, it is the state's largest city with a population of over 57,000. One of Charleston's main attractions is the capitol's 293-foot gold dome. Other destinations for visitors to Charleston are the West Virginia State Museum, which houses a settler's cabin and an old-fashioned general store, a museum of American art, and a science museum and planetarium.

The Importance of Coal

Since the late 1880s, coal has played a large part in West Virginia's history. Miners worked hard for little pay and faced great dangers on the job. During the Great Depression, many mines closed down, and mining towns turned into ghost towns. Technological advances, such as the development of diesel fuel and the invention of mining machines, also contributed to the decline of the coal industry in West Virginia. Today, only about 31,000 West Virginians are employed in the mines. Other major fields of employment are tourism, sales, and agriculture.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

artifact [är' tə fakt'] *n.* something made by humans, especially something left over from an earlier culture

combustion [kəm bus' chən] *n.* the act of burning

fidgety [fij' ə tē] *adj.* nervous

oblivion [ə bliv' ē ən] *n.* forgetfulness or the state of being forgotten

spontaneous [spon tā' nē əs] *adj.* on its own, without an outside cause

traipse [trāps] *v.* to wander aimlessly

Active Reading

Missing May Chapters 9–12

This section of the book is filled with references to physical, mental, and spiritual journeys. Take notes about each reference to a journey. Then, in the box next to the notes, write what you think the journey means. Feel free to add more boxes.

Journey Reference	Meaning
<p>Ob, Summer, and Cletus set off for Putnam County, where, Ob says, they have an appointment with the next world.</p>	<p>A physical journey can be a spiritual journey as well.</p>

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Responding

Missing May Chapters 9–12

Personal Response

Did the ending of the story surprise you? Why or why not?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What does Summer think Cletus will be when he grows up? Does her prediction match yours? Explain.

2. How does Ob react when he learns that Reverend Young has died? What do you suppose might have happened if Reverend Young had been there?

3. Why do you think Summer is able to mourn and cry for May when she gets back from the long trip?

Responding

Missing May Chapters 9–12

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Review your response to the **Focus Activity**. Would you say that Ob's sudden change of heart is believable? Why or why not?

5. May speaks of the love within a very special kind of family. How does her message relate to all families?

Literature and Writing

Write a Review

Imagine that the rest of your class has not read the novel but wants to know what it is about. Write a brief, informal letter that gives an idea of what the book is about but does not reveal the book's ending. Explain why you think the class would enjoy certain features of the book such as its message, its use of language, or its characters. Your goal is to get other students interested enough to read the book for themselves.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Ob, Cletus, and Summer are frustrated when they learn that they will not be meeting with the Reverend Miriam Young. As the reader, were you frustrated too? The author creates suspense about what will happen when Ob tries to contact May's spirit through a medium and then surprises the reader by having no such attempt at communication take place. In your literature group, debate why you think Rylant took this approach. Suggest alternative ways of ending the novel and evaluate their effectiveness compared with the ending Rylant wrote.

Performing

May's final message to Summer resembles a speech in a play. Reread May's message. What emotions are expressed in her final message to Summer? How do you imagine May's voice would sound? Practice reading May's message aloud. Speak slowly and simply. Try to evoke the beautiful images and powerful emotions of the message. Then give an oral presentation of the message to the rest of the class.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Responding

Missing May

Personal Response

What do you think is the most important message of *Missing May*?

What are some ways in which you could apply this message to your own life?

Writing About the Novel

The Newbery Medal is awarded each year by the American Library Association for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children. Write a brief essay explaining why you think *Missing May* did or did not deserve to win this award.



Save your work for your portfolio.

The World Is Not a Pleasant Place to Be

Nikki Giovanni

His Just Due

Cynthia Rylant

Before You Read

Focus Question

When you have a truly unpleasant day, who helps you to feel better? Why is it important to have a connection to friends or family members you trust?

Background

Nikki Giovanni is a teacher, lecturer, political activist, and award-winning author of twelve books of poetry. This selection by Giovanni examines the role of human relationships. In “His Just Due,” *Missing May* author Cynthia Rylant introduces readers to yet another character whose life is changed by love.

Responding to the Readings

1. According to “The World Is Not a Pleasant Place to Be,” what does a person need?

2. What images of nature does the speaker include in the poem? How do these images help you to understand the speaker’s feelings?

3. At the beginning of “His Just Due,” what does Boyd consider his “lot in life”? What situations and events have shaped his view of himself?

4. Describe everything Boyd does to help the woman and her child. In what ways do the woman and her child help Boyd?

5. **Making Connections** Compare the experience of Ob with the experience of Boyd in the Rylant short story. What causes each man’s despair? What gives them both a feeling of peace? How does the Giovanni poem help to explain Ob’s and Boyd’s experiences?

Learning for Life

As *Missing May* suggests, it is important to connect with people. Write letters to two people who are important to you. Tell them what is going on in your life and ask questions about their lives. Share feelings that will bring them closer to you and colorful details that will keep your letters interesting. Send or hand-deliver your letters when they are complete.

A Story That Could Be True

William Stafford

Valentine for Ernest Mann

Naomi Shihab Nye

Before You Read

Focus Question

What are three or four details that make you or something about your life interesting or special? These details can relate to a major life event, a special relationship, a quirky habit, or an unusual hobby.

Background

Winner of the National Book Award, William Stafford has worked as a teacher in addition to being a poet. Naomi Shihab Nye is an award-winning author of poetry, children's books, essays and novels. In both selections, the poets encourage readers to look more deeply into themselves and their lives.

Responding to the Readings

1. Who is the "you" being addressed in Stafford's poem? What is life like for this person?

2. According to Stafford's poem, what should a person believe, even when the world seems "dark and cold"?

3. According to "Valentine for Ernest Mann," where can poems be found?

4. In "Valentine for Ernest Mann," why does the poet tell the story of the man and the two skunks? How does it add to the poem's meaning?

5. **Making Connections** Explain why the speaker in Stafford's poem could be talking about Summer in *Missing May*. In what way has her life been "dark and cold"? Think about Nye's poem, which asks readers to find beauty in the most unlikely places. Name the two things you find most beautiful about the novel's characters and their lives.

Creative Writing

Following the words of Stafford and Nye, find a poem or story in an unlikely place. Look at something you never thought of as especially beautiful or interesting. What is unique about it? Does it have its own beauty? Does it tell a story about someone or something? Write a short paragraph or poem about your findings.



Mother

Grace Paley

Before You Read

Focus Question

Think about a person who plays an important role in your life. If this person were suddenly gone from your life, what would you miss most about him or her?

Background

Grace Paley is a poet, short-story writer, and political activist. Many of her characters are shown struggling against loneliness. In this selection, Paley examines the fleeting nature of life and how it affects people.

Responding to the Reading

1. Where does the narrator long to see her mother?

2. Explain why the narrator's aging parents "look at one another amazed." What do they have trouble believing?

3. Why does the narrator repeat the phrase "Then she died." What about life does she want people to understand?

4. **Making Connections** In *Missing May*, the reader learns about May through the memories of Ob and Summer. The mother in "Mother" also is not physically present in the story. Why are readers able to get such a strong sense of each woman? Name some of the most important details. How do the feelings of other characters color your view of each woman?

Memory Book

In *Missing May*, Ob and Summer realize that the greatest gifts they have are each other and their warm memories of May. Create a memory book for your family or other people who are important in your life. Include quotations, family recipes, and personal stories. You might also want to include photos or drawings. Set aside a journal section at the back of the book, where special friends or members of your family can write down their own ideas and memories.

The Girl Who Married a Ghost

edited by John Bierhorst

Before You Read

Focus Question

Do you believe there is a world beyond the world you can see, hear, taste, and touch? Why or why not? What people, religious beliefs, stories, or experiences have shaped your ideas on this subject?

Background

The following selection is a *myth*, which is a story that tries to explain how a tradition, belief, attitude, or ritual began. “The Girl Who Married a Ghost” is a myth from the Nisqualli people, a Native American group of southern Washington. Children of Nisqualli leaders were called “princes” and “princesses.” In the story, a young princess unknowingly enters a strange world.

Responding to the Reading

1. Why do people in neighboring villages become angry with the chief? What do they hope will happen to his daughter?

2. Why are the girl and her child sent home to her family? Why is she then forced to return to her husband’s world? According to the story, what is a lasting effect of the girl’s experience?

3. **Making Connections** What “unknown” does this myth attempt to explain? Describe Ob’s own attempts to make sense of his sudden loss and his beliefs about May’s “spiritual message.”

Presentation

For centuries, people have struggled to cope with the mysterious nature of death. With a partner, research a specific culture’s attitudes and beliefs on this subject. For example, you might learn about the funeral rituals of a particular religious group, find ancient myths about death and the afterlife, or examine themes of death in poetry from a particular period in history. Present your findings to the class. After listening to all presentations, decide which attitudes or rituals are most like those of Ob, Summer, and Cletus.

Crossing the Bar

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Before You Read

Focus Question

In your opinion, why are some people more at peace with the idea of death than others?

Background

In his day, Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) was one of England’s most popular poets. In 1850, he was appointed poet laureate of England by Queen Victoria. He often wrote **lyric poetry**—musical verse that expresses a speaker’s emotions. Tennyson requested that “Crossing the Bar” be the final selection in all of his collections. As you read, keep in mind that a bar is a sandbar, and waves crashing against a sandbar at the mouth of a harbor create a moaning sound.

Responding to the Reading

1. The speaker says, “Sunset and evening star, / and one clear call for me!” To what is the speaker being called?

2. What is the speaker requesting? To whom do you think he might be speaking?

3. What is the speaker’s attitude toward what is going to happen to him? Why does he have this attitude?

4. **Making Connections** At the end of *Missing May*, Summer says, “we filled up May’s empty garden with Dreams and Thunderstorms and Fire and that bright white Spirit that was May herself. . . . Ob and I smiled at each other. And then a big wind came and set everything free.” In what way is the mood of these lines similar to the mood of “Crossing the Bar”?

Create a Dialogue

Imagine that May is the speaker in the Tennyson poem. Write a dialogue that might take place between Ob and May. Have May explain why her death should be accepted and not mourned, and have Ob explain why he and Summer are so affected by her death. Base your dialogue on details in the poem and in the novel.

TEST: *Missing May*

Recall and Interpret (40 points total; 5 points each)

Write the letter of the best answer.

- _____ 1. Summer came to live with Ob and May
 - a. to take care of them.
 - b. after living in Ohio.
 - c. when she was a baby.
 - d. to learn to speak English.

- _____ 2. When Summer first arrived at Ob and May's, she felt
 - a. as if she wasn't wanted there.
 - b. homesick for her relatives in Ohio.
 - c. as if she had gone to heaven.
 - d. afraid of all the whirligigs.

- _____ 3. According to Summer, the quality that made May so special was her
 - a. artistic ability.
 - b. love of collecting things.
 - c. confidence in herself.
 - d. loving kindness toward everyone.

- _____ 4. Ob thought Cletus Underwood might be able to contact May's spirit because
 - a. Cletus had almost died himself.
 - b. Cletus said he was a medium.
 - c. Cletus was an excellent student.
 - d. Cletus collected all kinds of interesting objects.

- _____ 5. The morning after Cletus failed to contact May's spirit out in the garden, Ob reacted by
 - a. being unable to get out of bed.
 - b. planning a vacation.
 - c. getting angry with Cletus.
 - d. reaching out to Cletus's parents.

- _____ 6. The scheme Cletus devised to cheer up Ob was to
 - a. introduce Ob to the governor.
 - b. visit a Spiritualist church.
 - c. find a place to sell Ob's whirligigs.
 - d. replant May's empty garden.

- _____ 7. After learning that Reverend Young had died, Ob
 - a. said he could not care for Summer.
 - b. drove straight home and went to bed.
 - c. took everyone out to lunch.
 - d. fell into despair but then cheered up.

- _____ 8. The main theme of May's final message to Summer is that
 - a. May never appreciated Summer.
 - b. May has everything in heaven she never had on earth.
 - c. Summer will have to leave Ob.
 - d. Summer was the perfect gift to May.

Evaluate and Connect (60 points total; 30 points each)

Answer two of the following essay questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. *Missing May* is the story of not just one but of many deaths and losses. What are these various losses? What toll do they take on the characters who suffer them? What qualities enable the characters to endure, and what lessons do they ultimately learn from their losses?
2. Cynthia Rylant weaves three important elements into her novel: humor, the natural gifts of each character, and love. Discuss how each of these elements affects the story and the characters. Give specific examples from the novel.
3. In your opinion, who is the hero of *Missing May*? What challenge faces the hero, and what inner qualities help him or her triumph? If you feel there is more than one hero in this novel, explain why.

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

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