

The Moon Children: Teachers' Guide

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A novel study prepared by the author:
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Introduction

This novel study is geared for grades six/seven students but could be adapted for other ages. The author's website contains some background information, and can be accessed at: www.beverleybrenna.com. The intent of this guide, in addition to deepening an understanding of the story, is to increase awareness about Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in our communities, assisting with supports for people affected with FASD as well as prevention of a syndrome which implies permanent brain damage and is potentially very challenging for those affected.

The activities in this study are designed on Charlotte Huck's categories of webbing. They could be provided to students on a contractual basis, and relate to an independent reading study, or they could be directed activities as a class or group of students progress together through the novel. Websites listed should be checked by the teacher prior to student use.

Prereading Activities

- Try out the classroom yo-yos provided for student use. See what tricks you can learn. (This activity could work as a learning centre; extension ideas: research history of yo-yo development using internet websites (<http://www.theyoyomuseum.com> is a good place to start).
- Have you ever wanted to do something that you found difficult? What was your response—to keep trying? To give up? Explore this topic as your first journal entry, and continue the journal as a personal response notebook as you read the novel.
- Brainstorm a list of natural disasters. Time yourself for one minute, and compare your ideas with a friend. Who had the most number of ideas (fluency)? Who had ideas the other didn't have (originality)? Who had the most number of categories of ideas (flexibility)? Compose a companion list of words associated with these disasters (i.e. Volcanoes: hot, steaming, bursting; Earthquakes: rumbling, sudden, dangerous). This is one activity the author did to prepare herself for describing Billy's emotional state, as he often used the idea that a natural disaster was bubbling inside him, ready to erupt or overflow.

- Develop a classroom list of summer fun activities. Number the ones you'd rate as your favorite three. This activity could lend itself to math (bar graphs) if appropriate.
- Find Romania on the world map. Discuss the fall of the communist dictatorship in 1998 and the orphanages which were overcrowded because of the previous government ruling that mothers had to have five children before they were age 45 (leaving many families without the money to raise their kids). At that time, many children were adopted to North America.
- An extension activity is the moon journal assignment, modeling Natasha's records of the phases of the moon and her observations of life on her street during the time she's watching the moon.

Personal Response

- What difficulties would you have if you were not able to read? How could people in a community help someone who couldn't read?
- What are some words to describe Billy's feelings about entering the talent contest? Have you ever felt this way about something? Discuss with a partner.
- Think about friends you have encouraged the way Billy and Natasha encourage each other. How has someone encouraged you?
- Is there a character in the novel who reminds you of yourself or someone you know from real life? In what ways?
- Does this book remind you of any other books or poems you have read? Which ones?
- Does the setting of the book sound familiar? Have you ever been to North Battleford? In what ways does it sound similar/different to your community? Find out more on <http://www.cityofnb.ca/>.

Observation and Understanding

- Describe Billy's response to taking the money from his mother's purse. Did he know taking the money was wrong, or was he afraid of the possibility of his father being sent away because his mom thought his dad took the money? Sometimes people with brain damage have a hard time understanding certain concepts like "stealing" which is a very abstract idea. For example, when would it be okay to take money from someone's purse? (i.e. If the purse belongs to you; if someone told you to take the money; if you had to borrow it in an emergency

and would tell the person) So you see, a hard-and-fast rule doesn't apply here, such as "Never take money from a purse." Because there are exceptions to the "rule", it makes this concept harder to understand.

- Often we learn appropriate behavior because of "cause and effect" sequences of events. For example, if we take something that doesn't belong to us, someone will tell us not to do that, or give us a consequence, such as a time-out or a warning, and we will learn from this consequence not to do it again. Sometimes people with brain damage have difficulty remembering or predicting "cause and effect" sequences.
 - For example, someone with brain damage might take a pot off a burner on the stove, and then burn his or her hand on the burner because it's still hot. The next time the person takes a pot off the stove, the person might not remember about the possibility of the burner being hot and so isn't able to predict that it might be hot again.
 - Some people with extensive brain damage need constant reminders to prevent unsafe or inappropriate behavior. For example, they might need a sign on the stove telling them not to touch the burners because they might be hot.
 - Sometimes people with brain damage need the environment to be structured to prevent the possibility of trouble, such as limited or supervised access to a stove, in the example above.
 - In Billy's case, what could his mother do to remind him not to take money from her purse, or to prevent him from doing this in the future?

- How did Billy's challenges occur? Try the experiment below, along with a class discussion:

Break a raw egg (without breaking the yolk) into a bowl. Add a 1 ounce shot glass of alcohol. With a swizzle stick, gently stir some of the alcohol into the egg white. Watch the effects on the egg white. White streaks will form in the clear portion. Alcohol literally cooks the cells.

Biological specimens are preserved in alcohol. Why? The alcohol kills anything it contacts, so it prevents rotting (bacterial and enzyme degradation) of the specimen.

reproduced from www.faslink.org/

- There are studies which show how exercise improves memory. Billy seems more able to remember things when they have a physical component, such as the yo-yo tricks. In addition, he is able to remember the words to songs while he is doing his yo-yo routine. Read the following newspaper article and discuss what it means.

Getting Physical Aids the Memory

If you want to improve your memory and ability to learn, get off the couch and get going. Brian Christie, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, says exercise can promote the generation of new neurons in the adult brain and lengthen the dendrites that aid communication between neurons. Both those things are good for memory, he says. Following up on earlier research that found a connection between voluntary exercise and brain enhancement, Christie did studies in which rats were allowed daily access to an exercise wheel. He found that the brains of animals that exercised showed substantially improved neurogenesis and synaptic plasticity. In a second set of

experiments, the researchers looked at animals that had been prenatally exposed to alcohol, generating a condition similar to fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. As adults, these animals showed impairment in learning and memory. When these animals were provided with exercise wheels to see what, if any, effect exercise would have, the results were striking. The rats exposed to alcohol showed clear improvements in both spatial memory and learning ability, so much so that their brains looked virtually identical to those of rats that had never been exposed to alcohol.

Adapted from a newspaper article

- Extension of the above information can be found on the following website:

www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1460-9568.2005.04004.x

Literary Awareness

- Character Study
 - Brainstorm a list of qualities you notice about Billy. Brainstorm a list of qualities you notice about Natasha. Why do you think they are friends? Do friends have to have the same characteristics? How can people with different characteristics learn to get along with each other?

- What is an unusual thing about Mrs. Schmidt? Do you know any other characters in books who are based on a fascination with one particular interest? Why do you think an author might create a character this way?
- Describe Billy’s mother. For any value judgments, list the evidence from the book which proves what you say.
- What do you know about Billy’s father? Make a list of information from the book. What do you think might happen with this character if the book had a sequel?

➤ Language Study

- Make a list of the unique sayings from the book (for example: *Hope springs eternal*). Choose one and work it into a poem, so you show the meaning of the saying by your use of examples.
- Billy’s mom uses the word “gonna” instead of “going to.” Provide a definition of “slang” and indicate if what Billy’s mom is using here is slang. Why might an author choose to have a character use slang rather than “dictionary words”?

➤ Moon Motif

- A motif is a recurring single element in a work of art. List the ways the moon appears in the story as a motif.
- In the beginning of the story, the moon draws Billy and Natasha together. What other things do they have in common?
- Billy retells the story of *How Raven Freed the Moon* which he heard from his grade five teacher. Why do you think Billy remembers some things, but not others? In the myth, the idea is that the moon became too heavy for Raven to carry. What secrets in *The Moon Children* become too heavy for their bearers to carry? What advice does Billy give to Natasha about heavy secrets?
- What meaning does the moon have for Natasha? Why does seeing a full moon make her remember? Why do you think she isn’t able to talk about this with her adoptive parents?

Considering Alternatives

- What might have happened if the community playground group had been aware of Billy’s challenges?

- What might have happened if the business community in town had previous experience with Billy through a school-and-community work project?
- How might things have been different if Natasha's mother or father had tried to get to know Billy right from the start?
 - Choose one of the scenarios above and rewrite one of the scenes in the book to fit this new possibility.

Values Clarification

- Do you think Billy's mother is trying to be a good mother? Explain.
- What kind of help might Billy's father need in order to come back into the family? Discuss as a class.
- Why do you think Eddie makes trouble for Billy? Do you think Eddie is a good or bad character? What might his reasons be for acting this way?
- Did Billy mean to hurt Eddie? If he did, was he right in doing so?
- Why didn't Billy mistrust Eddie right from the beginning? Does this mean Billy is stupid? Is anyone really stupid?
- Do you think the ending of the novel is good? Why? Why not? Why do you think the author chose not to have Billy win the contest after all?

Art

- Make a model of the interior of Billy's apartment. You may use a diorama or a drawing to present information from the book.
- Create the poster that might have been used to advertise the community talent contest.
- Choose a scene from the book that you would like to illustrate. Think carefully about what materials you would like to use, and discuss your choices with the teacher before you begin.
- Billy is very careful with the moths on his window ledge. Make a moth (or collection of moths) out of tissue paper or some other medium, that you think Billy would appreciate. Why do you think Billy took such good care of the moths? What does this tell you about Billy himself?
- Use collage or another technique to depict the show-room of the car dealership managed by Mr. Arnold.

Writing

- Write new journal entries for Natasha for the week following her release from the hospital, or for any other seven-day period in her life.
- Billy has had some embarrassing experiences that someday he might find funny. Write about an embarrassing experience you have had. Was it funny to you at the time? Is it funny to you, now?
- Describe how Mr. Schmidt might have gotten his nickname Pork Chop. Be as creative as you can. You may use the voice of a storyteller (*One day Mr. Schmidt was ordering meat for the family's freezer. Instead of ordering six pork chops, he accidentally...*) or you may tell the story through dialogue (having two characters talking to each other: *"What do you have on special that's good tonight?" Mr. Schmidt asked the waiter...*).
- Write a letter to the author telling what you thought of the novel and why.

Drama

- Show the dialogue between Natasha and Billy as they walk to the car dealership.
- Present a soliloquy (a character sharing his thoughts aloud) from Billy's perspective as he enters the hospital to visit Natasha.
- Develop the conversation Mr. and Mrs. Schmidt might have had the night after Billy's mom and dad have the fight where Zak pushes the chair over.
- Show what Eddie's teacher might have said if she caught him passing a nasty note about Billy.
- Show two scenes by Billy's classmates: Scene A, where they talk about him behind his back, making fun of his disabilities; Scene B, where they talk about him supportively, wondering how they can help with his challenges.

Follow-Up Activities

- Make Dutch Pancakes (<http://www.recipesource.com/ethnic/europe/dutch/pannekoeken1.html>).

- Listen to the Elvis rendition of “Blue Suede Shoes” which becomes Billy’s theme song in the book; what songs might represent other characters in *The Moon Children*?
- Why might the author have chosen “Blue Suede Shoes” to include in the story?
- Research Carl Perkins, the author of the song “Blue Suede Shoes” which Elvis recorded (http://rockabillytennessee.com/legend_carl_perkins.htm and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Perkins).
 - Carl Perkins, from Jackson Tennessee, was the founder of the Exchange Club: The Carl Perkins Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse
- Research Elvis, the recording artist who brought “Blue Suede Shoes” to fame; why might the author have chosen his work to spotlight in this novel? (<http://www.elvis.com/elvisology>)

Related Literature

But Michael Makes Me Laugh by Lori Stetina

- A picture book about a five-year-old with FAS (available from www.fasbookshelf.com)

Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key by Jack Gantos

- A junior novel about a boy who has ADHD issues along with other challenges; Joey is not diagnosed as having FASD but the issue of his mother's current drinking, and possibly during pregnancy, is addressed (see www.jackgantos.com for further information on this and other related Gantos' titles)

How Raven Freed the Moon by Ann Cameron

- A retelling of the north coast explanatory myth about how the moon got into the sky (**this is a story which Billy tells in *The Moon Children*, illustrating how some secrets are too heavy to keep). For more information about Cameron's book, consult her website at <http://www.childrensbestbooks.com>

The Pinballs by Betsy Byars

- This novel would make a good comparison study as it also has characters who feel powerless in the situations in which they find themselves. For more about this prolific author's writing, see: <http://www.betsybyars.com/books.html>

Rules by Cynthia Lord

- This novel deals with respect for people with special needs. For more information about this Newbury honor book, see the author's website at: www.cynthialord.com.
