



Ann M. Martin

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About the Author

As a child growing up in Princeton, NJ, Ann Martin loved reading. With her younger sister, she once set up a lending library in her bedroom for the neighborhood children. After graduating from Smith College in 1977, she taught school for a year and then went to New York City to work in publishing. While editing other people's books, Ann began to write her own, and soon she was devoting all of her time to writing about the lives and adventures of young girls. She is the original author of the popular *Baby-sitters Club* series, which contains many incidents, situations, and characters that she remembers from her own childhood. The series now has nearly 125 million copies in print.

From her home in upstate New York, Ann Martin writes thought-provoking middle-grade and young adult novels, which have been praised by reviewers for their sensitivity, integrity, and humor.

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Discussion Guide to *A Corner of the Universe*

About the Book

It is the early 1960s and Hattie Owen's world revolves around the boarding house her parents run in the small town of Millerton, where her grandparents are the wealthiest residents in town. The summer of Hattie's 12th birthday starts like any other. Her best friend Betsy leaves for vacation in Maine, and once again Hattie does not accept her invitation to go along. She can't imagine changing her routine or leaving her home. But this is a summer that will change her life forever. It is the summer of the carnival, where she makes a new friend, Leila, the daughter of one of the carnival families. And it is the summer when she meets Adam, her mother's much younger brother, the uncle she never knew she had.

Adam has been living at a school and home for the mentally ill since Hattie was a baby. No one has ever told her of his existence. But the school has closed and Adam must come home to live until Hattie's grandparents decide what to do with him. His erratic behavior is an embarrassment to the adults, but Hattie finds Adam's childlike impetuousness to be intriguing and refreshing . . . and sometimes scary when it is uncontrollable.

Torn between helping Adam enjoy life and worrying about what to do when he becomes difficult, Hattie also secretly worries about whether she herself may have a personality disorder. Is her excessive shyness a sign of problems that will get worse? Could she develop problems as difficult as Adam's? Throughout the course of the summer, Hattie learns more about herself as she interacts with Adam and Leila and grapples with the issues her family has kept hidden all these years.

Discussion Points

Setting

1. How important is the setting to the story? What would change if the story were set in a city or in a rural area?
2. How are the attitudes of Hattie's grandparents affected by their status in the town?
3. What is the importance of the boarding house in the story?
4. How can Hattie's family keep a family secret from her in such a small town? What are the dynamics of the town that keep her ignorant of Adam's existence?
5. What is the importance of the carnival to the development of the story? What is the importance of the carnival in Hattie's life? In Adam's life? What does the carnival represent to Nana?

Characters

1. Discuss Hattie's question about Adam: "If a person is kept secret, is he real?"
2. Both of Hattie's uncles have been absent from her life. Compare Adam and Hayden, the reasons both have been away, and Hattie's reaction to each of them.
3. What is Hattie's first impression of Adam? What attracts her to him? What repels her?
4. Adam's speech and actions slow down when he talks with Miss Hagerty and Mr. Penny. Why does he interact with them differently than with his family?
5. Discuss the character of Hattie's grandmother, Nana. What does Hattie mean when she says of Adam, ". . . he is not part of the perfect world Nana has worked so hard to create." How were Adam, Hattie's mother and Hattie's uncle Hayden each affected by that "perfect world"?



6. How is Hattie's mother similar to Nana? How is she different?
7. Discuss Hattie's friendship with Leila. Why is Leila so important to her? What do Leila and her family represent to Hattie? Why was it easier for Hattie to become friends with Leila than to make other friends in her town after Betsy leaves for the summer?
8. Why is Adam so important to Hattie? Why does she feel responsible for helping him? What makes her think she should take Adam to the Carnival that night?
9. Compare Adam to the character of Lennie in Steinbeck's classic story, *Of Mice and Men*. What do we know about their personalities? What do we know about their physical strength? How are these characters similar and how are they different?
10. Compare the ways each of the main characters reacts to Adam when he is alive with the ways they react to his death. Why is Hattie surprised at her grandparents' grief? What ways does Hattie find to deal with Adam's death?
11. What is the importance of the Strowsky family? Why are they introduced near the end of the book? How is Hattie's friendship with Catherine different from her friendship with Leila or Betsy?

Theme

1. There are many secrets in this story. Discuss the reasons why people need to keep secrets: Nana and Papa, Hattie's parents, Adam, Hattie, Angel—how do their secrets affect them and those around them?
2. Hattie develops a concern that she might be like Adam. Would her fears be lessened if she didn't keep them to herself? Would she have the same fears if Adam's condition had not been kept a secret from her?
3. Why does Adam hate the camera so much? What does the camera represent to him? Why does Martin begin the novel with Hattie looking at home movies of the summer and of the family's past?
4. Discuss the concept and meaning of the words "freak" and "freak show." Compare the ways these words are used referring to Adam and to the carnival sideshow.
5. Discuss the meaning of the title. Does the phrase "a corner of the universe" mean something different to each of the characters? What does it mean to Hattie, to Adam, to the boarders, to Leila, to Nana?
6. Compare the theme of relationships and responsibility developed in this book to the same in *Of Mice and Men*. Does Hattie try to take responsibility for Adam in the way George does for Lennie? Why are these relationships so important to Hattie and George? Are they honest with themselves about their ability to cope with Adam's and Lennie's problems?
7. Both *A Corner of the Universe* and *Of Mice and Men* have tragic endings. How does each author let you know the tragedy is coming? Can you find incidents of foreshadowing that let you know Adam and Lennie are doomed? Could anything have prevented their deaths?
8. What would you identify as the true meaning of friendship after reading this book?

Other Books to Compare and Contrast

Eclipse, by Kristine L. Franklin. 1995. Candlewick Press.

The triumphs of Trina's sixth grade year are clouded by her father's increasingly strange behavior and her fears about his illness.



The Face at the Window, by Regina Hanson. Illus. by Linda Saport. 1997. Clarion Books.

When Dora's parents learn she has joined other children in throwing rocks at Miss Nella's house, they take her to visit the mentally ill woman to help her understand that Miss Nella should be treated with respect.

Kissing Doorknobs, by Terry Spencer Hesser. 1998. Delacorte Press.

Tara is a normal healthy girl until, at age 11, she begins to exhibit obsessive compulsive behavior and her family and friends have various reactions to her illness.

Lisa, Bright and Dark, by John Neufeld. c.1969, 1999. Puffin.

Lisa's parents refuse to respond to her increasingly difficult emotional problems, and she must rely on her friends for help.

Of Mice and Men, by John Steinbeck. c.1937, 1993. Penguin.

Lennie, a strong, but retarded migrant worker, is watched over by his partner George. The two dream of a better life, but are caught in a set of sad and tragic circumstances.

Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy, by Sonya Sones. 1999. HarperCollins.

Cookie expresses her feelings about her sister's illness through a series of poetic chapters that explore the emotional range of her reactions.

Background Reading

Know About Mental Illness, by Margaret O. Hyde. 1996. Walker.

When Someone You Love Has a Mental Illness: A Handbook for Family, Friends, and Caregivers, by Rebecca Woolis and Agnes Hatfield. 1992. J. P. Tarcher.

Organizations and Web Sites for Further Information

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
Colonial Place Three, 2107 Wilson Blvd., Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201
Phone: 800-950-NAMI [6264]
www.nami.org

The Mental Illness Education Project, Inc.
P.O. Box 470813
Brookline Village, MA 02447
Phone: 617-562-1111
www.miepvideos.org/understanding.html

National Institutes of Mental Health
NIMH Public Inquiries
6001 Executive Boulevard, Rm. 8184, MSC 9663
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663
Phone: 301-443-4513
www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/index.cfm

The White House Conference on Mental Health, 1999
www.nimh.nih.gov/whitehouse/default.asp



Discussion Guide to *Belle Teal*

About the Book

Belle Teal Harper lives with her mother and grandmother, a “family of women,” in the country outside her small town. Belle Teal and her friend Clarice are looking forward to the start of fifth grade when they will have pretty, young Miss Casey as their teacher. But when school begins, Belle Teal has many challenges to face. Her grandmother is having disturbing moments of confusion and lapses of memory. Her mother is starting secretarial school and working long hours to pay the bills. Vanessa, a new girl in school, makes cruel comments about the Harpers’ poverty. The school itself is in the midst of a desegregation crisis.

The time is 1962 and the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on school desegregation is just beginning to take effect in this town. Three African American children enter the town’s school on opening day; one of them is in Belle Teal’s class. Parents line up at the school to shout and protest, the most vocal being the father of Belle Teal’s friend, Little Boss. As the weeks go on, the protests disappear, but the resentment of many of the students remains. Belle Teal and Clarice make friends with Darryl, the new boy in their class, while others continue to harass him.

Belle Teal devises a trick for the Halloween party to show other students that they can be friends with Darryl, but her scheme doesn’t work; eventually a crisis involving Little Boss and his belligerent father, Big Boss, brings the situation to a climax. Vanessa turns out to have a secret that, in part, explains her unpleasant behavior. Throughout the story Miss Casey provides a steady influence for all the students as she tries to keep a volatile situation in hand. But it is Belle Teal who proves to be the real star of this story—a young girl growing into the resilience and understanding she needs to deal with difficult situations in her family and community.

Discussion Points

Setting

1. Belle Teal’s story begins on the last day of summer, a “long, simmering summer.” This description refers to more than the temperature. What has been simmering during this summer besides the heat?
2. Look up information about the history of “separate but equal” schools. How did this situation develop? Who was involved in the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* and what effect did the case have on public schools?
3. Do you think the events in the book would have been different if they had happened in a city rather than a small town? Why or why not?

Characters

1. Belle Teal’s mother has said to her many times: “We can take care of ourselves. We do whatever is necessary. We have strength and patience.” How many times can you see Belle Teal showing strength and patience in this story? When does she not exhibit these qualities? When does her mother and/or grandmother “do what is necessary?” When do they not?
2. Thinking of the way the African American students are treated the first day of school, Belle Teal realizes that she is not scared, but angry. Fear and anger are two emotions that often occur together. What scenes can you think of where characters show both fear and anger? What does this tell you about these characters?



3. What is the difference between the way Little Boss's father shows his prejudice and the way Vanessa's father shows his?
4. Courage is defined as the state of mind or spirit that allows someone to face danger with confidence and self-possession. Which character(s) do you think have courage in this story? Give examples of ways in which they exhibit their courage.
5. Which characters in the story commit acts of hatred? What do you think motivates these characters? Why does Big Boss hate the black families? Why do Vernon and Chas hate Darryl? Why does Vanessa act the way she does toward Belle Teal?
6. Discuss the various members of Belle Teal's fifth grade class. In what ways have their family situations affected the way they behave? In what ways have their parents influenced them? In what ways are they different from their parents?
7. Relationships are an important element of this story. Discuss the various relationships Belle Teal has with her mother, her grandmother, her friends Clarice, Darryl, and Little Boss. How do each of these affect her understanding of herself? Discuss relationships between other characters that we see through Belle Teal's eyes. How does her observation of those relationships affect her understanding of the world around her?

Themes

1. Belle Teal's mother tells her "Hate creates more hate." What does she mean by this? Discuss scenes in the story that show how hate creates more hate.
2. Belle Teal's grandmother tells her to "Fight your battles with words, not fists." How does Belle Teal follow this advice? Do other characters act on this saying, and how does that affect the story?
3. At the time this story took place, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was beginning to lead the Civil Rights Movement in this country with the theme of "nonviolence." Which characters in the story exhibit an approach of nonviolence in a particular situation? What specifically do they do or not do, and how does that affect others?
4. While Belle Teal is dealing with the problems at school, she is also worried about what is happening to her grandmother. Why do you think the author introduced this theme of dealing with elderly relatives into the story? How does her grandmother's loss of memory affect Belle Teal? Does this theme in the story help us deal with problems we encounter in our own families?
5. At the end of the story Belle Teal determines to "accentuate the positive," even though she knows she can't "eliminate the negative." What are the positive elements in her life? Will they be enough to overcome the problems that still bother her?
6. Which themes from this book can you apply to your own life? Have you ever acted friendly toward someone who was ignored or harassed by others? Make a list of ways you can be a positive force in your own neighborhood, school, and/or community.

Books to Compare

The Moves Make the Man (Newbery Honor Book), by Bruce Brooks. Paperback. 1996. Harper Trophy.

The year Jerome Foxworthy becomes the first African American student to integrate his North Carolina middle school, he meets a perplexing white boy who has his own set of troubles.

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, by Mildred D. Taylor. 2001. Phyllis Fogelman Books.

Set in the 1930s, this Newbery Award novel vividly shows what life was like for African American families in the segregated South.



The Starplace, by Vicki Grove. 1999. Putnam.

Frannie learns hard truths about prejudice in her small Oklahoma town when she befriends an African American girl who is new to her school.

Waiting for the Rain: A Novel of South Africa, by Sheila Gordon. 1997. Laureleaf.

The childhood friendship of Frikkie, a white landowner's son, and Tengo, the son of a black worker on the estate, is severely tested as they grow up under the strain of apartheid in South Africa.

Wings, by Christopher Myers. 2000. Scholastic.

This sophisticated picture book explores in words and illustrations the treatment of a new boy in school who is "different" and the girl who wants to befriend him.

Background Reading

The Little Rock School Desegregation Crisis in American History, by Robert Somerlott Enslow. 2001. Enslow.

Brown V. Board of Education: School Desegregation, by Mark E. Dudley. 1995. Twenty First Century Books.

Little Rock: The Desegregation of Central High, by Laurie A. O'Neill. 1994. Millbrook Press.

Separate but Not Equal: The Dream and the Struggle, by James Haskins. 1997. Scholastic.

Ruby Bridges, by Scott Sorrentino and Carolyn Otto. 1998. Little Brown.

The Story of Ruby Bridges (picture book), by Robert Coles, illustrated by George Ford. 1995. Scholastic.

Through My Eyes, by Ruby Bridges. 1999. Scholastic.

Teacher/Leader Resources

Hot Stuff to Help Kids Chill Out: The Anger Management Book, by Jerry Wilde. 1997. LGR Productions.

Teaching Tolerance: Raising Open-Minded Empathetic Children, by Sara Bullard. 1996. Doubleday.

Teacher/Leader Resources on the Internet

"Recent Changes in School Desegregation," by Jeanne Weiler. ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, ERIC/CUE Digest Number 133. New York, NY. 1998. www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed419029.html

Web site of the Urban Education Web at Columbia Teacher's College—dedicated to urban students and their parents and teachers. eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/

American Experience segment from PBS on the Little Rock Nine. www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/kids/civilrights/features_school.html

Desegregation article from *Education Week*, July 2001, outlining recent developments in school desegregation. www.edweek.org/context/topics/issuespage.cfm?id=27

Teaching Tolerance: a program of the Southern Poverty Law Center. www.teachingtolerance.org

Recordings

Under One Sky—Songs with Visions of a Caring World. A Gentle Wind, PO Box 3103, Albany, NY 12203-0103. (518) 436-0391.