

Teacher to Teacher

Trade Book Teaching Ideas from the OLRC Reading Group

What Jamie Saw

Author: Carolyn Coman
Title: *What Jamie Saw*
Arden, NC: Front Street
1995
ISBN: 1-886910-02-2

Summary: The power and lyricism of this remarkable book is evident in the opening sentence: "When Jamie saw him through the baby, saw Van throw the little baby, saw Van throw his little sister Nin, when Jamie saw Van throw his baby sister Nin, then they moved." Jamie, Nin, and their mother move to a friend's trailer and try to reestablish their lives as individuals and as a family.

Introductory Notes: Be careful not to "overteach" this powerful little book. Students might make response journal entries after every chapter or two. These might be followed by open discussion. You may also want to supplement the text with nonfiction information about abuse and its effects on children. Students may want to discuss or write about the extent to which Jamie and Patty "fit" these descriptions of victims of abuse.

Nancy Padak

Teaching Ideas

1. Ask students to write down the especially powerful or interesting sentences that they encounter as they read or listen to the book. (They will find lots of these; Coman is a gifted author.) Students can share these with each other and talk about why they found the sentences so remarkable. Discussion of the author's craft can also provide a bridge to writing instruction. For example, students might isolate the aspects of Coman's sentences that lead to powerful prose and then try to use these same techniques in revising their own writing.
2. Every chapter or two, ask students to jot notes in their journals about these issues: How is Jamie/Patty feeling? How do you know? Find some words or phrases from Chapter(s) _____ to support your ideas. These words/phrases could be sorted at some point so that students can see how the author both characterizes people through language and shows their changing feelings. (The easiest way to sort these would be for students to write them out on separate slips of paper. It's important when sorting that students can physically manipulate the word/phrases. If some members of the group select Jamie for focus and others select Patty, Venn diagrams comparing their feelings might be effective.)
3. Give each student a packet of sticky notes. Direct students to place a sticky note on pages where they find something interesting, important, etc., along with their own notes about what they want to say to others about this part of the book. Occasionally ask students to form literature circles to share these interesting o

important parts with one another. This sharing might go person by person, with each a) telling others what page and part s/he selected, b) starting conversation about why that portion was tagged, and c) listening to what others have to say.

4. Every chapter or two, do a Think-Pair-Share that focuses on these questions; What does Patty do to help Jamie understand and adjust to their family situation? What else should or might she have done?

Here are a few chapter-specific suggestions:

Chapter 1 - Begin the book by reading aloud to students. This almost always invites students into the story in a nonthreatening and engaging way. After the first chapter students may want to read silently, or you may want to alternate chapters - teacher reads one aloud, students read the next silently, etc.

Chapter 5 - Lots of vivid things happen in the "carnival" chapter. Students may want to complete the "Sketch to Stretch" activity. This involves each person making a quick sketch of the scene s/he finds most interesting or important in the chapter. Small groups of students (2-3 people per group) then share their sketches with each other and talk about why the selected that particular scene to portray.

Chapter 7 -An "Agree? Disagree? Why?" activity will work well with this chapter. Pairs of students talk about each of the following sentences, deciding together if they agree or disagree with each and jotting notes about their reasons. After pairs have completed their discussions, you may want to invite whole-group discussion of the same sentences, focusing on the reasons students identified for agreeing or disagreeing with the sentences. The sentences follow:

- Patty did the right thing by keeping Jamie out of school.

- Mrs. Desrochers did the right thing by visiting Patty and Jamie.
- Patty did the right thing by leaving to return the bookbag.

As a culminating activity, students may want to extend the story. How do they think Patty and her children will get along? Why? What challenges will they likely have to face? What advice would students give the family?

Field Testing

These teaching ideas were field-tested in two widely diverse learning situations - one an urban family literacy program and one a tutoring program in a corrections facility. Both teachers reported enthusiastic student response although there was some resistance initially to the book.

The family literacy class of 8 women, 5 African-American and 3 white, ranged in age from mid-twenties to early forties and in reading ability from 3.0 to high school level. The class met for 45 minutes to an hour 4 days a week over a 2-3 week period. At the beginning, several students were upset and voiced concern about the content of the book. Later, interest was so great that students wanted to read more than the assigned chapter. The Teaching Ideas provided opportunities to discuss issues of abuse, anger management, assertiveness, and community resources.

The students tutored in basic skills and GE in the jail setting included twice as many men as women. Women seemed to like the book better than men did. Although some men refused to read "that baby book," everyone who started the book liked it. The teacher attributed the refusal to macho behavior. "Next time," she said, "I will remove the cover picturing a young boy."

Teacher Change

The family literacy teacher reported particular success with the drawing activity in Chapter 5

although students were hesitant at first. She thought her class especially liked the Agree/Disagree activity for Chapter 7 and the culminating activity of extending the story because they were familiar with these classroom strategies. As an additional activity, she asked her students to write a letter to Jamie. She reports, "You could tell from their words the compassion and caring they had for this little boy.

In the corrections setting, tutors offered students two independent journaling options: a response journal of their own feelings as they read journal notations of what Jamie and Patty are feeling and how the reader knows. Most students chose to record their own feelings about the characters and some summarized events rather than feelings of the characters. Readers who had been child abuse victims reported in conversations and in journals that they could relate to the events of the book.

Reader's Responses

Inmates with murder charges could not comprehend how a person could "throw a baby and not be in the penitentiary.

A family literacy student, who cried when she began reading and wanted to quit, kept reading because she wanted to know what happened. She commented in writing when she finished that the book made her think about abuse and ways to handle anger.

Another reader in the family literacy class wrote: "I thought this was an exciting and thrilling book. When I first started it, I thought it would be about abuse. Then as you read on, you find out it is about surviving and dealing with the after effects of abuse. Honestly, it really inspired me to have the strength to be a strong-willed woman. If I ever find myself in that position, I hope I can succeed in dealing with it as well as Patty did. I feel that Patty did the right thing and I commended her for that. I also feel that because of the events that had

happened, Jamie will be a more productive and caring parent.

Two inmates in the twenty-three hour lockdown section of the jail were overheard talking across their cells about Jamie and Van.

What better testimonial to reading a good book that invites you into a world that makes you think than J's comments: "If you read this book you feel like you're inside of the book. Everything in the book was so real. If I had to tell anybody about the book, I would tell them [sic] to read it. It is very good. You get a lot out of it. It will make you cry and you feel like it happens to you.



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