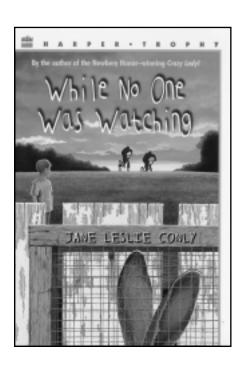
A Guide to Teaching Jane Leslie Conly's

WHILE NO ONE WAS WATCHING

CRAZY LADY!

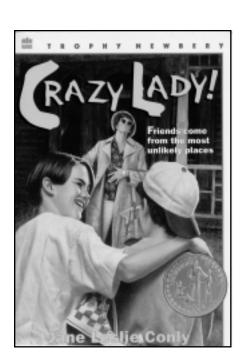


THEMES

Family Relationships
Friendship
Meeting Challenges
Survival
Turning Points

READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

Compare and Contrast
Identify Problems and Solutions
Make Judgments and Decicions
Recognize Points of View

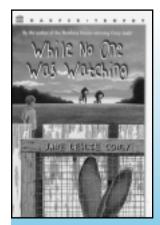


Gritty urban neighborhoods provide the backdrop for Jane Leslie Conly's *Crazy Lady!* and *While No One Was Watching*, two tales of young children who find themselves involved in situations that escalate beyond their control. *Crazy Lady!*'s Vernon feels responsible for the well-being of the retarded son of his alcoholic neighbor. *While No One Was Watching*'s Earl Foster must take care of his siblings when his aunt disappears, leaving the children with no money and no adult supervision. Meanwhile, the other children in the story, Addie and Maynard, leave the confines of their safe neighborhood to track down Addie's missing rabbit. Their world collides with the Fosters', and Addie and Maynard discover that the things they've always taken for granted—loving, stable families and nice homes—some children don't have at all. All the children learn to depend on one another and on their families in times of need, and develop a greater understanding of hardship, life, and loss.

CHALLENGING ISSUES

Both books deal directly with such difficult topics as alcoholism, mental illness, peer pressure, class struggles, theft, and abandonment. Supplement students' reading with newspaper articles and discussions on these challenging issues. How does reading a story about these issues spark discussion about them? Why is it important for students to read about issues like these in the classroom?

WHILE NO ONE WAS WATCHING



SETTING THE SCENE

Frankie Foster, along with his imaginative little sister, Angela, and his older brother, Earl, is living temporarily with his aunt Lula while his father works to earn money to buy a house. When Lula disappears one day, however, the three kids are stuck on their own, trying to make ends meet without a stable source of food or money, or a means of contacting their father. Following his troublemaking cousin Wayne, Earl steals bicycles from the nearby affluent neighborhood to get money for food. On one excursion Frankie comes along and winds up with a stolen prize of his own: a pet rabbit. As the Foster children struggle to care for themselves, the rabbit's owner, Addie, and her sleuthing neighbor, Maynard, try to find Addie's beloved pet, and the lives of these five very different children begin to come together.

Meanwhile, Wayne leads Earl on increasingly desperate pursuits, which bring Earl perilously close to hurting a friend. In the end, though, the five children find that they can depend on one another and on their families to pull through difficult situations, even when no one is watching.

READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

Compare and Contrast:

Have students think about the differences between the Fosters' neighborhood and Addie and Maynard's neighborhood. Are there any similarities between the two?

Recognize Point of View:

While No One Was Watching is told from the perspective of five characters: Frankie, Earl, Angela, Addie, and Maynard. Ask students to consider how this affects the way the events are described and how it affects their reactions to the narrative. How can you learn more about the characters through their points of view?

Identify Problems and Solutions

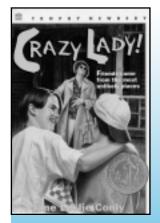
Think of some of the problems that are encountered by the different characters throughout the book, such as Addie trying to find Flag, or the Foster children trying to get food after Lula disappears. How do they go about solving these problems? Consider how some of the other characters may have solved the same problems.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Why does Frankie want the rabbit so badly? Why does he need to keep it a secret? Why does he return it at the end?
- Why do you think Angela lies so much?
- Maynard likes to write everything down as he practices to be an FBI agent. How does this habit of Maynard's help him and Addie find their way to Flag?
- When the Foster kids get worried about having no adults around, each of them turns to someone different: Frankie goes to see Mr. Tiptop, Angela meets Maynard, and Earl goes off with Wayne. What do each of these characters have to offer to the Fosters? How do they all affect the outcome of the story?
- How do you think Earl feels about stealing with Wayne? Why do you think he does it?

- Consider the following quote: "[Angela and Frankie] were driving Earl crazy. They thought that because he was oldest, he'd be able to make things right. He couldn't admit that he didn't know how. He felt like he and Frankie and Angela were invisible, lost among the rushing business of the world" (p. 109). What do you think this means? How does this feeling affect Earl's actions?
- Maynard and his father have different opinions about the best thing to do when they find out that Angela is living in a household without any adults. Compare their opinions. What would you do?
- Many of the characters in this book must face moral dilemmas and decisions. Consider what some of these might be, and discuss how the characters deal with them.
- Why do you think this book is called *While No One Was Watching?*

CRAZY LADY!



SETTING THE SCENE

Vernon has his hands full, between trying to bring his grades up enough to pass seventh grade and helping his large family make ends meet now that his mother has died. He and his friends pass the time on the streets of his destitute Baltimore neighborhood by making fun of a local rowdy alcoholic, Maxine, and her retarded son, Ronald. Then a dispute in the supermarket brings Maxine and Vernon together. When Maxine helps Vernon find a tutor for school, Vernon feels he must repay her by helping her out around the house and with Ronald. Soon Vernon has come to care deeply about the crazy lady and her son, helping Ronald participate in the Special Olympics, and visiting Maxine in jail so she can sign her welfare checks. Vernon sees that behind the alcohol, Maxine is an intelligent, capable, and caring mother. However,

Maxine's alcoholism is spinning out of control, and despite his efforts to find a way to keep the family together, Vernon finds himself in a situation that is too much for him. By the end of the book Vernon has gained the respect of his own family and realizes how important their support and love for him have been.

READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

Identify Problems and Solutions:

Have students identify some of the problems that arise during the course of the novel and discuss what measures are taken to solve these problems. Why are some of these solutions unsuccessful?

Sequence Events:

Vernon's feelings about Maxine and Ronald change and develop throughout the course of the book. Consider the events that occur in the story, and discuss how they affect Vernon's relationship with Maxine and with Ronald.

Make Judgments and Decisions:

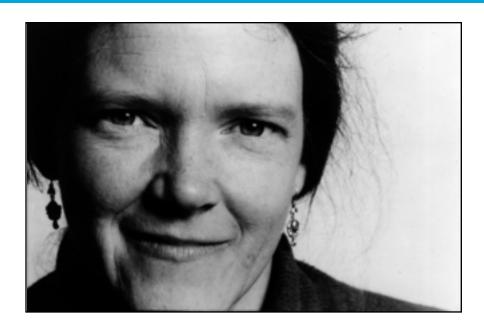
Consider Maxine's decision to send Ronald off to live with relatives. Think about the good and bad aspects of this decision and discuss as a class. Is there always one clear solution to a problem? What do you think of Maxine's judgment in this case?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Vernon develops an unlikely friendship with both Maxine and Ronald. Think of each of these characters and discuss what they mean to each other and what they have to teach one another.
- Vernon realizes that he can probably pass English without any more assistance from Miss Annie, and that he could distance himself from her and Maxine and Ronald. Instead, he goes to visit Maxine in jail as he was asked to do and even spends his bus money on a soda for Ronald. What do you think went through Vernon's mind that led him to make these choices?
- Why does Vernon's dad pick Vernon to help him learn to read and write?

- Describe the scene in which Maxine apologizes to Vernon for her behavior at the fair. Why do you think Vernon reacts the way he does? What does Maxine say that makes him forgive her? Why is it so important for Vernon to hear those things?
- When Vernon hears that people are criticizing Maxine's capacity to care for Ronald because of her drinking, he replies, "It's part of the truth, but there's more to it than that" (p. 106). Explain what Vernon means. In what ways is Maxine not equipped to care for Ronald? In what ways is she a good mother to him?
- Vernon says that "the Special Olympics changed everything, not just for Ronald but for me" (p. 163). Explain what he means by this.

Meeting the Author: An Interview with Jane Leslie Conly



Q: Are any of the events and characters in these two books based on your own experiences?

A: Yes, definitely. In Crazy Lady!, Maxine and Ronald were based on people I actually knew. There was a woman in my neighborhood that the kids called, "crazy lady," and she also had a retarded son. Through chance I became friends with her, and when she died no one from the hood came to her funeral except for me. With Crazy Lady!, I wanted to give people a chance to see what she was really like.

While No One Was Watching developed from an incident that happened to my family. One day we came home and our two pet rabbits were missing from their hutch in the backyard. We spent months, and a lot of energy, trying to find them, and eventually we did. The boy who had stolen them had taken good care of them. He was very lonely. I thought the incident would make an interesting story.

Q: How do young people respond to these two books?

A: Many readers enjoy the parts of Crazy Lady! that are funny, and they feel sad at the end. Lots have questioned the ending: they want to know more about what happened to Ronald. I tell them I really like the ending! It keeps them wondering about what did happen, and thinking about the book after they've finished reading it. As for While No One Was Watching, I think kids are interested in petty crime because it's often happened to them. Lots of kids have had either a bike stolen or something has been stolen from his or her locker. Who does these things and why? That's the question I wanted kids to consider when reading this book.

Q: Your books deal with a lot of challenging issues that play a big part in society today. Why do you think it's important for children to read and learn about these issues?

A: These problems affect both children and adults, and they have to be dealt with. Children are the future adults of our society and they will eventually be the ones to deal with these problems. I live in Baltimore, Maryland, where there is a wide discrepancy between the lives of many poor people and of other well-to-do city residents. Therefore I see many of these problems every day when I ride my bike or take a walk.

Q: What advice to you give to young people who want to be writers?

A: Read. Then think about incidents in your own life and really let yourself go. Don't worry about sounding stupid or crazy...just try to have fun with an idea or a plot. Try not to be too critical of yourself.

ACTIVITIES ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Art

■ Conly vividly describes in *While No One Was Watching* the contrast between the Fosters' neighborhood and the neighborhood in which Addie and Maynard live. Have students work in groups to draw maps of the whole town, clearly illustrating these two contrasting areas. Display these pictures around the class.

Language Arts

■ While No One Was Watching shifts point of view with different chapters, which helps enhance the characters' perspectives on the different events that are taking place. Ask each student to select an event from Crazy Lady!, and retell it from the perspective of a different character. Then ask students to compare what they wrote with Conly's original text. How does writing from a different perspective change how the events are described?

Language Arts/Drama

- Reread Vernon's first description of Maxine and Ronald, on page 13. In his own distinctive voice the narrator gives an entirely thorough picture of these characters in just two short paragraphs. Have students go to a public place and write their own two-paragraph descriptions of someone they see. How can they describe the person in a voice distinctly their own? How can they explain what the person looked like without resorting to merely bland and typical descriptions, and instead get to the essence of what the person seemed like?
- Using the students' paragraphs from the language arts description activity above, have volunteers act out other students' descriptions. The writer of the piece can serve as director, making corrections to the actors' interpretations of the description. Then have the writer go back over the original description and modify it based on how the reader interpreted it.

Math

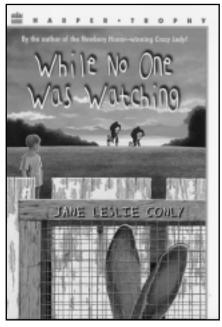
- Earl Foster gets \$20 and uses it to buy food for himself and his two younger siblings. Put yourself in Earl's shoes: You have a small amount of money, and you're not sure how long it will have to last you. Think about what you would buy at the supermarket. Find out your local sales tax and include that in the amount as well.
- Pretend that you need to raise money for sending someone like Ronald to the Special Olympics. If you were going to have a fair to raise money and you expected thirty people to come, how could you raise \$145? Don't forget to factor in your expenses (such as buying ingredients to make cookies, paper for posters, and so on).

Science

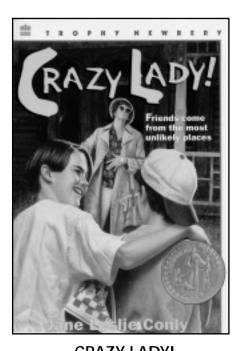
■ Vernon helps Maxine plant a garden in her yard. Have students grow their own plants in the classroom. Brainstorm as a class what steps you need to take in order to grow a healthy plant and have students help each other troubleshoot when plants don't seem to be growing as planned. You can suggest they follow Miss Annie's lead and use books to do their research. Have the class compare the different needs of various types of plants.

Social Studies

- In both books there are families that live in poor sections of large cities. Break the class into groups and have each group select a city to research. Each group can then research the breakdown of the socio-economic status of various communities in their chosen city. What services are available to the more needy citizens of the city? What could be done to help a family like the Fosters, or like Maxine and Ronald? Have groups present their findings to the class, using charts for clarity. Display the charts around the class for comparison purposes.
- Although Vernon is willing to get help from a tutor, his attempt to find one through his school is hopeless. Tutoring costs money that he doesn't have, or it takes place in a part of town that would be unsafe for him to visit. Help set up a free peer-tutoring program at your school. If your school already has such a program, see what you can do to get more students involved.



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