

Literature Circle Guide to
MISSING MAY by Cynthia Rylant

Book Summary

Summer loves living with May and Ob, the aunt and uncle who took her in and loved her when nobody else wanted her after her mother died. But when May passes on, a lot of the joy leaves Summer's and Ob's lives. Then Ob senses May is still with them and when a strange boy from Summer's class enters their lives, he introduces an idea that just might fix everything. But the real answer they seek can only be found within themselves.

Author Information

As a child in a small town in West Virginia, Cynthia Rylant never dreamed of becoming a writer. In her free time, she devoured Archie comic books and paperback romances and enjoyed the outdoors. But after taking one college English class, she was, "hooked on great writing... I didn't know about this part of me until I went to college—didn't know I loved beautiful stories." And one night, inspired by the Southern writer James Agee, she sat down and wrote *When I Was Young in the Mountains*. Named a Caldecott Honor Book and an ALA Notable Book, it was an instant success. She has since written more than fifty acclaimed novels, chapter books, and picture books. She lives with her many pets in the Pacific Northwest.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

Use the questions and activities that follow to get more out of the experience of reading *Missing May* by Cynthia Rylant.

1. Who did Summer live with before Ob and May? Why did Ob and May decide to bring her home with them to Deep Water?

She lived with various aunts and uncles. Summer says after her mother died "all her brothers and sisters passed me from house to house, nobody ever wanting to take care of me for long." (p. 4)

2. What are some of the strange items that Cletus has collected over the years?

Cletus gets his classmates to help him build his collections. First, he collected empty potato chip bags. "Heading home on the bus every day, people would be pulling flat shiny bags out of their history books like crazy and passing them to Cletus in the backseat." (p. 18) Then, he collected buttons, spoons, plants, used wrapping paper, and finally settled on collecting pictures.

3. Cletus says that he wants to become a "Renaissance Man." What is a Renaissance Man, and where does the term come from?

Cletus says, "Back in Europe there were these men who were real well-rounded. You know, they could paint, play music, write poems. They could talk science and

philosophy. Knew a lot about a lot. Folks called them Renaissance Men.” (pp. 54-55) The Renaissance was a culture movement that occurred in Europe, especially Italy, from the early 14th to the late 16th centuries, which brought scientific revolution and artistic transformation.

4. Summer suggests that there’s a difference between “gardening”— the activity that May most liked to do — and “going to work in the garden.” What is the difference between these two?

Summer says that even though May’s garden was just as practical—with sturdy vegetables rather than pretty roses—as anyone else’s, when she talked about it “your mind would see some lovely person in a yellow-flowered hat snipping soft pink roses, little robins landing on her shoulders.” Summer says, “Everybody else would say they were going to work in the garden, and that’s the picture you’d get in your mind—people out there laboring and sweating and grunting in the dirt.” (p. 9) May has a different experience gardening because she really loves doing it.

5. Summer discovers that Cletus and Ob get along well together, and that Cletus is a “perfect consoler” for Ob. What does she mean by that?

Ob likes Cletus’s personality and enjoys listening to his stories. Cletus is able to help Ob, like on the first Christmas without May when he brings over a one-thousand piece jigsaw puzzle and “got Ob to sit with him for twelve hours straight putting the puzzle together.” (p. 22) He is also very interested in Cletus’s near-death experience because Ob feels May is still present and wants to try to connect with her.

6. Cletus claims to have been to the afterlife, and, as proof, describes the time he slipped off the riverbank and nearly drowned. Who did Cletus see in the afterlife? What did they tell Cletus to do?

When Cletus goes toward the light, he sees his recently departed Grandfather and his little dog, Cicero, who died three years previously. He’s happy to see them, but then he hears a voice say, “Cletus, go on home now” and he regains consciousness after having nearly drowned in the river.

7. Why do Cletus, Ob, and Summer take the trip to Putnam County? Who are they looking for there, and what do they hope to accomplish when they get there?

Cletus shows Ob a newspaper clipping about “The Spiritualist Church of Glen Meadows” where the pastor is said to be able to communicate with the dead. They go to Putnam County hoping to find the Reverend Miriam B. Young and to get in touch with May.

8. Do you know someone who’s strange and unique like Cletus? Describe what makes this person so unique, and what you like best about him or her.

Cletus carries around a suitcase full of pictures—from magazines, cereal boxes, and other people’s photo collections—because he likes to make up the stories behind the pictures. He is an unusual character and, at first, Summer thinks he’s crazy, but she comes to value his friendship and accept his passion. For instance, when they visit

the state capital, she can see him working in the legislature to “enact profound laws.” (p.70)

9. Why does Summer describe Ob as “an artist”? What is the difference between his whirligigs and other whirligigs people put in their yards or gardens?

Ob makes creations of what he calls *The Mysteries*. Instead of making whirligigs depicting cartoon characters or cute animals, he represents abstract concepts such as love, dreams, and May’s spirit in his moving sculptures.

10. Why does Summer worry about the fact that Ob sleeps late one morning? What does Summer think might happen to Ob?

Summer is very worried that Ob might give up on living without May and just die of a broken heart. On the morning Ob fails to wake her up for school, Summer thinks, “he knew, as well as I, that he had never, not any day of his life, overslept. He was as trustworthy as the sun in this.” (p. 45)

11. Why does seeing the owl after returning from Putnam County make Summer cry? What memory does she have of seeing the owl, many years ago, with May?

It’s unusual to see an owl where Summer lives. She remembers seeing one with May soon after she joined them in West Virginia. May said, “I’d not ever seen an owl in all my days, and when I hadn’t had you but a few weeks there that one passed through my life.” (p. 86) When Summer sees another owl fly off into the night as they return from the trip to Putnam County, it represents May to her and she is finally able to really cry for missing May.

12. Why do you think Ob decides to turn the car around and go back to visit the West Virginia State Capitol? What do you think might have happened if they had just decided to go on home?

Ob’s decision to turn the car around changes everything. Originally, the main point of the trip was to find the pastor and contact May. When they find out the pastor has died, Ob is crushed. May fears that all hope is gone, but when he turns the car around and brings May and Cletus to the State Capitol and the Science and Culture Center, we can see he remembers he does have something to live for and that is these two children. He rests his palm against the back of Summer’s head like he used to when she was small and he looks at all the displays with Cletus. Cletus and Summer came on this journey with Ob to support him and he is able to feel that deep love and return it.

13. What is the importance of Ob planting his whirligigs in May’s garden? How is this a sign that he’s feeling better?

When May dies, Ob doesn’t know what to do with himself. When he plants his whirligigs in the garden, it’s a hopeful and joy-filled gesture that Ob would not have been able to embrace earlier in the story when he felt no hope or joy. Summer says the whirligigs now have “a place to spin and fly and live.” (p. 89)

14. How might the last line of the book — “And then a big wind came and set everything free”— relate to the lives of Ob and Summer? Do you think life will improve for them? **Throughout the story, Ob and Summer are stuck in the sadness of losing May and are unsure of how they will be able to continue living happily without her. In the final scene of the book, Ob offers his beautiful creations up and both he and Summer feel the hope and joy of this moment. Although they will undoubtedly both miss May forever, it’s possible this marks a turning point where Ob and May will be able to reclaim some of the happiness in living that May inspired for them.**

Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom’s Taxonomy: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-14.

Activities

1. Summer and Cletus like to look at people they see in advertisements and make up stories about what kind of lives they lead. Pick a photograph from a magazine advertisement or a newspaper and try to write a story about what you imagine that person is really like.

Cletus collects pictures, “Anything with a story to it!” he says. (p. 18) While looking at one picture he got from the barber shop, he tells Ob and Summer he thinks the “Brylcreem guy’s nerves are bad. He’s always cleaning under his fingernails and tweezing out his nose hairs and picking at his teeth.” (p. 21) Ask your class to bring in an assortment of pictures clipped from magazines or newspapers, like the kind Cletus would keep in his suitcase. Shuffle them and distribute new pictures to each student. Ask the class to imagine the stories behind the pictures and to write them down. Volunteers can share their stories and pictures with the class.

2. Cletus seems like a character who is bound to do great, interesting things with his life. Try to imagine what he turns out like in twenty years, after he’s moved to the big city, and write a scene in which he comes home to visit his old friends in Deep Water. How do you think he’s different? How do you think he’s stayed the same?

When Cletus first reacts to the State Capitol, Summer says she can imagine Cletus “being Fayette County’s elected representative to the legislature and driving over to Charleston to put his head together with other important heads and enact profound laws.” (p.70) Cletus has a unique take on life as evidenced by his passion for collecting and the way he connects with people such as Ob. Whatever Cletus does in his life, it is likely that it won’t be boring.

3. Ob calls his whirligigs “The Mysteries,” and Summer comments on how they look like nothing else she’s ever seen. They even have strange names like “Fire” and “Love” and “Dreams.” Try to draw a picture—using lots of color—of what you imagine these pieces of art might look like.

When Summer first comes to live with May and Ob, she says she “stood there before those shelves, watching these wonders beginning to spin as May turned on the fan overhead, and I felt like a magical little girl....” (p.7) Ob takes something ordinary,

a whirligig that might be found in someone's front yard, and turns it into art that is creative, beautiful, and unique. Ask your students to include a title with their picture.

Other Titles by This Author

Children of Christma: Stories for the Season

Dog Heaven

Every Living Thing

A Fine White Dust

Silver Packages: An Appalachian Christmas Story

The Van Gogh Cafe

When I Was Young in the Mountains

The Relatives Came