

Literature Circle Guide to OLIVE'S OCEAN by Kevin Henkes

Book Summary

Martha Boyle is ready to leave for a family vacation to visit her grandmother Godbee on Cape Cod, and she can't stop thinking about Olive Barstow, a girl she barely knew. Olive had died in a car accident, and though Martha knew her only by sight, she is now struck by the similarities between herself and the dead girl. Now she is filled with regrets that she didn't pursue a friendship with her. While on vacation, Martha begins to fear for Godbee's health, and she makes an effort to get to know her grandmother better than ever before. She finds herself being transparently honest with her grandmother about her feelings toward her family and her own desires and dreams. Complicating her vacation are the Manning brothers, especially the oldest brother Jimmy, who is suddenly paying more attention to Martha than ever before. After Jimmy tricks Martha into kissing him for his video recording, Martha feels ashamed and alone, and more than ever she is determined to honor the memory of Olive Barstow, the girl she barely knew. She determines to fill a jar of ocean water to deliver to Olive's mother when she returns home, but while filling the jar, she falls into the water and almost drowns. After this near-death experience, Martha gains a new sense of hope and purpose for her life and a new appreciation for her family.

Author Information

Kevin Henkes grew up in Wisconsin, and began drawing at an early age. The early encouragement he received helped solidify his love for his work, and at age nineteen he traveled to New York City, hoping to find a publisher for his drawings. He has worked as a writer and illustrator ever since. Today he lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with his wife and son. Besides his novels, he is known for his picture books with mouse characters, including *Owen*, a 1994 Caldecott Honor Book; *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*; and *Julius, the Baby of the World*.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

Use these questions and the activities that follow to get more out of the experience of reading *Olive's Ocean* by Kevin Henkes.

1. When the book opens, what career choice is Martha's father facing? Why is Martha relieved by the choice he makes?

Dennis Boyle, Martha's father, had quit his job as a lawyer two and a half years ago, and has been staying home to take care of baby Lucy and work on a novel. Soon after the book opens, he announces that he has decided to abandon his novel and go back to practicing law (p. 47). Martha is relieved by his decision, because it means that she is "free to be the one and only writer in her family."

2. Why is Martha so fascinated by Olive Barstow, a girl she barely knew? Revisit chapter 3 and list at least three reasons why Martha feels a deep connection with Olive.

Olive's mother gives Martha a journal entry that her daughter wrote, and this begins Martha's fascination with Olive Barstow. First, Martha has never known anyone else her own age who died. Second, Martha is struck by the similarities between herself and the dead girl. Olive's dream was to see the ocean, and Martha would soon be leaving to visit her grandmother who lived on the coast. Olive also wrote about her recent decision to become a writer, and Martha had just made the same decision. Finally and most intriguing, Olive wrote that Martha was "the nicest person in my whole entire class," but Martha had not even been friends with Olive (pp. 4-6).

3. Why does Martha confide in her grandmother more than her parents? What is it about Godbee that makes it so easy for Martha to talk to her?

Godbee's house is Martha's favorite place in the world (p. 5), and Martha feels very relaxed and comfortable with her grandmother. Godbee makes a special effort to get to know Martha, singling her out for attention and time. Also, Godbee is not afraid to be transparent about her own life, and this encourages Martha, a very private girl, to reveal herself to her grandmother.

4. After realizing that Jimmy has tricked her into liking him, how does Martha cope with her disappointment? What makes her feel better?

She begins to wonder what Olive Barstow would do in her situation (p. 132). She feels a kinship with Olive, who Martha imagines knew how it felt to be tricked. She imagines that Olive would have been able to ignore Jimmy and "quietly proceed with her life" (p. 133). This thought gives Martha comfort. She hatches a plan to commemorate Olive's life by bringing a jar of ocean water back to Mrs. Barstow, and fulfilling this plan helps to make her less self-absorbed.

5. On her last night at her grandmother's house, Martha has a strange dream involving each member of her family and the Mannings (p. 185). Does her dream give us some insight into Martha and her relationships? What do you think her dream means?

She dreamed that she was in a room filled with large shapes, as deep and as wide as dressers but with rounded edges. As she walks through the room, she learns that the blocks are really "thick plastic bags enclosing people, people trying to escape." Godbee is clawing desperately to get out of her bag, and when Martha is finally able to free her, Godbee has vanished. Martha's dream might show her feeling of commitment to her family members and friends, especially Godbee. It might also show how separate and alone Martha feels at times from those she loves most. Godbee's desperate struggle and disappearance might show that Martha is afraid for her grandmother's health.

6. While Martha is filling her jar with ocean water for Olive, she falls into the ocean trying to escape the sight of Jimmy Manning. Explain how this event is an important one for her. How does this event affect the decisions she makes and her relationships with others? What might the ocean symbolize in this novel?

This experience is Martha's own near death experience, and in its aftermath she reevaluates her self-absorption with her problems. She understands for the first time that "the world didn't revolve around her" (p.165), and she feels less self-pity and more appreciation for her family and her life. Perhaps the ocean symbolizes Martha's rebirth, for her near-drowning is a turning point in her summer vacation.

7. Would you enjoy being a member of the Boyle family? How would you feel about having a sister like Lucy or a brother like Vince? Can you relate to the way Martha feels toward each of her parents?

The Boyle family is described with great realism, so students will probably be able to identify with the family. Most students will conclude that despite his teasing, Vince cares deeply about his sister. Lucy, the baby of the family, is a lot of work for the whole family, but also brings a lot of humor to their lives. And Martha's ambivalence and occasional animosity toward her mother is something with which many students will be able to identify.

8. Were you surprised to learn that Tate Manning was the one who liked Martha? Did we have any clues about this early in the novel? How is Tate different from his brother Jimmy? **Tate is the Manning brother closest in age to Martha, the one she looks forward to seeing most at the beginning of the vacation. But Martha's interest quickly switches to Jimmy after he begins paying attention to her (pp. 61-62). After Martha realizes that she's been tricked by Jimmy, Tate comes forward to apologize for his brother's behavior, and tells Martha that he "didn't know what to do." Later he confiscates the videotape his brother made and presents it to Martha with a note that says "I was the one who really liked you" (p. 199). While Jimmy is self-centered and deceitful, Tate is observant, kind, and honest.**

9. Godbee tells Martha, "You are brave. And you always were." How is Martha brave? Find several examples from the novel that demonstrate Martha's bravery. What are some other adjectives that you would use to describe Martha?

Martha grows in confidence and bravery as the novel progresses, and Godbee's encouragement plays a large role in this. For example, she shows bravery when she makes the decision to capture a jar of ocean water to bring home to Mrs. Barstow, in an effort to stop being self-pitying about her humiliation by Jimmy. She shows bravery when she confesses to her father that she wants to be a writer. Students may also describe Martha as thoughtful, careful, reserved, serious, quiet, and introspective.

10. What do you think Martha has learned about friendship from her experiences with the Manning brothers, her conversations with Godbee, and her contact with Olive Barstow? After finishing the novel, what kind of person do YOU think would be the ideal friend for Martha? Imagine just such a person, and describe him or her.

Olive has a greater value for true friendship after her vacation to Cape Cod. Students will have a variety of opinions on the ideal friend for Martha. Many will say that an ideal friend will relate to Martha like Godbee does, taking the time to ask questions and encourage Martha. Some students will suggest that Olive needs a friend like Tate, who is honest and authentic unlike his brother Jimmy.

11. What if Olive Barstow hadn't died? Do you think Olive and Martha would ever have grown to become friends like Olive hoped? What difference did seeing the page from Olive's journal make in Martha's life?

Seeing Olive's own words from her journal caused Martha to feel connected to her in a way that she hadn't previously. Students may say that Olive and Martha would have become friends, if the opportunity had presented itself, since they had some things in common. For example, both girls are thoughtful and interested in writing.

12. Predict how Martha's life will change after the end of the novel. Will she continue to grow closer to Godbee? Will she and Tate become better friends? Will she grow up to be a writer? Will she always remember Olive Barstow?

Students' predictions will vary, but most will view Martha's experiences here as important in shaping her future. She has a new friend in Tate Manning, and she has a closer relationship with her grandmother. Her interest in writing continues to be strong, and since her father has decided to go back to his law career, she feels free to pursue her writing. She has a new appreciation for her family and more confidence and purpose.

13. What do you think about the methods Jimmy uses in making his video? Do you think he should have the right to videotape private conversations between others? What about the way he got Martha to talk about death and Olive Barstow for his video?

Many students will feel that Jimmy was unfair in the way he used Martha to make his movie as well as the way he videotapes private conversations between others without their knowledge. Besides tricking Martha into kissing him for the video, he also tapes an argument between his parents without their knowledge or permission (pp. 67-68).

14. Is Vince a good brother to Martha? On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the score for Best Brother Ever, rate Vince as a brother. Explain why you gave him the rating you did, using examples from the novel.

Most students would find Vince to be somewhat immature but often kind and understanding to his sister. The scene where Vince appears as Martha is walking home immediately after recognizing that Jimmy has tricked her is most telling; Vince starts by attempting to be supportive and sympathetic, but when he is rebuffed by Martha (who is feeling ashamed), his behavior turns to teasing. Overall, the two siblings are close; for example, they spend some time talking each night before they go to bed, and Martha appreciates Vince's honesty with her (pp. 24-25).

15. Is Martha Boyle a believable character? Is it surprising to you that Kevin Henkes, a male author, would choose to write about a girl as his main character? If you had the opportunity to find out more about Martha from Mr. Henkes, what questions would you ask him?

Many students will find Martha Boyle entirely believable and realistic, yet might be surprised that a male author would understand and write about a girl as his main character. Students might wonder about Martha's appearance and about her future as a writer and with Tate Manning.

Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-2; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-15.

Activities

1. In Martha's experience, "The world can change in a minute, and at the same time remain unchanged" (p. 165). Write about a time in your life when your world changed in a moment. What changed, and how did you respond? Tell your story using specific details to help your writing come alive. If Martha's experience is represented by a jar of ocean water, what tangible object would represent your life-changing minute?

Martha's experience falling in the ocean is the turning point of the novel, and in preparation for the assignment, students should reread this section of the novel and discuss how Martha grows as a result of this experience. This activity would be an excellent springboard into personal narrative essays. By focusing on a single moment in their lives, students will be encouraged to go into detail in describing their experience.

2. Martha tries to write a poem after her near-death experience, but ends up with a page of first lines. Reread these first lines on p. 175. Which line is your favorite? Beginning with this line, write a poem from Martha's perspective to depict what she's experienced and learned in the novel. Use as many of the other "first lines" as you can, and include your own thoughts, combining them into a poem. Your poem doesn't need to rhyme; instead, focus on choosing the most precise, vivid words that you can to describe Martha's experiences in this novel.

This activity is a way for students to understand Martha and empathize with her by selecting some of her own words to show what she's thinking. These "found poems" will give students the opportunity to pay attention to especially vivid language and show their insight into Martha. Students might also be encouraged to illustrate their poems using symbols from the novel.

3. Draw a Boyle family tree, including Martha, her parents, Vince, Lucy, and Godbee. For each character, include a drawing using details from the novel. Also for each character include a description of that character's relationship with Martha and a characteristic quote – something the character says that seems to represent him or her – from the novel. After you've finished your family tree, compare yours to a classmate's and discuss the choices you made.

This assignment is a helpful way of reviewing the characters in the novel and focusing on the family relationships, an important part of the story. Choosing a characteristic quote for each allows students the opportunity to examine the novel's dialogue and draw conclusions about each character.

Author's Web Site: www.kevinhenkes.com

