



Belle Teal Discussion Guide

Synopsis

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 US 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 behaviour. 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?



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Characters cont.

- Thinking of the way the African-American students are treated the first day of school, Belle Teal realises 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?
- What is the difference between the way Little Boss's father shows his prejudice and the way Vanessa's father shows his?
- 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.
- 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?
- 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?
- 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

- 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.
- 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?
- At the time this story took place, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr was beginning to lead the Civil Rights Movement in the USA 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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 neighbourhood, school, and/or community.





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Other Books by Ann Martin

Missing Since Monday, by Ann M. Martin. 1987. Scholastic.

P.S. Longer Letter Later, by Paula Danziger and Ann M. Martin. 1998. Scholastic.

Snail Mail No More, by Paula Danziger and Ann Matthews Martin. 2000. Scholastic.

The Doll People, by Ann M. Martin and Laura Godwin. 2000. Hyperion Press.

About the Author

As a child growing up in Princeton, NJ, Ann M. Martin loved reading. With her younger sister, she once set up a lending library in her bedroom for the neighbourhood 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 has about 125 million copies in print.

Dividing her time between an apartment in New York City and her home in upstate New York, Ann M. Martin writes thought-provoking middle-grade and young adult novels which have been praised by reviewers for their sensitivity, integrity and humour. Learn more about Ann M. Martin at Scholastic's website: www.scholastic.com.

Discussion guide written by Connie Rockman, children's literature consultant and adjunct professor of literature for children and young adults at the University of Bridgeport, Sacred Heart University and Manhattanville College, and editor of *The Eighth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators* (H. W. Wilson, 2000).