

Amber Brown Is Feeling Blue

by Paula Danziger

Amber Brown has to make a decision and making decisions is hard work! Should she spend Thanksgiving with Mom and Max in Walla Walla, Washington, or stay home and go to New York City with Dad? And what should she do about the new girl with a colorful name just like hers, Kelly Green?

THEMES

decision-making, family, school, friendship, divorce

I. PRE-TEACHING

A. Have the class define and discuss these terms:

construction, werewolves, superheroes, skeleton, unique, embarrassing, magnetize, repulsive, original, disaster, flummoxed, perplexed, civil, disgusting, devote, emphasis, combing, nightmare, overslept, allergic, gullible, detention, torture, exhausted, assumed, sages, mascara, intentionally, guilty, gilt, barrettes, feat, mustache, supervising, concentrating, prejudice, announcement, confusing, gloating, chutes, liposuction

B. Before beginning the story, discuss the following questions with the class:

1. Do you sometimes have to make difficult decisions? What are some things you've had to decide? How does it feel before you've made the decision? How does it feel when you've made it? How did you go about making the decision?
2. Have you ever wished you could be two places at once? What would it be like to be able to be two places at the same time?
3. What is special about your name? Have you ever met anyone with a name like yours? How do you feel about someone having a name like yours?

II. PRESENTATION

A. Understanding the Story:

1. Begin with Chapters 1 - 5: What is Amber excited about? Why has Amber decided to go as a crayon for Halloween? What does Max come home dressed as? What is Max's surprise? How does Amber feel when she learns the new girl's name? What does Mrs. Holt assign Amber to do?
2. Advance to Chapters 6 - 10: What happens to Kelly? What does Amber tell everybody about Kelly? What worries Amber about Brandi and Kelly? What does Amber remember when she's talking to Dad? How does Dad feel about the news? What does her mother say about it? How does Amber feel about having to decide between the trip and being with Dad?
3. Complete the story with Chapters 11 - 14: Why can't Amber pay attention to the Thanksgiving reports?

Describe Amber's book report in a bag. How do her mom and dad act around each other? Why does Amber decide to stay with Dad? What are some things she wishes? Why can't they all happen? How does the time with her dad turn out?

B. For Discussion

1. How does Amber feel about her name? How did she used to feel when she was younger? Why does meeting Kelly Green upset her at first?
2. As Amber tries to figure out what to do about Thanksgiving, her aunt Pam tells her—"There's no right or wrong answer to making a choice." How does Amber make her decision? Why does she find it so difficult to do?
3. Amber's father tells her to be sure she's made the right decision because he wants her to do what she wants to do, not what she thinks she should. Does Amber do what she wants or what she thinks she should? Support your answer with examples from the story.

III. EXTENDING THE LESSON

Give students the opportunity to work with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:

A. Language Arts:

1. Have students listen for puns, like "hairplane," that the color war is not "a very civil war," the similarity between "gilt" and "guilt," or Amber's newspaper headline gossip column called, "A Knight on the Town." What makes a pun fun? Have students make up some puns of their own.
2. Have students write in their journals about their names. How were they named? How do they feel about their name? Do they like it? Have they a nickname? How did they get that?
3. Have students make up funny names based on colors. They might look at the names of crayons or paints for ideas. Then have them write stories or poems about these "colorful" characters.
4. Have students do a book report in a bag the way Amber does for *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*.

5. Have students listen to *The Watsons Go to Birmingham —1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis and discuss why they think Amber enjoyed reading it for her book report in a bag.
6. Have students find a word they don't know and look it up in the dictionary. If the definition contains other words they don't know, have them look them up too.

B. Art and Music:

1. Have students select background music that is appropriate to some of the scenes. They could find funny or scary Halloween music, music about colors, like the "blues," or Thanksgiving hymns.
2. Have students make a bulletin board about the story. They could show Amber dressed as a crayon, include crayons, draw another girl dressed in something bright green like Kelly Green might wear, add Mylar balloons to represent the Macy's Day parade, show Walla Walla, Washington on a map, add an airplane.
3. Have students design T-shirts with humorous sayings on them.
4. Have students design their own Halloween costumes.
5. Have students put together a scrapbook the way Amber has her "Dad book" about something or someone special to them.

C. Social Studies:

1. Have students learn about the history of Halloween. Why do we celebrate it? Why do we dress up in costumes and go trick or treating? How has this holiday changed through the ages?
2. Have students discuss superheroes. Who are some superheroes? Why do we enjoy their exploits? What is the difference between a superhero and a hero?
3. Have students look on a map of the United States and find Walla Walla, Washington. Why does it have such a funny name? Can they find other funny names of towns like this?
4. Have students find out about Thanksgiving. Why do we celebrate it? Do other countries celebrate anything like it?
5. Have students make a newspaper about a historical period the way Amber does for her project on the Middle Ages. Encourage them to have fun with it.

6. When he comes from Paris, Amber's dad has to go through customs at the airport. Have students find out about customs. Why do we have to go through this when we come from another country?
7. When Amber meets her dad's friends from Texas, they say she talks funny and she thinks they do. Have students discuss regional accents. Why do people from different parts of the country have accents? Have students try to speak with a different accent.

D. Science and Math:

1. Max's niece's name is "Jade" which is a color and a precious stone. Have students find out about jade. What minerals does it contain? What color is it? How heavy is it? What does it look like? Where is it found? What is it used for? Another group could do research about amber.
2. Max reminds Amber there is a difference in time between New Jersey and Washington state. Have students learn about the time zones. How are they determined? Why do we have them? Why do we have Daylight Saving Time?
3. Amber tells Kelly that her mom is allergic to dogs. Have students find out what causes allergies to animals, like cats and dogs. What can be done about these allergies besides just not having a pet?

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I, Amber Brown

by Paula Danziger

When Amber's father moves back from Paris, she can hardly wait to see him, but as her parents begin fighting again, she discovers what "joint custody" really means.

THEMES

divorce, changes, family, love, problem-solving, responsibility, peer pressure

Middle Grade Unabridged Audio

I. PRE-TEACHING

A. Have the class define and discuss these terms:

collapse, exhaustion, energy, menorah, generalization, misery, pout, custody, recipes, definitely, rummage, allowance, disaster, bonding, bulletin, convince, suspicious, infected, ignition, deserve, headache, stomach, inconvenience, sushi, tenant, chauffeur, apartment, allergies, customer, disappointed, entrance, preliminary, creepy, cobwebs, dungeon, fluorescent, permission, adorn, nervous, ointment, reasoning, imagined, tarnish, involved, disagreement, piñata, sanctified, kindle, retro

B. Before beginning the story, discuss with the class the following questions:

1. How does divorce affect the children in a family? What is it like to have parents who live in different houses? Are there some benefits to having two families?
2. Have you ever played one parent against the other to get to do something you wanted to do? What happened? How did you feel about doing that?
3. Do you sometimes wish you could make your own decisions instead of always having to ask your parents for permission? What decisions do you get to make? What decisions do you wish you could make?

II. PRESENTATION

A. Understanding the Story:

1. Begin with chapters 1 - 5: Why is Amber glad they are going to celebrate Hanukkah as well as Christmas? How does she feel about Max being part of the family now? What is she worried about? What are some of the presents Amber and her mother are making? What happens when she closes her eyes? What does Brandi want Amber to do? Why won't her mom let her? What does she tell her dad about it? Why is she glad her friends aren't at the mall?
2. Advance to chapters 6 - 10: Why is she angry at her dad? How does she feel about having two homes? What does she make her dad promise? How does she feel when she sees her room? What does she like about the Marshalls? Why does she think Justin would like Dylan? Why doesn't she want to go in when they get home? What happens?

3. Complete the story with chapters 11 - 16: Name the hopes Amber lists as she waits in her room? How do her parents decide to punish her? Why can't she go shopping with her father? What Hanukkah present does Max give her? What does Justin tell her in his letter? What does she answer? Why isn't it easy to have two homes? What is decided about her pierced ears?

B. For Discussion:

1. Amber feels this is a "time of firsts." What are some of the "firsts" she thinks about? How does she feel about each of these?
2. Why does Amber say, "I, Amber Brown"?
3. Why is Amber angry when her father breaks his promise? How does she feel when he says that next time, he'll "do his best"? Why does he say that instead of saying he'll never break another promise to her?
4. Why do Amber's parents make her tell them what she did wrong instead of their telling her? Why does she find this difficult?

III. EXTENDING THE LESSON

Give students the opportunity to work with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:

A. Language Arts:

1. Have students write in their journals about how it feels to have parents who are separated or divorced. They might write about having step-parents as well.
2. Have students listen for references to earlier Amber Brown books. How does the author tell what happened earlier without interrupting this story? If students have read earlier books, how do they feel about reading a continuing story within a series?
3. Have students listen to the punning that Amber and her father do, such as saying the boll weevil would drive Justin "buggy," "We fish you a Merry Christmas," or when Amber and her mother get stuck together with glue, Amber saying, "This is a very sticky situation." What's fun about puns? Have students make up their own puns.
4. Amber wishes there were a rulebook for kids of divorced parents. Have students get together and come up with a rulebook like this. They could also write a companion one for the parents.

5. Have students practice saying their own names proudly the way Amber says, "I, Amber Brown." How do they feel when they say their names that way? You might start the session with the song, "I am I, Don Quixote" from *Man of La Mancha*, then discuss why it's important to say our names clearly and proudly when we introduce ourselves.

B. Art and Music:

1. Have students select background music that might be appropriate to some of the scenes. They might use Christmas carols, especially the "12 Days of Christmas," and music for Hanukkah.
2. Have students make a bulletin board about the story. They might divide the board in two and put Dad on one side and Mom on the other, then add all the characters and events that belong on each side, such as Max on Mom's side and the new home Dad has rented on the other. Amber could be in the middle, looking frazzled and torn between the two sides. Students could add Christmas gifts and decorations, such as the name bracelets, frames, and bowling pin salt shakers Amber makes.
3. Have students make gifts for friends, the way Amber does for her friends.
4. Have students cut out catalog pictures and create a poster of their ideal bedroom.

C. Social Studies:

1. Have students find out about how Hanukkah is celebrated. Other students might learn about Kwanza or other holiday celebrations.
2. Amber's father accuses her of making a "generalization" when she says boys don't care how their presents are wrapped. Have students think about other generalizations we make about groups of people, such as how we talk about ethnic groups, racial groups, and other stereotypes. What's wrong with making generalizations? How can we avoid doing this?
5. Amber convinces her father to let her have her ears pieced by not telling the whole truth about what her mother allows. Discuss with students why in court a witness has to pledge to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

3. Have students find out what has happened on each day of the calendar in earlier years and make up a Jeopardy type quiz to present to the class.
4. Have students learn more about body piercing. Why has it become so popular among young people? Why do so many adults object to it? Why do you think it's more socially accepted to pierce ears rather than other body parts?
5. Amber convinces her father to let her have her ears pieced by not telling the whole truth about what her mother allows. Discuss with students why in court a witness has to pledge to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

D. Science and Math:

1. Have students learn about body piercing. What can happen if the person isn't careful about infections?
2. Amber and her mother get stuck together because they are using Superglue. Have students find out how different glues are made. Why are some glues, such as the adhesive used in Post-It Notes, weak enough to just pull off, while others, like Superglue, extra strong?
3. In her book of days, Amber learns about the invention of radio. Have students find out about Marconi and how he invented radio. How does radio work? How does TV work?

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