



Three Good Things

Lois Peterson

Reading level: 2.0

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Book Summary

Leni has lived in so many different places in the last few years that she's not surprised when her mom wakes her in the middle of the night and tells her to pack up her things. The reason for this move? Her mom tells her they've won the lottery, and now they have to go underground. Leni is not surprised when they end up in a filthy motel. But when Leni makes a new friend and tries to explain their lifestyle, she begins to understand just how messed-up her life has become.

Author Biography

Lois Peterson wrote short stories and articles for adults for twenty years before turning to writing for kids. She was born in England and has lived in Iraq, France and the United States. Recently retired from her job as a librarian, she now lives in Surrey, British Columbia, where she writes, reads and teaches creative writing to adults, teens and children. Lois is the author of several books for children and youth, including *Beyond Repair* and *Disconnect* in the Orca Currents series.

Connecting to the Text***Character and Novel Study***

To engage students with the main characters in *Three Good Things*, use the following as large group discussion topics, individual novel study or paragraph-writing exercises:

- After reading the first four chapters, describe what you know about Leni's life. What are you curious about? What questions do you have about her and her mother? For example:
 - ◆ Leni describes her mom as “crazy,” with “highs and lows” and “delusions.”
 - ◆ She says it's been years since she's been in school.
 - ◆ She wishes Grand would “do something” about her mom.
 - ◆ “Weeks go by when we sleep more nights in the car than in a bed.” (ch.4)
- Although Leni hasn't been in school for a long time, she's learned skills and gained strengths through her experiences. Find examples of this from the novel. Do you think she'd have these skills if she'd led the “normal” life she imagined? For example,
 - ◆ She can find and pay for a motel where she and her mom can spend the night.
 - ◆ She's good at bargaining with shop owners so she has food to eat.
 - ◆ She goes to libraries to educate herself, and she knows how to use the computer.
 - ◆ She's street wise. She keeps her head down so she doesn't risk being bullied.
- Leni's mother has a mental illness. Sometimes Leni resents this, but she also doesn't want to be alone, and she feels judged. Consider her mixed feelings. How would you feel if you were in her position? Use these quotes to start discussion, or for writing exercises.

ch. 5 *Most of the time I live in fear of her dying on me. The rest of the time I wish she would disappear.*

ch. 10 *Most of the time, I feel like I can't cope with my mother. But when anyone else notices? All I feel is their judgement. Of her. And me.*
- Leni and her Mom both imagine a life different and better than their own. Leni keeps a scrapbook “with details of the house I want one day” (ch. 3), and her Mom “devours everyone else's funny lives” on the TV (ch. 6). Does imagining this different life help them feel better, or could it actually make them feel worse? Recall that Leni says her feeling of envy is like a worm in her gut (ch. 3).
Think of a time when you longed for something you couldn't have. Did it motivate you to take action or did it make you feel unhappy or envious?
- In chapter 9, Jake says, “Someone has to be the grown-up...It shouldn't have to be you.” Leni has had to be the grown-up for a long time and she just can't do it anymore. At the end of the novel, Leni and Grand decide they'll both care for Leni's mom.
Imagine what Leni's life will be like a month later, or a year. Use examples from the novel to support your answers.

Connecting to the Curriculum*Language Arts, Creative Writing*

1. In chapter 9, Leni tells Jake what it's like to care for her mother, who is volatile, unpredictable and a danger to herself and Leni. She tells him she hasn't been in school for four years. She describes some of the places she's stayed and what she's had to cope with. Imagine that you're Leni. Instead of talking to Jake, write him a letter, describing your life and how alone and scared you feel, referring to the novel. Include drawings, if you like.
2. On top of all the other challenges Leni faces to get by, Leni also fears that she could end up like her mother. In chapter 10, when she's alone in the playground, she tries hard to "swallow the feeling that...any day it will be me yelling at servers in the coffee shop. Making rude remarks about people to their faces." Write a letter to Leni highlighting "three good things" about her, to give her strength and self-confidence. Use examples from the novel.
3. In chapter 11, when Leni's Mom falls from the jungle gym, Leni reflects on Jake and his menagerie. She says, "He can take care of thirty-two animals. I can't even look after one person. Not anymore." Do you think this is a fair comparison? Write a paragraph comparing and contrasting the differences between caring for a person and caring for a pet. Consider that all of Jake's animals are in cages in the family garage. When Jake has time alone, he knows his animals are all safe.
4. Imagine you are Leni. Use some of her words and cadence in a song, poem or rap, describing a scene from the novel or Leni's feelings about herself or her mother.
 - ◆ *I could be anywhere or nowhere, something or nothing.* (ch. 1)
 - ◆ *It's my life. Always on the run. With a crazy mother and no money and no idea when it is all going to change. Or end. Knowing that if it does end, it won't end well.* (ch. 9)
 - ◆ *Leni needs more than clothes, food and shelter. She needs someone to take over. Take charge. Take notice...Take an interest. Take steps. Take a moment, just one teeny-tiny moment, to look...and see what's going on with her. And with me.* (ch. 12)

Social Studies

1. Leni has a lot to deal with. She's homeless, has little clothing, and does not eat well or regularly. She doesn't attend school and is responsible for her mother, who has a serious mental illness. She's often on the run often because of her mother's delusions. She's been beaten by bullies. Ask students to reflect on her situation.
 - ◆ What services exist in your community for homeless youth like Leni? Where could she go for help?
 - ◆ If Leni was a student in your school, what would you advise she do?
2. Invite students to imagine they are Leni, now living with Grand at the end of the novel. You have the \$763 to spend however you wish. Consider that you'll soon be going to school after being out of it for four years. What clothes and supplies will you need? Make a list that includes three "nice to have" items and three "need to have" items. How will you decide what's most important to buy, and when?

Art

- Ask students to choose and illustrate a descriptive scene from the novel, incorporating a quotation into their work. Ask students: What caught your attention about this scene? Does the author's syntax, choice of words or imagery lend meaning to the scene or help illustrate Leni's feelings? Ideas for projects could be collages, scrapbook pages, creative diaries, journal writing and poems, print work, etc. Examples for meaningful quotations include:
 - ch. 3 *What it would be like to pump so high the swing cleared the top bar? Scary. Exhilarating. Dangerous.*
 - ch. 3 *I've seen rats in alleys. A dead cat under a bed. Too many mean dogs.*
 - ch. 5 *Once I get stuck thinking about all this stuff, I feel like a gerbil on a hamster wheel, going round and round and round with no way off.*
 - ch. 10 *If there's one thing Mom likes better than a playground, it's a playground at night. I make the rounds, but the place is empty. Everything is in shadow. A swing creaks in a breeze. A piece of paper rattles across the ground.*
 - ch. 12 *More people hurry back and forth. A phone rings. A baby cries. Someone moans. Equipment ticks and hisses and whines.*
- Invite students to design a two-sided picture or portrait where the life Leni wants is mirrored by her real life. Choose images from the novel to illustrate this dichotomy.
 - ♦ The rooms in *Better Homes and Gardens* or *Architectural Digest* compared to the grimy room at Lions Motel.
 - ♦ Jake's friendly, welcoming family at dinner compared to Leni's mother asleep in the motel room with the Shopping Channel blaring. Leni says, "They are such a normal family. And I am such an outsider." (ch. 8)
 - ♦ Leni's mom and the moms she imagines in the laundromat, the "others who could only be my mother in another lifetime in which she ate well, had a decent place to live and stuck to her meds." (ch. 11)

Option: Introduce students to the concept of juxtaposition, where objects or themes are intentionally positioned side by side, resulting in a new and often deeper meaning. Searching "juxtaposition photography" online will provide examples; however, preview to ensure images are suitable for your students.

Health Sciences, Vocabulary

The following words and terms are used in the novel in the context of Leni's mom's mental illness.

appointment	erratic	medications	risk-taking
breakdown	genetic	mental illness	scenario
delusions	highs and lows	psychotic	serious
episode	manic	recovery	symptoms

Challenge students to find out more about mental illness, using these words and terms in their responses. Students may wish to include references to Leni's mom or grandmother. Questions, to get students started:

- Is there a spectrum of mental illnesses, or are they all the same severity and duration?
- Can mental illnesses be treated with drugs and other therapies?
- What are some warning signs of mental illness?
- What does the word “stigma” mean, and how might it be the experience of people with mental illnesses?
- If a youth (like Leni) was worried about inheriting a mental illness, what could they do to find out more?

Connecting to the Wider World

1. In chapter 9, Leni describes what it's like to be homeless. She says, “if we didn't use Grand's address, we'd not even get welfare.” She knows her diet of subs and donuts isn't healthy, but she can't eat decently without a way to cook real food. Discuss some of the challenges homeless people face every day, such as lack of shelter options, risks to personal safety and security, health issues, and discrimination.

Links to teaching resources on homelessness are below. They include myths about homelessness and ideas for activities, such as donating to local food banks.

2. Students may be interested to learn about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was signed by the General Assembly in 1989. It outlines the rights of children under 18 and the responsibilities of parents and governments. For example, Article 19 says that States Parties (countries) should take measures to protect children *from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.*

Could some of the Rights of the Child be contravened in Leni's life? Consider neglect, abuse and maltreatment. Has Leni experienced these?

Web Resources

www.unicef.org

<http://stophomelessness.ca/home-2015/take-action/teachers-guide>

<http://nationalhomeless.org/references/teaching>