



Meeting Miss 405

Lois Peterson

Interest level: ages 8–11

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AR Quiz # 126478

Consider the following question as you read *Meeting Miss 405*:

Who would look after you if the person who takes care of you most of the time went away for a long time?

Story

Life is hard for Tansy Hill, with her mom away indefinitely and her dad making a mess of things at home. Then she gets sent down the hall to a wrinkly old babysitter named Miss Stella, who doesn't even own a TV. Or a computer. Or a car. She eats brown spaghetti and Bird's Custard. What kind of babysitter is *she*? But Miss Stella has a unique perspective on life, to say the least. With the help of her best friend Parveen, Tansy gradually learns to manage all the changes in her life and makes unexpected new friends in the process.

Author

Lois Peterson wrote short stories and articles for twenty years before turning to writing for kids. Born in England and brought up in Iraq at an English boarding school, she worked in a public library for many years. She now lives in Surrey, British Columbia, where she writes, reads and teaches creative writing.

Author Website

<http://lpwords.blogspot.com>

Connecting to the Curriculum*Language Arts*

- Introduce students to figures of speech. In chapter 1, Tansy says her father already “has enough on his plate.” With your class, brainstorm a dozen or more figures of speech. (You could also have students do this in groups.) Why do we use figures of speech? How do these make English a rich and interesting language?
- Have students write a character study of the zaniest babysitter they can think of: animal, vegetable, or mineral! Then create a portrait (painting, collage, sculpture) of the crazy babysitter they invented.
- Tansy spends a lot of time with Miss Stella, who has no computer or tv. For a week, have students record how much time they spend on the computer or watching tv. Ask them to make a list of all the things they could do if they had to live without a computer or tv.
- Tansy writes a letter to her mother telling her how she feels about what’s going on in her life. Have students write a letter to someone in their family about something they feel very strongly about. (This is private. Students may share only if they feel like it!)
- Calligraphy is just one way to record words and ideas. Have students research five other ways that people have used over the centuries to tell the stories of their lives and share their ideas. Explain that these don’t have to be limited to written forms of communication. Don’t forget to include ancient cultures like the Egyptians and even prehistoric humans.
- Tansy’s father drives a limousine for a film company. Have students write a film script of their favorite scene from *Meeting Miss 405* and cast the starring roles with actors they have seen in other films.

Art

- Miss Stella teaches Tansy calligraphy and Chinese brushwork. Provide students with Chinese brushes and encourage them to explore new ways of writing their names and decorating them to create pieces of art. Try and find someone to teach students basic calligraphy.
- Using pictures collected from old magazines and newspapers and other found items, have students make either an individual or a class collage showing old people engaged in all kinds of activities, including those you don’t think of older people doing.

- Have students design a new book jacket for *Meeting Miss 405*. The book jacket should have a picture on the front and a short paragraph on the back that entices others to read the book (kind of like an advertisement for the book).
- As a class, research *illuminated texts*. Have students choose a meaningful passage or phrase and write it on vellum or parchment paper, then illuminate it with detailed illustrations that are relevant to the selected text.

Health/Personal Planning

- Tansy creates some interesting snacks (wine gums and sardines!) when she visits Miss Stella. Using the Canada Food Guide, have students create a week's menu of healthy but unusual after-school snacks.
- An allergy to nuts is a serious thing. As a class, research nut allergies and find out what your school and community can do to protect people with life-threatening allergies.
- Meditation helps Tansy deal with her mother's illness and absence. Have students read about meditation and try it for at least five minutes once a day for a week. How does it make them feel? Calm? Nervous? Sleepy? Energetic?

Science

- Tansy's teacher saved her classmate's life by administering an EpiPen when Devin was having an allergic reaction to nuts. Research EpiPens. What medical condition do they treat? What do the auto-injectors have inside them (epinephrine)? How do our bodies use this substance? Explain how EpiPens save lives.

Social Studies

- Tansy's friend Parveen has the job of making *rotis* for her family's supper every night. Rotis are a traditional Indian food. Have students think about their own ethnic background. What sorts of foods are traditional to their heritage? Choose five cultural groups (Chinese, Irish, Indian, Polish, Indonesian, Mexican, Caribbean...the possibilities are endless!). Make a list of traditional foods for each of them.

Connecting to the Text

- Lois Peterson helps us imagine the inside of Miss Stella's apartment by comparing it to Tansy's own apartment. The author adds a bit of texture to the setting in chapter 9 by having Tansy carefully write a list of the things she likes most in Miss Stella's place. On her list, Tansy writes things like "the purple afghan" and "a loopy thing for hanging bananas on to get ripe." Have students think about a place where they love to be. It could be their home, someone else's home, or even a favorite hangout. Have them imagine how this special place appears to someone who's never been there before. Ask students to describe what the imaginary visitor sees, feels, hears and smells.
- Authors sometimes use *figurative* language to communicate meaning. A *simile* is a comparison using the words *like* or *as*. Similes can be an effective way to show action or mood in a story, or simply to enrich a description. For example, "When Parveen bends over to pull out her books, I watch her long shiny braid swing down her back like a thick rope." Have students find five more examples of similes in the story.
- To convey emotions, the author uses a technique called "showing" instead of simply telling how her characters are feeling. Here's an example from chapter 13: "I have a pulling feeling inside where my head hurts. I close my eyes and put my hands on my chest. I feel the hard bone under my shirt and wait for the ache to pass. But it is still there." How is Tansy feeling in this scene? How do you know? Have students find other examples in the story where they can tell how characters are feeling by the way they behave and the sensations they experience. Now have students try writing a few examples of their own.
- Fiction, even fantasy fiction, has to be *believable* to work. If anything in the text suddenly reminds readers that the story or the characters aren't real, the story loses its credibility and its ability to affect us emotionally. For example, characters who behave differently for their age than they would in real life, or sudden coincidences that wrap up the plot in a "just-so" manner can make the story feel really fake. *Meeting Miss 405* is a very believable book. Break students into small groups and have them discuss why the story works. They should support their findings with examples from the book. Have each group share their reasoning with the class. Can students think of a book they've read where the events, characters or actions do not feel believable?
- In pairs, have students determine the message (the "Big Idea") of *Meeting Miss 405*. Have students share their thoughts with the class.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. Tansy's father says you can tell most of what you need to know about another person within the first fifteen minutes of meeting them. Do you agree or disagree? Why? Did Tansy have a clear understanding of who Miss Stella was after fifteen minutes?
2. Tansy ends up liking Miss Stella despite herself. Miss Stella doesn't get angry when Tansy is rude during their first visit. She doesn't push Tansy into doing anything she doesn't feel like doing. What are some other examples of how Miss Stella gets Tansy to loosen up and start to trust her?
3. Mr. Howarth asks Tansy whether she ever talks with a Trusted Other to help her sort out her feelings. Do you have a Trusted Other to tell things to? Who is that person? What is it about them that makes you feel safe?
4. Miss Stella says Tansy should try to concentrate on doing one thing at a time. Do you find that this is easy or hard to do? Tansy was super-concentrated when she did her best calligraphy. Think about the things you like to do best. Are there times when you, too, become super-concentrated? Explain.
5. Tansy's dad tells her that it shouldn't matter what kids at school say about her mom being a nutcase. "It matters what you think," he says. Write a note to Tansy to convince her that this is true. Use examples to support your argument.

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Until I started writing *Meeting Miss 405*, I didn't know why Tansy's dad was taking her down the hall, or who they would meet when they got there. Sometimes that's how writing works—a single idea leads to a few words on the page. And these first words lead to all kinds of “spooky stuff” that writers often do not know about until they uncover it.

When Super-Concentrated Miss Stella answered the door of apartment 405, I found I had conjured up someone I might want to be like when I get older. And the sort of person—a kind and rather eccentric elder—who can be useful and comforting when life gets tough, as it does for Tansy.

Once the story got going, I was happy to “lend” Tansy and Miss Stella some of the incidents of my life. My own father was once told by his aunt that he was allergic to pears, even though he'd only ever been sick once after eating them. The pottery frog on Miss Stella's shelf actually sits on the mantelpiece in my uncle's house. And it was my five-year-old daughter who told me, “I must be full, because I feel sick.” (I am also completely addicted to wine gums!)

Many people who read this story as I was working on it asked me when Tansy's mom would get well. I don't know. Depression is a sneaky and scary disease that can arrive without warning, and retreat almost as suddenly. My own dad sat in a chair without speaking for almost a year, until his beard and his hair reached his collar. Then one day he made a joke, and we knew he was getting better.

But this is Tansy's story, not mine. While I may have something in common with Tansy, Miss Stella and perhaps even Devin, for me the magic is in letting all the little pieces come together to tell a tale in which each reader finds something that is special to them.

Whether you love or despise wine gums, take to the idea of being super-concentrated, think a little about what it might be like to live with a serious allergy, or decide to take up calligraphy, most of all I hope that you stick with the story to see how it turns out.

That's what I had to do. And I'm glad I did.

I've enjoyed getting to know everyone in *Meeting Miss 405*. And I hope you will too.

Happy reading.
Lois Peterson

Resources**Books***Fiction*

- Barrows, Annie. *Ivy + Bean: Take Care of the Babysitter*
 Child, Lauren. *Clarice Bean, Guess Who's Babysitting?*
 Fine, Anne. *The More the Merrier*
 Foreman, Michael. *Evie's Garden*
 Maclean, Kerry Lee. *Peaceful Piggy Meditation*
 Nassau, Elizabeth Sussman. *The Peanut Butter Jam*
 Ravanelli, Terry. *Zoallergy: A Fun Story About Allergy and Asthma Triggers*
 Recorvits, Helen. *Yoon and the Jade Bracelet*
 Rumford, James. *Silent Music: A Story of Baghdad*
 Tan, Shawn. *The Red Tree*

Nonfiction

- Andrews, Beth. *Why Are You So Sad?: A Child's Book About Parental Depression* (616.8)
 Cooper, Scott. *Speak Up And Get Along!: Learn The Mighty Might, Thought Chop, And More Tools To Make Friends, Stop Teasing, And Feel Good About Yourself* (302.3)
 Fontana, David. *Teaching Meditation to Children: The Practical Guide to the Use and Benefits of Meditation Techniques* (158.12)
 Louis, Catherine. *My Little Book of Chinese Words* (495.11)
 Hanson, Anders. *Cool Calligraphy: The Art of Creativity for Kids!* (745.61)
 Wakan, Naomi. *Haiku: One Breath Poetry* (808.1)
 Winters, Eleanor. *Calligraphy for Kids* (759.951)
 Zhensun, Zheng. *A Young Painter: The Life and Paintings of Wang Yani—China's Extraordinary Young Artist* (759.951)

Online

Canada Food Guide

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php

Kids With Food Allergies

www.kidswithfoodallergies.org

Kids Against Bullying

www.pacerkidsagainstbullying.org

Wombania (includes recipe for homemade wine gums)

www.wombania.com/wine-gums.htm

Illuminated Texts Online—includes work by children's authors such as Kate Greenaway

www.illuminated-books.com/children.htm