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SYNOPSIS

A powerful story of dealing with death and grief, *Missing May* can help readers understand and communicate more effectively with old people, see the good in others, and learn when to listen rather than speak.

Chap. 1 Summer was a 6-year-old orphan when she met the aunt and uncle who took her home to be their child forever. Her parents had died in a flash flood. Summer's Aunt May and her Uncle Ob love her and each other very much. Living with them is like living in paradise, Summer feels. Although the small family lives modestly in a trailer, they feel themselves rich beyond compare. Ob makes whirligigs in imaginative shapes that express his joy and love for his family.

Chap. 2 Six years later when her Aunt May suddenly dies while gardening, Summer must deal with grief that she and her uncle carry inside. Although six months have passed since May's death, the grief is undiminished. Ob insists that May has come back from the dead to visit him. Summer is not surprised that Ob would think that May has done this, since May was the best person either of them had ever known. "A big barrel of love" is what Summer calls her. May never made Ob feel embarrassed about being a disabled Navy man who fiddled with whirligigs all day long. Similarly, May never made Summer feel embarrassed about having been passed from relative to relative for years. May bragged about Ob and Summer and made them feel loved.

Chap. 3 The previous fall, Ob had spotted Cletus Underwood snooping around the family's old Chevy. Summer's classmate at Deep Water Junior High, Cletus is an odd boy who collects pictures from magazines, newspapers, and other publications. These he carries around in a battered suitcase. Cletus spends part of Christmas Day with Ob and Summer, eating and doing a puzzle. His presence greatly alleviates their loneliness.

Chap. 4 Cletus tells Ob and May about his near-death experience when he nearly drowned. Ob becomes convinced that Cletus is an expert on the afterlife and can help him contact May's spirit.

Chap. 5 Summer recalls May's everyday acts of kindness. Ob holds a vigil in the garden, waiting for May's spirit, but it does not arrive.

Chap. 6 For the first time, Summer misses the bus to school because Ob did not wake her up. Too despondent to get out of bed, Ob decides that he cannot care for Summer any longer. Ob and Summer are near despair when Cletus provides them with hope.

Chap. 7 Cletus tells Ob and Summer about the Spiritualist Church of Glen Meadows, whose pastor can communicate with the dead. The pastor, the Reverend Miriam B. Young, is advertised as the "Small Medium at Large," which amuses everyone. Ob calls her the "Just-in-Time Lady" because she

arrived just in time to lead them all to May. His desire to live restored, Ob decides to take Summer and Cletus to meet the Reverend.

Chap. 8 Ob and Summer visit Cletus' parents to get permission to bring him to visit the Reverend. When she arrives at the Underwoods' poor shack, Summer realizes that as much as she is ashamed of Cletus for his strange ways, his elderly parents accept him unquestioningly — as May had accepted her and Ob. Mr. and Mrs. Underwood welcome Summer and Ob to their home and treat them with great kindness. Although they are very old and frail, they trust things will be all right, the opposite of Summer's fear about losing everything.

Chap. 9 Ob, Summer, and Cletus start off on their trip. In addition to visiting the Reverend, they plan to visit the West Virginia capitol, which excites Cletus very much.

Chap. 10 When they arrive at the Reverend Miriam Young's home, her nephew informs them that she died the previous June. Although the nephew is kind and compassionate, Ob is inconsolable and wants to return home immediately. Summer's heart aches for Cletus, who yearned to see the West Virginia state capitol. Realizing that life must go on, Ob announces that they will visit the capitol anyway and have a great time.

Chap. 11 Summer understands that Ob has made a conscious choice to live, perhaps because Summer needs him so much. At the capitol, Summer suddenly feels all her grief at May's death and cries because she realizes that she will never see May again. Ob reassures her that May lives on in their hearts. Summer flashes back to her early years with May and all the love May had given her. She thinks of the owl that crossed their path one night, a symbol to May of all the love that Summer brought into their lives.

Chap. 12 The next morning, Summer awakens to a beautiful spring day and a delicious breakfast. She is ready to move on with her life as well.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born June 6, 1954, in Hopewell, Virginia, Cynthia Rylant had a difficult childhood. In her autobiography *But I'll Be Back Again: An Album*, Rylant noted: "They say that to be a writer you must first have an unhappy childhood. I don't know if unhappiness is necessary, but I think maybe some children who have suffered a loss too great for words grow up into writers who are always trying to find those words, trying to find a meaning for the way they have lived."

Rylant's parents divorced when the author was four years old and the child assumed the blame for their breakup. Cynthia and her mother moved West Virginia where the child was left in her grandparents' care while her mother earned a nursing degree. She lost touch with her father until many years later, but he died before they could be reunited. Rylant was 13. "I did not have a chance to know him or to say good-bye

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to him, and that is all the loss I needed to become a writer," Rylant wrote in her autobiography.

Rylant's childhood home lacked electricity and running water, but as with Summer in *Missing May*, Rylant felt warm and loved in the close-knit neighborhood. By the time she reached her teen years, however, Rylant envied the more prosperous lifestyle of others. In addition, she came to see the back hills of West Virginia as dull and stifling. "I wanted to be someone else," she noted "and that turned out to be the worst curse and the best gift of my life. I would finish out my childhood forgetting who I really was and what I really thought, and I would listen to other people and repeat their ideas instead of finding my own. That was the curse. The gift was that I would be willing to try to write books when I grew up."

Rylant earned her bachelor's degree in 1975 from Morris Harvey College (now University of Charleston) and an master's degree in English from Marshall University in 1976. Six years later, she earned a master's degree in Library Science from Kent State University. She has worked as a college English professor and in the children's department of a public library.

Rylant's first book, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, was praised for its simple, evocative text and named a Caldecott honor book. Subsequent books have earned Rylant considerable recognition and awards. For example, her 1986 novel *A Fine White Dust* was named a Newbery Honor Book; *Missing May* won the Newbery Award in 1992. Rylant confided that writing "has given me a sense of self-worth that I didn't have my whole childhood. I am really proud of that. The [books] have carried me through some troubled times and have made me feel that I am worthy of having a place on this earth." Cynthia Rylant currently resides with her son, Nate, in Kent, Ohio.

CRITIC'S CORNER

Missing May was greeted with enthusiastic reviews. For example, the *Kirkus Review* critic noted: "A gifted writer returns to one of her favorite themes—love—in this case, as it can inform and transform grief. ... Rylant reveals a great deal about her four characters, deftly dropping telling details from the past into her quiet story. A beautifully written, life-affirming book." *English Journal* was equally positive: "This wonderful book revolves around a few delightfully named characters: Summer, Uncle Ob, Aunt May and Cletus Underwood. After being passed among relatives, Summer joins her aunt and uncle and marvels at the couple's deep love for one another. But after Aunt May dies, Summer and Uncle Ob are brought together in their struggles to come to terms with the death. Cletus, a neighbor boy, comes along to help provide an answer. This simple and sweet story is injected with just the right touches of humor and mysticism."

The Horn Book said: "Orphaned at six, raised by an elderly West Virginia aunt and uncle with more devotion than money, Summer is 12 years old when Aunt May dies. Summer's grief is profound, but Uncle Ob seems unable to go on living without his beloved companion. The final scene is a triumphant catharsis as they find consolation in their memories and in each other. A haunting first-person narrative."

OTHER BOOKS BY CYNTHIA RYLANT

All I See (1988)

An Angel for Solomon Singer (1992);

Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds (1991)

Best Wishes (1992)

Birthday Presents (1987)

The Blue Hill Meadows (1997)

The Blue Hill Meadows and the Much-Loved Dog (1994)

A Blue-eyed Daisy (1985)

The Bookshop Dog (1996)

But I'll Be Back Again: An Album (1989)

Cat Heaven (1997)

Children of Christmas: Stories for the Season (1987)

A Couple of Kooks: And Other Stories about Love (1990)

Dog Heaven (1995)

The Dreamer (1993)

Every Living Thing (1985)

The Everyday Garden (1993)

The Everyday Town (1993)

The Everyday Children (1993)

The Everyday Pets (1993)

The Everyday House (1993)

An Everyday Book (1997)

A Fine White Dust (1986)

Gooseberry Park (1995)

Mr. Griggs' Work (1989)

Henry and Mudge: The First Book of Their Adventures (1987)

Henry and Mudge in Puddle Trouble: The Second Book of Their Adventures (1987)

Henry and Mudge in the Green Time: The Third Book of Their Adventures (1987)

Henry and Mudge under the Yellow Moon: The Fourth Book of Their Adventures (1987)

Henry and Mudge in the Sparkle Days: The Fifth Book of Their Adventures (1988)

Henry and Mudge and the Forever Sea: The Sixth Book of Their Adventures (1989)

Henry and Mudge Get the Cold Shivers: The Seventh Book of Their Adventures (1989)

Henry and Mudge and the Happy Cat (1990)

Henry and Mudge and the Bedtime Thumps (1991)

Henry and Mudge Take the Big Test (1991)

Henry and Mudge and the Long Weekend (1992)

Henry and Mudge and the Wild Wind (1992)

Henry and Mudge and the Long Weekend: The Eleventh Adventure (1993)

Henry and Mudge and the Wild Wind: The Twelfth Book of Their Adventures (1993)

Henry and Mudge Get the Cold Shivers: The Seventh Book of Their Adventures (1994)

Henry and Mudge and the Happy Cat: The Eighth Book of Their Adventures (1994)

Henry and Mudge and the Careful Cousin, The Thirteenth Book of Their Adventures (1994)

Henry and Mudge and the Best Day of All: The Fourteenth Book of Their Adventures (1995)

Henry and Mudge in the Family Trees: The Fifteenth Book of Their Adventures (1997)

I Had Seen Castles (1993)

A Kindness (1989)

Night in the Country (1986)

Margaret, Frank, and Andy: Three Writers' Stories (1996)

Miss Maggie (1983)

Mr. Putter and Tabby Bake the Cake (1994)

Mr. Putter and Tabby Feed the Fish (2000)

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Mr. Putter and Tabby Fly the Plane (1997)
Mr. Putter and Tabby Pick the Pears (1995)
Mr. Putter and Tabby Pour the Tea (1994)
Mr. Putter and Tabby Row the Boat (1997)
Mr. Putter and Tabby Walk the Dog (1994)
The Old Woman Who Named Things (1996)
Poppleton (1997)
Poppleton and Friends (1997)
The Relatives Came (1985)
Scarecrow (1997)
Silver Packages: An Appalachian Christmas Story (1997)
Soda Jerk (1990)
Something Permanent (1994)
This Year's Garden (1984)
The Van Gogh Cafe (1995)
Waiting to Waltz . . . a Childhood (1984)
The Whales (1996)
When I Was Young in the Mountains (1982)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bloomsbury Review, July, 1992, p. 22.
Booklist, Feb. 15, 1992, p. 1105; Jan. 1, 1997, p. 854; Feb. 1, 1997, p. 950; April 1, 1997, p. 1334; April 15, 1997, p. 1437; August 1997, pp. 1910-11; Sept. 1, 1997, pp. 126, 135, 140-41.
Children's Literature Review, Volume 15, Gale, 1988, pp. 167-174.
Horn Book, November/December, 1987, pp. 695-703.
Kirkus Reviews, Jan. 15, 1992, p. 120.
New York Times Book Review, Nov. 10, 1985, p. 37; June 30, 1990, p. 24.
Publishers Weekly, March 8, 1985, p. 91; Feb. 3, 1992, p. 82; June 16, 1997, pp. 58, 59-60; July 21, 1997, pp. 178-79.
School Library Journal, March 1992, p. 241; March 1997, p. 165; April 1997, p. 116; October 1997, p. 43; September 1997, p. 193.
Something About the Author Autobiography Series, Volume 13, Gale, 1991, pp. 155-163.
Twentieth-Century Children's Writers, 4th ed., St. James Press, 1995.
Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers, 1st ed., St. James Press, 1994.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze different manifestations of love
2. To assess the powerful effect of love on people's lives
3. To recognize the themes of loyalty and acceptance
4. To appreciate the power of friendship
5. To understand the novel's title
6. To explore the ways kindness and acceptance can be shown
7. To find examples of affirmation
8. To understand death and grief
9. To describe the novel's mood or atmosphere
10. To predict what the future holds for Ob and Summer

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To assess the damage caused by abandonment
2. To probe the relationship between Ob and Summer, Summer and Cletus, and Cletus and his parents

3. To understand how much May's unconditional love means to Summer and Ob
4. To see how different people deal with death and grief
5. To explore why Ob and May decided to adopt Summer
6. To see the good in other people
7. To understand the novel's symbols, especially the owls and May
8. To compare and contrast Summer and Cletus
9. To learn when to listen rather than speak
10. To understand and communicate more effectively with old people

LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of Cynthia Rylant's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

humor is parts of a story that are funny. Humor can be created through sarcasm, word play, irony, and exaggeration. In *Missing May*, Rylant creates humor chiefly through gentle word play. For example, in Chapter 7, she describes the Reverend Miriam B. Young as "Small Medium at Large." Later in the same chapter, the Reverend is called the "Just-in-Time Lady." This is humorously ironic because the Reverend is dead, yet she nonetheless manages to knit the family together and help ease their grief.

setting is the time and place where the events take place. The setting may be stated outright, or you may have to infer it from details in the story. To infer the setting, look for words that tell *when* and *where*. Also look for clues in the characters' speech, clothing, or means of transportation. *Missing May* is set in the backwoods of West Virginia in the indeterminate present. The characters are poor in material possessions but rich in love and caring.

theme in a literary work is its main idea, a general statement about life. The theme can be stated outright in the work, or readers will have to infer it from details about plot, characters, and setting. The unstated theme of *Missing May* is the redemptive power of unselfish love. This is shown in the way that May's devotion to Ob and Summer transforms them from marginal outsiders to self-confident and independent people.

CROSS-CURRICULAR SOURCES

Books

William H. Armstrong, *Souder*
Joan W. Blos, *A Gathering of Days*
Betsy Byars, *The Summer of the Swans*
Beverly Cleary, *Dear Mr. Henshaw*
Sharon Creech, *Walk Two Moons*
Karen Cushman, *The Midwife's Apprentice*
Sid Fleischman, *The Whipping Boy*
Jean Craighead George, *Julie of the Wolves*
Patricia Reilly Giff, *Lily's Crossing*
Karen Hesse, *Out of the Dust*
E. L. Konigsburg, *The View from Saturday*
Lois Lowry, *Number the Stars*
Emily Cheney Neville, *It's Like This, Cat*
Katherine Paterson, *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved*
Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, *Shiloh*
Armstrong Sperry, *Call It Courage*
Jerry Spinelli, *Maniac Magee*
Cynthia Voigt, *Dacey's Song*
Maia Wojciechowska, *Shadow of a Bull*

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Internet

"Cynthia Rylant Home Page," <www.rylant.com>

Videos/DVDs

Breaking Away (1979)

The Horse Whisperer (1998)

The Iron Giant (1999)

The Mighty (1998)

Never Cry Wolf (1983)

The Princess Bride (1987)

The Secret of Roan Inish (1995)

THEMES AND MOTIFS

A study of the central issues and situations in Cynthia Rylant's *Missing May* should include these aspects:

Themes

- adoption
- death
- elderly people
- family love
- fitting in
- friendship
- grief and loss
- loyalty
- poverty
- survival

Motifs

- dealing with the painful loss caused by the death of a loved one
- the transforming power of unselfish, unconditional love
- the importance of judging people individually
- the effect of abandonment on children
- why we must cooperate and help others
- reasons why some people gravitate toward spiritualism in times of trouble
- finding consolation in memories of a beloved person
- the relative unimportance of money in relation to the significance of love
- how love can inform and transform crippling grief
- humor and mysticism

MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each. Chapter and page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. That first night in it with Ob and May was as close to paradise as I may ever come in my life. (Chap. 1, p. 5)
(Ob and May have adopted Summer and taken her to live with them in their modest trailer. Orphaned as a young child when her parents died in a flash flood and subsequently passed from relative to relative, life with Ob and May represents the first stable home Summer can remember. The trailer full of fanciful whirligigs and abundant love renews Summer and fills her with happiness. Living with Ob and May is Summer's idea of being in heaven.)
2. May was the best person I ever knew. (Chap. 2, p. 15)
(Summer is correct in her assessment: May is unselfish, loving, and generous. Every night she rubs ointment on Ob's sore knee. Every day she looks at Summer on the swing and says: "Summer honey, you are the best little girl I ever did know." At the end of Chapter 7, Summer even links May to Christ when she says: "Pretty soon

we'll all be in Ob's Valiant, traveling like wise men to Bethlehem, looking for that star in the sky that might point us to May.")

3. Now Ob wants to keep Cletus here like he was installing some afterlife antenna on the place. (Chap. 4, p. 31)
(At first, Summer thinks that Cletus is strange, ill-groomed, and outside the mainstream. Gradually, she comes to recognize his essential goodness, much like May's selfless love. Here, Cletus offers Ob hope that they can contact May in the afterlife. Overcome with grief, Ob clings to this slender strand of hope.)
4. And in the oddest way Cletus became what we'd needed all along from the undertaker and preacher and visiting relatives. (Chap. 5, p. 36)
(Cletus becomes the perfect counselor because he listens to Ob but does not respond. Rylant explores the importance of being a sounding board for those in need, especially the elderly and the grief-stricken.)
5. Ob's not making yard decorations. He's making art. (Chap. 5, p. 39)
(Cletus recognizes that Ob's whirligigs spring from his subconscious and thus are an expression of the true artistic soul. Rylant suggests this by stressing that Ob doesn't carve animals; rather, he creates abstract shapes.)
6. And I knew, in an instant, that this was not the same boy who had been coming to us with his battered old suitcase all these weeks. (Chap. 8, p. 60)
(When she visits Cletus' home and meets his parents, Summer realizes that he is deeply loved for himself, purely and simply. His parents adore him and have created an environment in which he feels totally safe.)
7. It made me think about the difference between Cletus and me. (Chap. 8, p. 65)
(Cletus is able to trust things to be all right. Summer, in contrast, is worried about losing everything. This is no doubt due to the differences in their upbringings: Cletus has been raised in a safe and secure environment his entire life, while Summer had her life ripped out from under her when her parents died.)
8. I remembered then, I remembered May. I began to cry. (Chap. 11, p. 83)
(At the novel's climax, Summer has an epiphany and is able to deal with her grief over May's death. She realizes that May is truly gone forever. Now Summer is ready to begin her healing.)
9. I always told Ob he was my moon and sun. And when you came to us, Summer, honey, you were my shining star. (Chap. 11, p. 87)
(In a flashback, Summer recalls May's total love, which she will use as a ballast to support her in her entire life. May's reassurance that Summer is the "best little girl" that she has ever known has helped the child fill the hole left by her early loss.)
10. "What is the true mission of spirit messages? To bring us consolation in the sorrows of life..." (Chap. 12, p. 89)
(Cletus reads this from the handout from the Reverend's nephew. Ob and Summer smile and "a big wind came and set everything free," enabling each character to go on without May.)

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COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. When and where does the story take place? Why is the setting significant to the plot?
(The story takes place in Deep Water, West Virginia. It is a poor area, but Summer feels rich because Ob and May adopted her and love her very much.)
2. How did May feel about Summer?
(May loved Summer with all her heart. She called Summer "The best little girl I ever did know.")
3. How does Ob react to May's death?
(At first, Ob is very sad about May's death, but he manages to function. As the months pass, however, he becomes increasingly depressed and finds it hard to function. Ob reaches his lowest point one morning, when he cannot get out of bed to help Summer get ready for school. Ob is so despondent that he contemplates giving Summer up and having some other family take care of her.)
4. In what ways does Cletus help Summer and Ob?
(Cletus provides Summer and Ob with friendship and companionship, talking to Ob and keeping him company. He also spends Christmas with them, eating and putting together a puzzle. Cletus also gives Ob hope that he may be able to contact May's spirit. Through their journey to the Reverend and the state capitol, Ob and Summer come accept the reality of May's death.)
5. What relationship does Cletus have with his family?
(Cletus is very close to his family; they surround him with unconditional love, much as May had loved Ob and Summer. Cletus feels equally loving toward his parents.)

Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. How is May special?
(May is kind, generous, and compassionate. She takes in the orphaned Summer and makes a real home for the child. She provides Ob with a home as well, a place that protects them all from the world's cruelty. Most of all, May is able to love unconditionally and make all the people she cares for feel blessed.)
7. Why does Ob believe that May's spirit has visited him?
(Ob is unable to let May go. He thinks that he sees her spirit because he must believe that she has not abandoned him. He is desperate to have some contact with her because she is the center of their life.)
8. Why does Ob decide to continue with his life?
(Summer believes that she saves Ob because she needs him so much. She believes that Ob cannot bear to say good-bye to her. Ob might also regain his spirit to live because he shares May's unselfish spirit and wants to continue her legacy of love.)

Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. What does May's garden symbolize in the novel?
(May's garden symbolizes the Garden of Eden, the perfect happiness that May, Ob, and Summer experience together in their small trailer and garden. With May's death, Eden has ceased to exist and Ob and Summer no

longer live in paradise. Although they can never recreate the perfect world they had with May, Ob and Summer do cobble together a life as they heal from their loss.)

10. What does the title mean? Argue that it does or does not fit the theme.

(The title refers to the feelings Ob and Summer have after May's death. The title fits the theme because the entire story concerns the attempts Ob and Summer make to deal with their grief over May's death. Until their catharsis at the end of the novel, Ob misses May so much that he does not think he can continue living; Summer misses her so much that she is unable to fully express her sorrow.)

Questions 11 and 12 (Creative Level)

11. Working with a small group of classmates, discuss some ways that you might have coped with Summer's situation had you been in her place.
12. Explain why May and Ob decided to take Summer into their home and hearts.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Art and Music

1. Create one of Ob's whirligigs that expresses his individuality. Demonstrate it for the class.
2. Summer says that Ob looks like Ichabod Crane, a character in Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle." Read the story and sketch Ichabod/Ob.
3. Find at least six pictures to add to Cletus' collection. Display each picture and explain why Cletus would like it.
4. Ob loves the tango. Play some tango music for the class and explain its history. Learn a few tango steps to demonstrate for the class, too.
5. Create a puzzle that Ob and Cletus would like to put together. Glue a picture on stiff cardboard. When it dries, cut it apart in small shapes. Working with a classmate, assemble the puzzle.
6. Cletus explains that one of his pictures is surreal art. Find at least two examples of surreal art to display. Include a paragraph explaining how each picture is surreal.

History and Geography

1. Prepare a report of the West Virginia capitol or the capitol in your state.
2. Write the paper on women's suffrage that Summer has been assigned in Chapter 4.
3. List five famous people from West Virginia. Select one and write a newspaper article explaining why the person is worthy of an award.
4. Many communities still have Welcome Wagons that greet newcomers with packages of small gifts and coupons relating to their new community. Make a Welcome Wagon package for newcomers to your town. Include information on your town's history, culture, and customs.
5. Ob is a disabled Navy man. Learn more about the history of the United States Navy and careers in the United States Navy today.

Language Arts

1. In Chapter 1, Summer alludes to feeling like Alice in Wonderland. Read the novel of the same name and give

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- a speech in which you compare and contrast Summer to Alice.
2. Write the newspaper story reporting the death of Summer's parents in a flash flood.
 3. May is very kind. Pretend that you are May and perform at least three random acts of kindness.
 4. Write a note of condolence to Ob, offering your sympathy on May's death. Imagine that you knew May well, so you can offer specific reasons why she will be missed.
 5. In Chapter 6, Summer jokes that she, Ob, and Cletus are like the characters in *The Wizard of Oz* setting off to the Emerald City. Watch *The Wizard of Oz* movie or read the book. Parallel each of the characters in *Missing May* to one of the characters in *The Wizard of Oz*.
 6. Imagine that Summer, Ob, and Cletus did meet Reverend Young. Role-play the scene they might have had.
 7. Many words in English are easily confused, such as *capitol/capital*. List at least 20 easily confused word pairs, define each word, and explain how writers can remember what each word means. Possible pairs include *fair/fare*, *compliment/complement*, *here/hear*, *alter/altar*, *conscience/conscious*.
 8. With a small group of classmates, debate whether adoptions should be open (birth parents stay in contact with the children they have placed for adoption) or closed (birth parents do not have contact with their children).

Mathematics

1. Plan a car trip to your state capitol. Include the mileage and the cost of such a trip. Add up the cost of hotel rooms, meals, gas, and tolls.
2. Mr. and Mrs. Underwood are elderly. Find out the average age for men and women in 1900, 1950, and 2000. How much longer are we living today?
3. How much does a trailer cost? How much does the average house in your community cost? Make a chart showing the difference in cost.

Science and Health

1. Plan May's garden, using plants that would flourish in West Virginia. If time permits, plant several of the flowers you selected in pots to place on the classroom windowsill.
2. May suffers from diabetes. Prepare a report on this medical condition, including the two different forms the disease can take and how each form is treated.
3. Make a menu of healthful breakfasts that Summer could prepare for herself before she goes to school.
4. Role-play a skit in which you counsel Summer to help her deal with her grief. Offer her specific ways to deal with the loss of May.
5. May likes bats and treats them gently when they get trapped in the trailer. Are bats safe? Find out more about bats and prepare a bulletin board or web page with your findings.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. The garden has great meaning to Ob and Summer because it represents May and her boundless love. Select an item from your life and explain its significance to the people you love.
2. Lead a debate about whether older couples should be encouraged to adopt young children. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages to the children as well as the

parents. Account for Ob and May adopting Summer.

3. Create a valentine that Summer might have sent to May. Be sure to suit the valentine to Summer's age and abilities at the time.
4. Using scenes from the novel, create a mural that shows its main themes.
5. Find out more about spiritualism. Based on what you find, argue that spiritualism is or is not a hoax.
6. Read another book by Cynthia Rylant. Compare and contrast it to *Missing May*.

ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. List examples of ways that parents can bolster their children's self-esteem, as May does for Summer.
2. Compile a list of actions that demonstrate how May and Ob are excellent parents.
3. Outline a sequel to the novel, using the three main characters: Ob, Summer, and Cletus.
4. Make a character list and explain the character flaws and strengths of each individual.

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VOCABULARY TEST

First unscramble each of the following vocabulary words from *Missing May*. Then use the words to fill in the appropriate spaces on the corresponding numbered lines. When you have completed the entire puzzle, another vocabulary word will read vertically in the circled spaces.

Word List

delirium hoisted miserably sincere tango
grunting lunatic Renaissance snooping wide-eyed

- | | |
|----------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. EEYDDEWI | staring |
| 2. TEIDSHO | lifted up |
| 3. ERMABLISY | unhappily |
| 4. CEISSNNAARE | a rebirth of the arts in Europe |
| 5. CNATILU | insane person |
| 6. CERESIN | genuine |
| 7. NGOTA | Spanish dance |
| 8. MDELIRIU | hallucinations |
| 9. UINGNTGR | groaning |
| 10. INGOOPSN | spying |

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

New word: _____

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COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blanks provided.

- | | | |
|-------|--|--------------------------------|
| _____ | 1. collects pictures of strange things | A. May |
| _____ | 2. where Summer lives | B. Cletus |
| _____ | 3. believes that Summer is the "best little girl in the whole world" | C. Ob |
| _____ | 4. a place that Cletus very much wants to visit | D. Mr. and Mrs. Underwood |
| _____ | 5. Cletus' elderly parents | E. the trailer |
| _____ | 6. the Small Medium at Large | F. Reverend Young |
| _____ | 7. where the story takes place | G. Deep Water, Virginia |
| _____ | 8. orphaned when her parents died in a flash flood | H. West Virginia State Capitol |
| _____ | 9. gives Ob a handout about spiritualism | I. Reverend Young's nephew |
| _____ | 10. May's husband, a disabled Navy veteran | J. Summer |

Part II: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either **T** for true or **F** if any part is false.

- _____ 1. Cletus makes whirligigs in imaginative shapes that express his joy and love for his family.
- _____ 2. May died while gardening.
- _____ 3. After May's death, Ob insists that she has come back from the dead to visit him.
- _____ 4. Cletus spends part of Easter with Ob and Summer, doing a puzzle.
- _____ 5. Cletus had a near-death experience when he nearly drowned.
- _____ 6. Ob kindly rubbed Ben-Gay on Summer's sore knees every night.
- _____ 7. Six months after May's death, Ob falls into a deep depression and is too sad to get out of bed.
- _____ 8. Cletus tells Ob and Summer about the Spiritualist Church of Glen Meadows, whose pastor can communicate with the dead.
- _____ 9. The Underwoods are rich and have a large, beautiful home.
- _____ 10. The Reverend Young died before Ob, May, and Cletus visited her.

MISSING MAY

Part III: Motivation (20 points)

Complete each line below with a reason or explanation.

1. Summer goes to live with Ob and May because
2. Summer loves being with Ob and May because
3. Many people consider Cletus odd because
4. After May dies, Ob stands in the garden because
5. Ob enjoys spending time with Cletus because
6. Ob decides to take Summer and Cletus to Putnam County because
7. When Summer meets Cletus' parents, she feels ashamed because
8. Miriam Young's nephew is living in her house because
9. Ob announces that they will visit the capitol anyway because
10. When they arrive at the capitol, Summer erupts in a flood of tears because

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Which characters do you find most admirable? Why?
2. Cynthia Rylant's writing style has been described as unadorned, clear, and lyrical. Find examples in *Missing May* to illustrate this assessment of Rylant's style.
3. How does Ob react to May's death? Why does he react this way?
4. What function does Cletus serve in the novel?

MISSING MAY

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Underline a word or phrase to complete each of the following statements.

1. Summer, May, and Ob live in a (trailer, apartment house).
2. Ob makes (puppets, whirligigs) in imaginative shapes that express his joy and love for his family.
3. May died suddenly while (shopping, gardening).
4. When the story opens, (six, two) months have passed since May's death.
5. The previous fall, Ob had spotted Cletus Underwood snooping around the family's old (car, outhouse).
6. Cletus is an odd boy who collects (stamps, old pictures).
7. Ob decides to take Summer and Cletus on a trip to meet (Mr. and Mrs. Underwood, Reverend Young).
8. Ob, Summer, and Cletus also plan to visit the (West Virginia, Florida) capitol.
9. After their trip, Ob makes a choice to (live, die).
10. Summer realizes that May has given her the precious gift of (love, jewelry).

Part II: Matching (30 points)

Match the following quotations with names of characters from the list below. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- | | |
|--|--|
| _____ 1. where the story takes place | A. May |
| _____ 2. the Reverend Young | B. Cletus |
| _____ 3. Cletus' mother | C. Ob |
| _____ 4. offers Ob information about the afterlife | D. Margradel Underwood |
| _____ 5. the Reverend Young's church | E. Spiritualist Church of Glen Meadows |
| _____ 6. May's husband | F. the Small Medium at Large |
| _____ 7. Summer's classmate | G. Deep Water, Virginia |
| _____ 8. a big bundle of love | H. West Virginia State Capitol |
| _____ 9. place that Cletus really wants to visit | I. Reverend Young's nephew |
| _____ 10. orphan adopted by Ob and May | J. Summer |

MISSING MAY

Part III: Identification (20 points)

Explain why each is important in the story.

1. May
2. May's garden
3. the bats
4. the Reverend Miriam Young
5. the owl

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Summarize what you learned about love and loss from this novel.
2. Trace the novel's plot. Include the rising action, climax, and resolution.
3. One critic has remarked: "Rylant's characters tend to be contemplative and set apart from their peers by their situations." Apply this comment to Cletus and Summer.
4. Rylant herself noted: "I don't ever quite write really happy novels; I don't want to deal with the people who have what they want. I want to deal with people who don't have what they want, to show their lives too." Explain how this quote applies to *Missing May*.

MISSING MAY

VOCABULARY TEST

1. (w)ide-eyed
2. (h)oisted
3. m(i)serably
4. (r)enaissance
5. (l)unatic
6. s(i)ncere
7. tan(g)o
8. del(i)rium
9. (g)runting
10. (s)nooping

New word: **whirligigs**

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. B | 6. F |
| 2. E | 7. G |
| 3. A | 8. J |
| 4. H | 9. I |
| 5. D | 10. C |

Part II: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. F |
| 2. T | 7. T |
| 3. T | 8. T |
| 4. F | 9. F |
| 5. T | 10. T |

Part III: Motivation (30 points)

1. they offer her a permanent home. Summer's parents died and she had been shuttled around from relative to relative.
2. they love her and each other.
3. he collects pictures, which he stores in a suitcase.
4. he is waiting for her spirit to revisit him.
5. Cletus is good company; he listens well.

ANSWER KEY

6. he wants to ask the Reverend to help him contact May's spirit.
7. she sees the difference between their adoration of Cletus and her disgust.
8. he is putting her affairs in order after her death.
9. he realizes that life goes on.
10. she suddenly feels all her grief at May's death.

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- | | |
|---------------|-------------------|
| 1. trailer | 6. old pictures |
| 2. whirligigs | 7. Reverend Young |
| 3. gardening | 8. West Virginia |
| 4. six | 9. live |
| 5. car | 10. love |

Part II: Matching (30 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. G | 6. C |
| 2. F | 7. B |
| 3. D | 8. A |
| 4. I | 9. H |
| 5. E | 10. J |

Part III: Identification (20 points)

1. May represents total and unconditional love.
2. May's garden represents the Garden of Eden, the perfect world. She created this paradise through her love for her family.
3. The bats represent May's love for all creatures, even those that others find fearful and unappealing.
4. the Reverend Miriam Young represents the futile hope we often chase when we are desperate.
5. To May, the owl becomes a symbol of all the love that Summer brought into their lives.

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.



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