



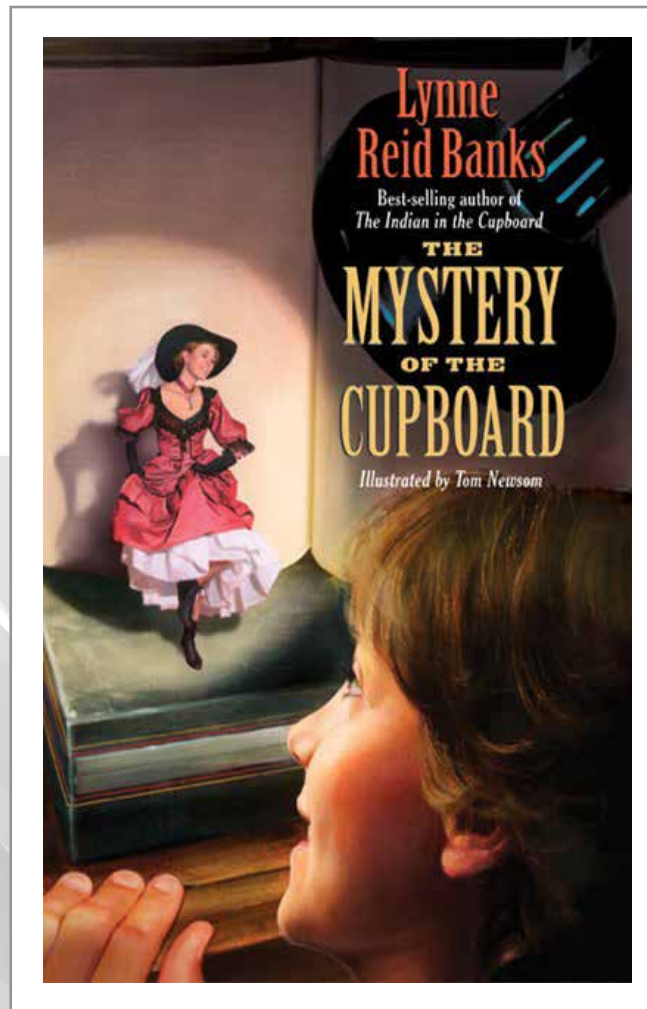
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 3-5**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# **The Mystery of the Cupboard**

Lynne Reid Banks



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# The Mystery of the Cupboard

Lynne Reid Banks

## TEACHER GUIDE

### NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Summary

Omri, a London teenager, is at first distressed to learn his family is moving to a country house his mother has inherited from her uncle, Frederick. After a visit to the 1704 “longhouse” with his parents and older brothers, Gillon and Adiel, Omri begins to feel the place has something magical about it. Omri has been a firm believer in magic since his discovery that an old key, when turned in the lock of a small cupboard given to him by Gillon, brought to life his plastic action figures, whose real lives, as normal-sized people, continued in various time frames. Omri has vowed to eschew the “little people’s magic,” sure that they had caused a devastating storm that took lives, and has asked his father to put the paper-wrapped cupboard and its magic key in the vault at the bank.

Moving day is marred by the disappearance of Omri’s cat, Kitsa. One night while Omri is outside looking for Kitsa, he comes across an old notebook and metal cash box hidden in the thatch being discarded as thatchers re-roof the house. Omri is magically drawn to the notebook kept by his great-great aunt, Jessica Charlotte Driscoll in 1950, just prior to her death.

Omri grills his mother for information about his ancestors, and learns that Jessica Charlotte was a “wicked black sheep” who had a “past.” The notebook, which he keeps hidden from his family, reveals the reasons: she became an actress, an unladylike profession in the late 1800s, and then made matters worse by having a baby, Frederick, out of wedlock. It turns out that Frederick’s father persuaded his relatives, who then lived in the longhouse, to take Jessica in until Fred was born. Maria, Jessica Charlotte’s sister and Omri’s great grandmother, was the only family member who remained in contact with Jessica Charlotte.

Maria, who had always thrown a shadow on Jessica, married Matthew Darren, and they had a daughter, Lottie. Jessica adored the little girl. She was devastated when Maria explained to her that a time would come when Lottie would begin to understand the kind of life her aunt led, and that when Jessica began to be a “bad influence” on Lottie, their relationship would have to end. It only made matters worse that Jessica’s own son, Fred, had begun to act hostile and strange toward her.

The notebook also reveals that the little cupboard Gillon gave Omri was once Jessica Charlotte’s, and that she too knew about “the little people.” Gillon confesses he found it down in the basement in their house in London, among a vast collection of their mother’s “family stuff,” and not in an alley, as he had first indicated.

As Omri reads, he learns more about Jessica’s tragic story. After difficult years of supporting herself with whatever work she could get, Jessica realized she had a psychic gift. During World War I, she cashed in on this gift by doing “readings” of boiling lead poured into water. She earned enough to send Frederick to school and also to buy the longhouse where he was born. It still bothered Jessica that Maria seemed to have everything she wanted—including the family jewels. She particularly coveted a pair of aquamarine earrings and planned to steal them from Maria’s red jewelry box. She made an impression of the key in wax and then cast her own key in lead, unwittingly imbuing it with the powers of her psychic gift. She realized immediately that the key could do much more than just unlock the jewelry box.

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According to the journal, Jessica bought a fine red dress and rented a horse to ride in the Armistice Day parade. She begged to take Lottie, then 8, with her. Matthew and Maria allowed Lottie to go, but told Jessica this would be the last time she could see Lottie.

The next day, using the excuse that she has come to say a final goodbye to Maria as well, Jessica stole the earrings, sure she'd never be suspected of the theft. She never dreamed Lottie would be accused. Hysterical, Lottie ran into the street, with Matthew behind her. Matthew was killed by a passing cab, leaving Maria desolate with grief and Jessica sick with guilt.

Omri realizes that the lead key Jessica described in the notebook is the same key he used to bring his plastic figures to life. In further conversation with his mother, he finds out that Maria's house was robbed of all its valuables, and that Lottie died young, leaving a nearly-penniless Maria to raise Omri's mother.

Once the incident about the theft of the earrings is related, the handwriting in the notebook changes. The writer is Frederick, at that time a cynical but successful businessman, writing at Jessica's direction since she was by that time too weak to hold a pen. Frederick tells of his unhappy childhood and his subsequent success making toy lead soldiers, then ammunition during World War II. At the war's end, Frederick hoped to return to toy-making, but by that time the preferred material for toys was plastic, which he found decadent and cheap. He continued to produce metal articles, such as medicine cupboards and cashboxes. He still felt tremendous anger and hatred toward plastic, so Frederick took his mother's advice to build a cabinet to "hold his anger," and included a lock to keep his bad feelings inside. Jessica Charlotte used her magic key to lock the cupboard. The diary ends here, except for a note in another hand recording Jessica's death and the writer's intention to "foller her instructions."

There is a tradition that thatchers leave notes in a bottle for the thatchers yet to come, and one day the bottle of the previous thatchers is discovered. Omri is fascinated with a note about "Missus D," and learns that some of the thatchers who worked for Jessica the last time the roof was done were still around.

Omri's friend, Patrick, comes for a visit. Patrick knows about the magic cupboard, and Omri quickly fills him in on the details of the notebook and shows him the locked cashbox. Patrick points out that the magic key, now in the bank vault, would probably open it.

Omri learns the whereabouts of Tom Towsler, one of the previous thatchers, and goes to visit him. Tom admits it was he who wrote the last entry in the notebook and then hid it and the cashbox in the thatch. He also explains that he packed a parcel sent to Maria after Jessica's death. It contained the little cupboard made by Frederick, the magical key, and a note reading "I took them." Most importantly, Tom tells Omri that Jessica took him into her confidence about the little people, and that she had left him one called Jenny, his dear companion until quite recently, when she "stopped being human" and turned into plastic. Tom is sure there must be other plastic forms of the people Jessica spirited away from the past, and both Omri and Tom think they are in the cashbox.

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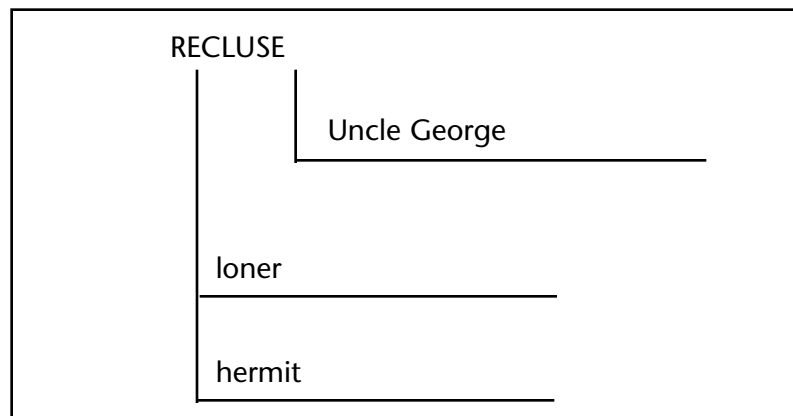
## Chapters 1-2, pages 1-29

### Vocabulary

longhouse 1	ajar 1	freak 3	compound 4
indignantly 5	flake 6	spread-eagled 7	rottweiler 8
loopy 9	imperceptible 10	paddock 11	consulting 11
corrugated 12	enthused 13	fatuous 14	demolished 16
persisted 17	recluse 21		

### Vocabulary Activity

Have students make up individual vocabulary cards that connect the target word and its definition with something or someone from the student's personal experience or observation. For example, if "recluse" happens to describe a student's Uncle George, the student's card might look like this:



### Discussion Questions

1. Why is Omri's family moving? (*Omri's mother inherited a house in the country.*) How does everyone feel about the move? Does the picture on page 2 capture how everyone feels? (*Omri is upset about having to move, while his parents look forward to avoiding the problems of city life.*) What are some of the good and bad points about moving that the family members mention? (*Omri points out how chaotic moving is; Omri's parents talk about the poor schools and crime rate in the city.*) Do you sympathize more with Omri, or with his parents?
2. What are each of the three brothers like? (*Adiel, the oldest, is more studious than Gillon, who likes to clown, and Omri, who is more serious.*) How do they get along? (*They squabble.*) Would you like to be a member of this family?
3. How does Omri's mother spark Omri's daydream about a cowboy? (*She mentions they might get a pony.*) For those who have read other books in this series: how do you explain Omri's daydream? (*He is thinking of Little Bear.*)

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4. What sort of “brotherly signal” do you think Gillon gives Omri (p. 9) and what sort of “imperceptible nod” do you think Omri gives in return (p. 10)? (*They are acknowledging to each other that the move might be okay.*) Act out this exchange of body language with a partner. Why does Omri’s heart suddenly feel “unaccountably light” (p. 10)? (*He enjoys thinking about his friend, Little Bear.*)
  5. What problems come up as the family gets involved in moving? (*Packing is chaotic; the cat gets lost.*) For students who have moved: Is the move in the book at all like yours was?
  6. How does Omri try to protect his privacy? (*He chooses an inner room so Gillon won’t be passing through.*) What does he hide? (*He hides his plastic figures in the holes in some bricks.*) Why? (*Omri wants to prevent anyone from finding them; they have real lives*) How important is privacy to you?
  7. What do you learn from the letters Omri and Patrick send each other? (*Omri dreads school, invites Patrick to visit; Patrick tries to change Omri’s mind about taking IT out of the bank.*) Are they close friends? (*yes*)
  8. How does Gillon tease Omri? (*Gillon threatens to tell their father that Omri’s package is a cupboard.*) Why do you think Gillon teases Omri? (*He doesn’t like Omri keeping secrets from him.*)
  9. What secret does Omri have the urge to tell Gillon? Why? (*Omri is tempted to tell Gillon that plastic figures come alive in the cupboard—partly because he is lonely and misses his old friends and cat.*) Do you do more talking when you are lonely? What do you think would happen if Omri told Gillon why the cupboard is valuable?
  10. **Predictions:** What is the IT that Patrick wants Omri to take out of the bank? Will Kitsa reappear? Will Omri change his mind about leaving the plastic figures alone? Will Omri tell anyone his secret?

### Language Study

Have students point out words and phrases in this section that are distinctly British (e.g., *Mum, estate agent, barmy*). Have them keep a running list of these “Britishisms” and their American “translations.”

### Geography

Have students locate England on a world map. Have them find London (where Omri lives) and Kent (where Patrick lives) on a map of England. Have students speculate about the approximate location of “Hidden Valley”—the place to which the family in the story moves from London, a “village in deepest Dorset” that is about four hours’ drive from London. Students should plot the route over which Omri’s family may have driven, marking what rivers or streams they may have crossed and what towns they may have seen along the way.

### Writing Activities

1. You are Omri. Write a letter to Patrick telling him about your new school, home, etc.