



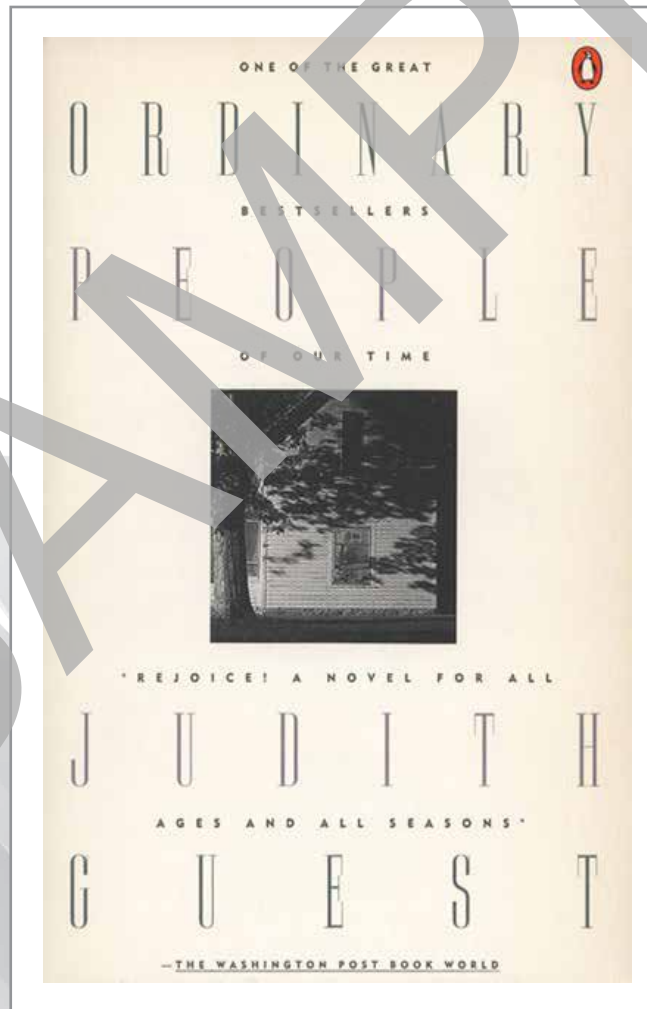
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# Ordinary People

Judith Guest



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

# Ordinary People

Judith Guest

## 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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**ISBN 978-1-50204-060-2**

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## Skills and Strategies

### Critical Thinking

Brainstorming, research, foreshadowing, analysis, sequence, prediction

### Comprehension

Compare/contrast, inference, cause/effect, pros/cons

### Literary Elements

Metaphor, symbolism, conflict, characterization, irony, theme, point of view, author style, plot, title

### Vocabulary

Definitions, applications, synonyms/antonyms

### Listening/Speaking

Oral presentations, class discussion, acting/drama

### Writing

Poetry, essay, short story, brochure, letter, freewriting, synopsis, review questions

### Across the Curriculum

Art—painting, photography, sketch, collage; Music—appropriate selections; Sociology—social stigmas, “typical” families, illusion vs. reality, dreams, life goals

**Genre:** fiction, family drama

**Setting:** mid-1970s in Lake Forest and Evanston—both suburbs of Chicago, Illinois, and Dallas, Texas, respectively

**Point of View:** third-person limited omniscient

**Themes:** loss, grief, depression, suicide, love, finding one's purpose in life, acceptance, forgiveness, divorce, death

**Conflict:** person vs. society, person vs. self, person vs. person, person vs. nature

**Style:** narrative

**Tone:** serious, tense

**Date of First Publication:** 1976

## Summary

Conrad Jarrett returns home after spending time in a hospital recovering from a failed suicide attempt. Conrad blames himself for his older brother's death, a tragic drowning that occurred on Lake Michigan a year earlier. While he is physically healed, Conrad's emotions are still very fragile. His attempts to rejoin his swim team, reconnect with friends from the hospital, and rejoin his circle of high school friends result in failure. Pushed into seeing a therapist by his father, Conrad meets with Dr. Berger and begins to piece his life back together. Conrad's father, Calvin Jarrett, worries about his son's ability to readjust to high school and family life. Calvin's concern is so persistent that his wife, Beth Jarrett, accuses Calvin of coddling their son. Beth, a vibrant, independent woman, shows little emotion toward Conrad and hides her family's problems from friends and other family members. The loss of her older son has deadened Beth's ability to love, and she pushes away any painful reminders of the past. Calvin constantly worries about the state of his marriage and the health of his son and attempts to heal the past by openly discussing the family's issues and keeping constant vigilance. This directly contradicts Beth's desire to hide the family's problems and simply move on. As Conrad begins to date and overcome his personal demons, Calvin and Beth's marriage crumbles in a series of vicious arguments. The book ends on both high and low notes, with Calvin and Beth separated, and Conrad involved in a serious romantic relationship and rediscovering old friends.

## About the Author

Judith Guest, great-niece of revered poet Edgar A. Guest, was born in 1936 in Detroit, Michigan. A graduate of the University of Michigan, she studied English and psychology and has written fiction since the age of ten. *Ordinary People* was her first novel. It took three years to write and was rejected twice before Viking Press published the book in 1976. The book met with high praise from literary critics. Due to controversial topics discussed in the novel, the American Library Association currently lists *Ordinary People* as number 59 on their "100 Most Frequently Challenged Books" list.

Robert Redford bought the rights to turn *Ordinary People* into a film, and his film version went on to win the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1980. The film also won Academy Awards for directing (Robert Redford) and acting (Timothy Hutton as Conrad Jarrett).

Since the success of *Ordinary People*, Guest has written several other novels including *Second Heaven*, *Errands*, and *The Tarnished Eye*. She has three sons, seven grandchildren, and currently resides in St. Paul, Minnesota, with her husband.

## Chapters 1–5

Conrad Jarrett returns from the hospital after an attempted suicide and struggles to find peace in his day-to-day life. He is no longer comfortable at school, at home, or with his friends. Reminders of his deceased brother surround him, and Conrad attempts to follow a routine to keep his wounded psyche in check. His father frets about Conrad's readjustment. Calvin questions his role as a father and a husband and constantly reexamines the duties involved with both, believing he must "Strive, strive. Correct all defects" (p. 9). Calvin convinces his son to see Dr. Berger, the psychiatrist recommended by the hospital. Although Conrad recognizes in his sessions the typical psychiatric games he encountered in the hospital, he finds Dr. Berger to be "loose" and accommodating.

### Vocabulary

antagonize  
tendrils  
affliction  
benefactors  
motes  
analysis  
indelible  
indifference  
prestige  
dissonance  
brusque  
opaque  
placebos  
perplexity  
benign

### Discussion Questions

1. Conrad believes that mornings are not "good times" for him. Why does he think this? How does he try to work through this problem? *(Too many details about his past and his current condition crowd his mind, and he becomes anxious about whether he is "on the Right Road" [p. 2] or if he is floundering. Feelings of anxiety and failure infest his thoughts the moment he wakes. He attempts to stick to a routine—a system that will keep him too busy to dwell on his condition and his past.)*
2. Examine the relationship Conrad has with his parents. What differences do you notice between Calvin's and Beth's parenting styles? Which do you feel is more beneficial to Conrad's adjustment? *(Conrad appears to regard his parents with indifference. He frequently hears them speaking from across the house but pays little attention because he knows they will not speak about him while he is around; Beth speaks to Conrad only in passing and frequently brushes him off. She asks Calvin to talk to their son about issues like clothes, school, and behavior. Calvin takes a more active role in communicating with Conrad. He tries to start a conversation at breakfast and inquires about Conrad's friends, classes, and how he is feeling. Answers will vary, but while Conrad may appreciate his mother leaving him alone, the conversation and interest stirred up by his father help coax Conrad out of his emotional solitude.)*
3. How does Calvin see his role as a father? *(Calvin sees fatherhood as being in a constant state of vigilance—talking to his children about small things like clothes and school and not applying too much pressure. He believes in looking for signs of problems around the curve and asking if his children are happy. "Responsibility. That is fatherhood. You cannot afford to miss any signs..." [p. 9].)*
4. Describe Conrad's friends. Does he have any close relationships? How does he conduct himself at school? *(Conrad's two main friends, Lazenby and Van Buren, are congenial and easygoing. Of these two, Conrad is closest to Lazenby. While Conrad gets along with both friends, he is not especially close with either since Buck's death and refrains from sharing his personal issues with them. Conrad feels distant and awkward around everyone at school, especially girls. He participates at a minimal level to maintain his "normal" status and avoid making enemies. He continues to sing in the school choir where he can let down his guard to a certain degree. He also practices with the swim team, though he enjoys that activity less and less each day.)*
5. In Chapter 3, Conrad is asked if Jude Fawley (the protagonist in Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure*) is powerless in the grip of circumstances or if he can help himself. How does

Conrad respond, and what might his reaction say about his own situation? *(Conrad is unsure how to reply at first but eventually says Fawley is powerless, or at least thought he was. Answers will vary as to why Conrad chose that response, but it may be a subconscious sign that Conrad thinks he is powerless in the grip of his current circumstances. He admits his weaknesses often and relies on avoidance techniques and structured routines to compensate for his inability to cope.)*

6. How does Coach Salan react to Conrad's time in the hospital? On what do you think this reaction is based? Do you think this reaction is typical of most people? *(Coach Salan is insensitive to Conrad's time in the hospital, asking if he is on meds or if they "shocked" him while he was there. Coach Salan's reaction is based on crude and outdated stereotypes of mental health care, and while most people may not be as unfeeling as the coach, there are probably few people who truly understand what it is like to go through an ordeal like Conrad's.)*
7. What writing style/technique does the author use when Conrad becomes upset or overwhelmed by his emotions? Why do you think the author chose this technique? *(When something upsets Conrad, like Stillman's boorish behavior in Chapter 3, Conrad's inner thoughts change from a standard sentence format to a stream of consciousness that has little or no punctuation to separate sentences. Answers will vary but may include that the style accelerates the pace of Conrad's thoughts, giving them a frantic tone.)*
8. Why do Beth and Calvin argue about where to go for Christmas vacation, and what does the argument reveal about their relationship and their attitudes toward Conrad? *(Beth is eager to continue their holiday tradition of visiting Europe, suggesting a "Dickens" Christmas in London. Calvin is immediately against the idea of leaving Conrad alone. He alludes to their "mistake" of going to Florida the year before, hinting that their absence may have been to blame for Conrad's attempted suicide during that time. The argument displays Calvin's overprotective desire to always be there for his son, Beth's desire to distance herself from the past, and the increasing communication struggle between husband and wife.)*
9. Why does the religious card Conrad sees in Dr. Berger's lobby make him growl and feel like "he is being strangled" (p. 37)? *(Answers will vary but could include that Conrad likely receives a constant bombardment of differing advice from friends, family, doctors, advertisements, articles, and random messages such as the message on the card. The intrusions and prodding come at him from so many angles that he is now suffocating in help he doesn't want.)*
10. What does Conrad mean when he asks, "how do you stay open, when nobody mentions anything, when everybody is careful not to mention it" (p. 45)? *(Conrad is wondering how he can move ahead when so many people in his life pretend his suicide attempt never happened, although he realizes that people cannot say something as awkward as "we're glad you didn't die" [p. 45] without feeling like it is inappropriate.)*

### Supplementary Activities

1. Pretend a close friend of yours asks for help readjusting to school life after going through an ordeal like Conrad's. What advice would you offer? How would you help? Write a personal letter explaining your advice.
2. Begin the Foreshadowing Chart on page 24 of this guide. Continue to fill out the chart as you read *Ordinary People*.
3. What services are available in your community for people dealing with depression and suicidal thoughts? Research different services (the guidance counselor's office is a good place to start), and create a brochure, flyer, or pamphlet.

## Characters With Character

**Directions:** A person's **character** is evaluated by his or her actions, statements, and by the way he or she treats others. For each of the attributes listed in the center of the page, write the name of one character from the novel who has this trait and the name of a character who does **not** have this trait. After each character's name, give an example of an action or statement which proves you have properly evaluated the character.

Has This Trait		Doesn't Have This Trait
	tells the truth	
	keeps promises	
	considers consequences of actions	
	sacrifices for others	
	listens to others without pre- judging them	
	is a good person	
	is kind and caring	