



TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 6-8

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Yolanda's Genius

Carol Fenner

READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

Yolanda's Genius

Carol Fenner

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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3901 Union Blvd., Suite 155

St. Louis, MO 63115

sales@novelunits.com

novelunits.com

Table of Contents

Summary	3
About the Author	3
Background Information	3
Characters	4
Initiating Activities.....	4
Vocabulary Activities.....	5
Four Sections	17
Each section contains: Summary, Vocabulary, Discussion Questions, and Supplementary Activities	
Post-reading Discussion Questions	21
Post-reading Extension Activities.....	22
Assessments	23
Scoring Rubric.....	25
Glossary.....	26

Skills and Strategies

Comprehension

Identifying main ideas and supporting details, predicting, summarizing

Writing

Creative writing, investigative reporting, poetry, letter, book review

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, songs, musical instruments

Literary Elements

Recognizing and examining figurative language, story mapping, setting, identifying author's theme and purpose

Critical Thinking

Identifying character attributes, conducting research, compare/contrast, cause/effect, problem solving, creative thinking, inferring

Vocabulary

Pictionary, synonyms, antonyms, context clues, using a thesaurus/dictionary

Across the Curriculum

Social Studies—geography, history; Science—heat convection; Music—famous musicians; Art—illustration; Technology—Internet research

Genre: fiction

Settings: Illinois and Michigan

Point of View: third person

Conflict: person vs. person, person vs. self

Tone: humorous, upbeat

Date of First Publication: 1995

Summary

When Yolonda's mother believes that their Chicago neighborhood is too dangerous for Yolonda, age 11, and her 6-year-old brother, Andrew, she moves the family to Grand River, Michigan. The place is far too boring to suit Yolonda, who has trouble adjusting even after months of living there. She's either ridiculed or ignored by her fellow students and succumbs to using her large size to confront a tormentor. But Yolonda does like her teacher and reluctantly forges an alliance with Shirley, a thin, white girl whom she treats disrespectfully. She also develops a crush on fellow schoolmate Stoney Buxton, a talented skateboarder.

One day Yolonda realizes that her little brother is a musical prodigy. Andrew is illiterate and is receiving tutorial help in school, but he nevertheless has an amazing gift when it comes to playing his recorder and harmonica. Their mother is more concerned about his reading, but Yolonda wants Andrew to have special training to advance his musical abilities. During a visit to her beloved Aunt Tiny in Chicago, Yolonda pretends that she and Andrew are lost at the Chicago Blues Festival so they can meet an influential musician. Her plan works, and a chance meeting with the legendary singer/guitarist B. B. King has Andrew performing onstage to a thrilled audience. On the ride back to Michigan, Yolonda feels hopeful about Andrew's future, as well as her own. She decides that she must begin with an apology to Shirley.

About the Author

Carol Fenner was born in 1929 in Almond, New York. She grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and Connecticut. She composed poetry when she was very young, and as a teenager she wrote plays and performed them with her friends in her home. After high school, Carol moved to New York City to study theater. She acted in many plays, commercials, and movies before working as an illustrator at an advertising agency. She lived her remaining years in Battle Creek, Michigan, with her husband, Jay Williams. Carol died on February 16, 2002. Among her award-winning books are *Tigers in the Cellar* (1963), *Gorilla, Gorilla* (1973), *The Skates of Uncle Richard* (1979), and *Randall's Wall* (1991–1992). *Yolonda's Genius* was a Newbery Honor Book in 1995.

Background Information

Yolonda's Genius was inspired by an actual event that happened in Chicago's Grant Park, home of many jazz and blues festivals. Carol Fenner attended many of them with her husband, a music enthusiast. During one such event, they saw a large girl onstage, clutching her little brother, who claimed to be lost. To Carol, the girl looked too mature and too composed to need that sort of assistance. Carol decided there must be a deeper story to explore, and she created Yolonda and her talented brother to tell such a story.

Jazz Music—Jazz music is widely considered the only art form to have begun in the United States. It began in the late 1800s and combined the rhythms, instruments, and harmonies of both African and American music.

Blues Music—Blues music is a form of jazz. It originated in the southern part of the United States. The sound has a doleful quality with simple, repeated harmonies.

The Chicago Blues Festival—The Chicago Blues Festival began in 1983. It is the largest free musical event in the world. The outdoor concert showcases over 70 acts and is enjoyed by thousands of people.

Characters

Yolonda Mae Blue—overweight but confident 11-year-old black girl; struggles with moving to a new town; believes her brother is a musical genius

Andrew Blue—6-year-old black boy; speaks very little; unable to read; has a great musical talent

Josie Blue (Momma)—Yolonda and Andrew’s mother; concerned for her children’s safety in Chicago, Illinois; moves the family to Grand River, Michigan

Shirley Piper—thin, gullible, white girl; befriends Yolonda when she arrives in Grand River

Aunt Tiny—Mr. Blue’s sister; happy, easygoing woman; very fashion- and style-conscious

Stoney Buxton—popular boy at Yolonda’s school in Grand River; is nice to Andrew and compliments Yolonda

Romulus Foster—drug dealing bully; leader of a gang of drug dealers called the Dudes; taunts and harasses Andrew

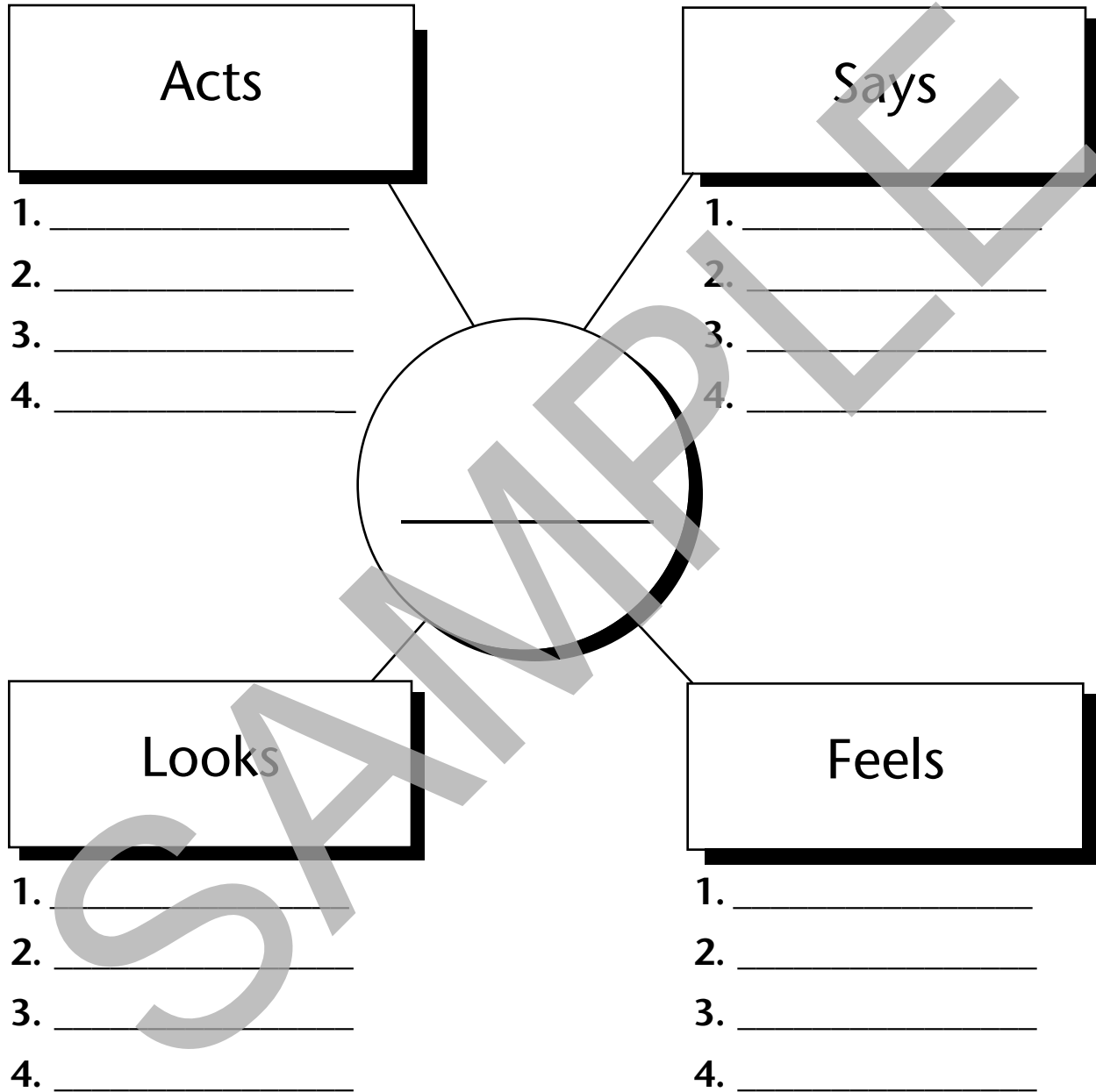
Initiating Activities

Use one or more of the following activities to introduce the novel.

1. **Vocabulary:** Have one or two students look up the word *genius* in the dictionary. Have students brainstorm a list of famous people they believe to be geniuses. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of having true genius.
2. **Predictions:** Have students begin the Prediction Chart on page 7 of this guide.
3. **Prereading:** Preview the book, noting the author’s name, the Newbery Honor Award logo on the front cover, and the dedication page.
4. **Social Studies:** Ask students to describe anyone they know who is very gifted in a particular field. How do they think that person became so talented? Is their ability completely natural or do practice and study play a role?
5. **Music:** Classical music (written by Mozart and Chopin), jazz, and blues are often mentioned in the novel. Let students listen to examples of these genres (such as Chopin’s *Nocturne in E flat* or George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*). Ask them to compare the sounds heard in each genre.

Character Attribute Web

Directions: The attribute web below will help you gather clues the author provides about a character in the novel. Fill in the blanks with words and phrases that tell how the character acts and looks, as well as what the character says and feels.



A character attribute web diagram. At the center is a circle with a horizontal line. Four lines radiate from the circle to four rectangular boxes: 'Acts' (top-left), 'Says' (top-right), 'Looks' (bottom-left), and 'Feels' (bottom-right). Each box has four numbered lines below it for notes.

Acts

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Says

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Looks

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Feels

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Chapters Ten–Thirteen, pp. 106–154

Aunt Tiny decides to visit the family, and Yolonda is delighted. Momma realizes that Andrew has a new harmonica and demands to know how he got it. Although Yolonda gains respect at school for standing up to Romulus Foster and his gang, she still feels terrible about not having been around to protect Andrew. When Shirley brings rope to the Blues' house for a turning lesson, Yolonda's rudeness offends her deeply and she walks away in a huff. Yolonda and her family drive to Chicago to spend their summer vacation.

Vocabulary

lug (106)
retribution (109)
tentative (109)
fond (110)
soberly (114)
enlivened (115)
giddy (115)
modified (123)
doggedly (125)
ponder (134)
tolerate (139)
ravishing (140)
stalled (140)
admonished (148)
vague (149)
warily (149)

Discussion Questions

1. How does Yolonda soothe her mother's anger about Andrew's new harmonica? (*Yolonda says the harmonica is "just like Daddy's" [p. 108].*)
2. Why are Yolonda and her mother so fond of Aunt Tiny? (*Aunt Tiny reminds them of Mr. Blue, who was her brother. She has the same hearty laugh and shares his warm, easygoing nature.*)
3. Why do you think Yolonda is rude to Shirley? (*Answers will vary. Suggestion: She would rather hurt Shirley than admit lying about turning ropes for double Dutch jumping. It may also feel better to lash out at Shirley instead of feeling guilty about leaving Andrew alone at Asphalt Park.*)
4. Yolonda thinks she'll look foolish if she apologizes to Shirley. What does this tell you about Yolonda's character? (*Yolonda is proud and stubborn. p. 126*)
5. Why do you think Yolonda tells the men in the restaurant that her mother doesn't usually look pretty? (*Answers will vary. Suggestion: Yolonda may be afraid that her mother will remarry*

someday. She may not be able to handle having a stepfather, no matter how lonely her mother is. p. 133)

6. If an 11-year-old girl moved next door to the Blue family, do you think Yolonda would act friendly toward her? Why or why not? (*Answers will vary.*)
7. **Prediction:** What will happen during the Blues' summer in Chicago?

Supplementary Activities

1. **Literary Devices:** **Simile**—"...a bad feeling that hung over her like a poison cloud" (p. 108); **Metaphor**—Shirley: toy poodle (p. 126); **Personification**—"...her fingers flirted in the air" (p. 121)
2. **Writing:** Write a letter to a friend or relative who lives far away, inviting him/her to visit you.
3. **Compare/Contrast:** Use the Venn Diagram on page 11 of this guide to compare and contrast Chicago, Illinois, and Grand River, Michigan.
4. **Character Analysis:** Using the T-chart on page 12 of this guide, list Yolonda's positive and negative traits.
5. **Poetry:** Write a poem about Aunt Tiny's visit to Grand River. If possible, make your poem rhyme.