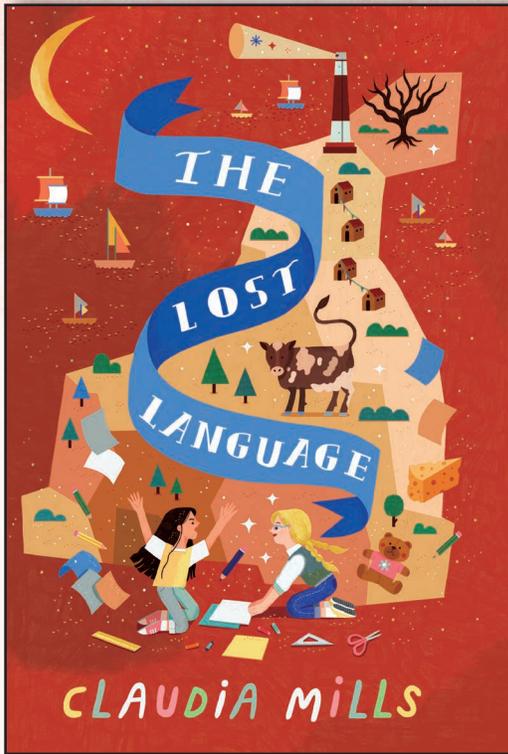


HOLIDAY HOUSE EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



Margaret Ferguson Books
HC: 9780823450381 · e-book: 9780823450695



The Lost Language

by Claudia Mills

ABOUT THE BOOK

The quest to save the words of a dying language—and to find the words to save what may be a dying friendship—lies at the heart of this exquisite novel in verse.

Sixth grader Betsy is the one who informs her best friend, Lizard, that thousands of the world's languages are currently threatened by extinction; Betsy's mother is a linguistics professor working frantically to study dying languages before they are lost forever. But it is Lizard who, gripped by the magnitude of this loss, challenges Betsy, "What if, instead of WRITING about dying languages, like your mom, you and I SAVED one instead?"

As the girls embark on their quest to learn as much as possible of the near-extinct language of Guernésiais (spoken on the Isle of Guernsey, off the coast of France), their friendship faces unexpected strains. With Lizard increasingly obsessed with the language project, Betsy begins to seek greater independence from her controlling and charismatic friend, as well as from her controlling and charismatic mother. Then tragedy threatens Betsy's life beyond what any words can express, and Lizard does something unthinkable. Maybe lost friendships, like lost languages, can never be completely saved.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Describe Betsy and Lizard's friendship. How did they become friends? Why does Betsy think that her mother doesn't like Lizard? What does Betsy's mom mean when she says Lizard is a "mover and a shaker"? At the end of the novel, Betsy's mom says that she admires certain qualities in Lizard. What are those qualities? Cite evidence that Lizard displays "spunk and spirit." Betsy's dad thinks that she has "spunk and spirit." How does the *Alice in Wonderland* play bring out this quality in Betsy?
- What is Lizard's reaction when Betsy gets a part in the school play? Why is Betsy afraid to tell Lizard not to wait for her after school? How does Betsy notice qualities in other girls like Zoey when she and Lizard are no longer friends? Explain why Lizard is so eager to tell Betsy bad things about Zoey. Why does Betsy find her friendship with Zoey more "restful" than her friendship with Lizard?
- Explain what Lizard means when she says that "givers marry takers" (p. 25). Why does Lizard say that Betsy's father is a giver and her mother is a taker? Discuss how Betsy takes issue with Lizard's assumption. Who is the giver and who is the taker in Betsy and Lizard's friendship? How does this begin to change by the end of the novel?



- Discuss Betsy’s relationship with her mom and dad. How is life simpler when her mom is away? How does Betsy’s mom expect perfection from her? Betsy auditions for the play and gets the part of an “extra flower.” Contrast her mom and dad’s reactions to the role. Betsy’s mom doesn’t have the language to communicate with her daughter. How does she make an effort after she comes home from the hospital? Explain what Betsy means by “We couldn’t have done our talking, if he (Dad) hadn’t been there doing his listening” (p. 256).
- Describe Lizard’s family. Why does Lizard tell Betsy that her father is a spy? At what point does Betsy detect that Lizard’s father is an alcoholic? Debate whether Lizard’s family issues contribute to her controlling nature. What is Lizard searching for? How does she finally find the words to reveal the truth about her father?
- What are Betsy’s fears? How does she deal with them? Debate whether she conquers these fears by the end of the novel. Betsy says that Lizard is the bravest girl at Southern Parks Middle School. Why does she think it useful to have a brave friend? Discuss whether Lizard is really that brave. How does Betsy become brave as the story progresses?
- Betsy’s mother speaks five languages and is a professor of linguistics. Discuss why Betsy and Lizard form a club to save a lost language. How do they decide which language to save? Discuss Betsy’s mom’s reaction when she learns about the club. Explain the following metaphor: “It’s more like my mom is Blackie the cat, and Lizard is the soon-to-be-eaten mouse and I’m the soon-to-be-eaten baby bird” (p. 175). Lizard seems to be surprised by Betsy’s mom’s disapproval. Debate whether Betsy is surprised by her mother’s reaction. How is saving a language more complicated than simply learning to speak a few words?
- What is the first hint that Betsy’s mom suffers from depression? Betsy thinks that her father returned from his trip because her mother needed to go to a conference. How does she learn that her mother is actually in the hospital? Why is Lizard so eager to tell the girls at the lunch table about Betsy’s mother? Discuss how the girls turn on Lizard for delivering this information. Debate whether Betsy feels betrayed when she learns that her dad lied to her about her mom’s suicide attempt.
- Betsy doesn’t know how she feels about her mom coming home from the hospital. Explain the symbolism of the “mixed flowers” that she gives her mother. How does Betsy’s mom explain her issues with anxiety and depression? Explain why being honest about mental health conditions is so important.

Guide created by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Claudia Mills has written many children’s books, including *7 x 9 = Trouble!*, the Franklin School Friends series, the After-School Superstars series, and *Zero Tolerance*. She recently received the Kerlan Award for her contribution to children’s literature. She was a professor of philosophy for more than two decades at the University of Colorado and is now a faculty member in the graduate programs in children’s literature at Hollins University. Dr. Mills lives in Boulder, Colorado. Visit her at claudiamillsauthor.com.

