



A Taste of Blackberries

Doris Buchanan Smith , Mike Wimmer (Illustrator)

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**What do you do without
your best friend?**

Jamie isn't afraid of anything. Always ready to get into trouble, then right back out of it, he's a fun and exasperating best friend.

But when something terrible happens to Jamie, his best friend has to face the tragedy alone. Without Jamie, there are so many impossible questions to answer -- how can your best friend be gone forever? How can some things, like playing games in the sun or the taste of the blackberries that Jamie loved, go on without him?

A Taste of Blackberries Details

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Author : Doris Buchanan Smith , Mike Wimmer (Illustrator)

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From Reader Review A Taste of Blackberries for online ebook

Emily Calzi says

A Taste of Blackberries by Doris Buchanan Smith is a truly somber tale. It is the story of two best friends who embark on many adventures together. The narrator is never named, but we do know his best friend Jamie. Jamie is the jokester, who especially loves attention. The narrator at times cannot stand his friends need for attention, and sometimes takes a break from Jamie. The fun comes to an abrupt halt and the story completely shifts to a sad and upsetting resolution. This novel honestly and truly speaks for the grief and pain associated with losing a loved one or close friend.

The few illustrations by Mike Wimmer are done realistically and in grey scale. They look as if they are drawn by pencil and pay close attention to detail. They highlight important themes and events that occur in the book.

I would recommend this book to all younger readers, especially accelerated first to third grade. Since this is a difficult topic for many children to understand, it is important that the children have an adult with whom they can discuss their feelings with and talk things out.

Alvina says

This book may have saved my mother's life.

This is one of the first children's books to deal with death, and in it *****SPOILER ALERT!!!!**** the main character's best friend dies from bee stings (this book came before movies such as MY GIRL), and when I read this at a young age, I hadn't known that you could be allergic and die from something like a bee sting.

Years later when I was 12 or 13, my mother came to me at home and said she had been stung by a bee and was feeling funny. She seemed weak, and the site of the sting was also swelling up. I told her that bee stings were dangerous and it seemed like she was allergic and she should call a doctor right away. She did, was treated, and the doctor told her that I saved her life.

So, there you go. A children's book saved my mother's life.

Larissa says

Doris Buchanan Smith's A Taste of Blackberries starts with an idyllic childhood moment: two young friends rambling through a blackberry patch, checking to see if the fruit is ripe. The lazy summer day continues with races and some mischievous apple thieving, and Jaime, the (unnamed) narrator's friend, always vying for attention. Jaime is fun, but he's also melodramatic and a bit of a show off, and his antics are sometimes too much for the narrator to take.

Everything changes when Jaime stirs up a bees nest that afternoon. Many of the neighborhood children get stung, including Jaime, who makes a big show of thrashing around on the ground and yelling. Or at least,

everyone thinks it's a big show, until they find out that Jaime was allergic to bee stings. And the one or two stings he received were actually enough to kill him.

Conveying the senselessness of a child's death to young readers is difficult enough, but what makes *A Taste of Blackberries* even more tragic is the guilt that the narrator feels for ignoring his friend's cries of pain. Smith handles both aspects of this troubling situation with grace and empathy, allowing the narrator to explore a whole range of emotions and mourn in his own way (he feels like he can't eat until after Jaime's funeral).

Equally important, Smith illustrates that caring adults are present everywhere in the narrator's life. Not only his parents, but his neighbors, and even Jaime's mother are there for him as he navigates this difficult time, ready to listen or even just sit quietly with him as he begins to heal. This is an important point for children to take away from such a story--that the adults in their lives are ready and able to be there for them during difficult and painful times.

Imani ♥ ? says

When my fifth grade teacher read this to the class, I was so upset. I mean, here's this little stupid book. About some summer with these two boys. Best friends. LALALALALa. They're all happy. Then all of a sudden, some darn bee stings one of them...and, oh no!...one of them is allergic to bees. And get this...he DIES! I mean, DIESSSSSS. I mean, seriously? Then for the rest of the darn book the one boy is trying to cope. I'm not sure exactly where the blackberry thing comes in but it's in there somewhere. Anyway, what a depressing book :(

Holly Crepps says

"*A Taste of Blackberries*" is a heart-wrenching story about two boys who are best friends. The narrator, (who remains unnamed) admires his best friend, Jamie, and has been his partner in adventure for the duration of their childhood. One day, one of their fun pranks goes all wrong, and after a tragic accident Jamie dies. The rest of the book is about the narrator learning to live with the sadness of losing his best friend, and trying to deal with the burden of believing he could've prevented it.

The illustrations are beautiful and set the mood for the serious themes in this book. Because this book is full of such serious themes and ideas, I would suggest it for older readers of grade 4 and older. It is not a hard read, it could just be very sad and difficult to understand for younger readers. I loved this book. It was very touching. You learn to really love the characters by the end of the book. I would suggest this for mature readers, who have access to asking questions if they need to.

John Conrad says

I just saw a book category on someone's shelf named "Books that made me cry". I immediately thought of this book from my childhood and the many times I enjoyed crying over this short but touching book. Not being an expert on grief, I'm not sure if the author dealt with the topic in a clinically accepted way. To this day, I have never experienced prolonged grief at the loss of a friend or loved one. However, I think that

somewhere deep in my psyche this book has become part of the way I deal with loss because I read it at such a young age. I do recommend the book for the younger set. Maybe older people will like it too, but even back when I read it at the tender age of 10, it only took an hour or so to read.

Debbie says

I remembered reading this back in the 1980's for a university Children's Literature course and just re-read it. A great book to broach a difficult and often frightening subject for children. Written for kids, the ending is realistic, yet uplifting and hopeful.

Haselton says

"A Taste of Blackberries" is a simple book that deals with a complicated issue. Dealing with the death of someone is difficult always. Dealing with the death of a child is almost an unbearable tragedy. Dealing with all this emotion when you are a child yourself is unthinkable.

Catherine Kirk says

Transitional Book

This is the touching story of a young boy and his best friend, Jamie. It begins with a scene of them tasting blackberries and discovering that they are not yet ripe, then shows the two of them playing together, wrestling, and exploring. It is obvious that the two are best friends, even though Jamie can be a bit dramatic at times. However one day, while the neighborhood children are picking Japanese beetles from Mrs. Houser's grapevines, Jamie is stung by a bee. No one knows he is allergic, and he dies from the sting. After Jamie's death, the main character has to learn how to cope without his best friend, and has to deal with life's toughest questions at a young age. In the end, he realizes that it is okay to be happy, and that's what Jamie would have wanted. He agrees to spend time with Jamie's family, and picks Jamie's mother a basket of blackberries, which have ripened since the beginning of the story.

The cover of the version of this book that I read was kind of dull. I don't think it would particularly grab the interest of most children, but there are newer versions with different covers that may be more appealing. The illustrations are simple, black and white sketches of main events of the story. They are realistic, and would help the reader clarify questions that they may have about the main events of the story, so I think they would be helpful. The chapters are fairly short, but they are longer than the two- or three-page chapters that some chapter books have.

I would use this book in literature groups with third, fourth, or fifth grade students. Although the issue of death is a difficult one, I think that students need literature like this that helps them better understand it. Most students probably even have friends or family that have died suddenly, so this book would be helpful for them and would help them understand their feelings better. Although it is a sad book, it is hopeful in the end, which would be good for students going through these issues. This would also be a good book to have in a classroom library for independent reading time.

Sarah Pfingston says

This book is very unexpected. When reading the cover one would have no clue as to what the story is going to be about.

There are two friends Jamie and the Narrator. Jamie is a free spirit, dare devil, jokester type of kid. The narrator is best friends with Jamie, but they aren't very similar. The book describes different experiences the boys go through together and their day to day life. One day Mrs. Houser ask the boys to get Japanese beetles off her grapevines and Jamie is goofing off with a bee hole. He ends up getting stung and dies from a bee sting because he was allergic to bees. The story concludes with how the Narrator deals with his best friends death.

I loved this book. I think for young readers it may be unexpected and they may not fully understand death, but this is a great child's perspective of what death seems to be like. I would recommend it for fifth grade or older. The vocabulary isn't terribly hard, but it is a novel so it's somewhat lengthy. Also, there are a few illustration throughout the story. They are sketches with is completely appropriate given the tone of the story. The only negative about this book is that some students may then become terrified of bees, but overall I enjoyed this book

Debbie Boucher says

I read this with my class as preparation for Literature Circles. Whenever I'm the new teacher, I inherit whatever is in the closet. This novel set had enough copies for everyone and a guide to go with it, so I figured, What the heck? It was good, but in light of what just happened in Newtown, I found it heavy going. My students were fine with it, and it was a good pick for training them to run groups independently.

MLE says

A gentle story of a boy and his larger than life best friend. I liked the way this story honestly dealt with grief, loss, and the questions we all have when dealing with the death of someone we love. I appreciate how this book never felt heavy handed, or moralizing. The questions the boy had were treated with respect, and even though the adults couldn't give him concrete answers they gave the love, support, and space he needed so he could deal with his loss, and learn how to move on without his best friend.

Caitlintobin says

** spoiler alert ** Simple, sad. A fast read about the sudden death of a friend. I liked the narrator's point of view, and the phases he goes through as he processes the death of his best friend due to a simple bee sting.

Josiah says

"(O)ne of the hardest things we have to learn is that some questions do not have answers."

—Mrs. Mullins, *A Taste of Blackberries*, PP. 61-62

The list of books for younger readers dealing with issues of losing a loved one is long and illustrious, and includes many great American classics. *Bridge to Terabithia* by two-time Newbery Medalist Katherine Paterson is one of the best-known, an exercise so profound in its understanding of human emotion as to set it apart from all else that came before or could ever follow it. There's also *The Lottery Rose* by Irene Hunt, *Roller Skates* by Ruth Sawyer, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs* by Tomie dePaola, *Annie and the Old One* by Miska Miles, *Nobody's Fault?* by Patricia Hermes, *On My Honor* by Marion Dane Bauer, *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White—in all probability the greatest of them all—and a host of others too numerous to mention individually. *A Taste of Blackberries* is one of the shortest juvenile books on the subject of death I've ever read, just eighty-five pages of relatively large font, and it goes by so quickly you might miss the magnitude of its meaning if you aren't careful to take it slow and absorb every moment of understated brilliance it has to offer. Pound for pound, *A Taste of Blackberries* is within shouting distance of the greatest books I've ever read, painted in strokes of plain, simple beauty, the incredible shining light of shared human experience hidden behind actions routine and unspectacular. A spoken sentence here or there reveals the depths of a lifetime of adoration and the mourning still to come over the loss of one so special it rips our hearts out just as it does to the mother who must give her luminously endowed son back to the soil, knowing nothing in the universe can replace a one and only son. In remarkably spare, unadorned writing, Doris Buchanan Smith delivers a stunner of a novel that gets to the point and does it quickly, allowing us a glimpse, while its few pages still turn beneath our fingers, of a young life snuffed out before those around him have time to comprehend what has happened, and the aftermath of sudden tragedy as it settles back into the pitiless reality of eternity. I don't see how one could reemerge the same person after the experience of reading *A Taste of Blackberries*.

Jamie is a source of constant amazement to his best friend, who is never given a name in this book. Jamie is playful and unpredictable, taking chances where his friend is wary, not worried about neighborhood legends and cautionary tales to stick close to home and stay beneath the radar of grownups who are reportedly mean to kids. Jamie is the kind of boy who will sneak into the yard of the neighbor rumored to carry a gun to prevent theft from his prized apple tree, filch the shiny red fruit from the tree in question, and dash back to his friend's side with an apple for each of them, laughing about the risk he took to get it. Where Jamie is showy and attracts attention, his friend merely watches his antics in quiet astonishment, knowing he would never duplicate Jamie's actions even if he could. Who wants to always be on the brink of getting into trouble?

But Jamie's penchant for mischief backfires on him when he and a group of friends from the neighborhood agree to work for the cranky lady next door to remove beetles from her yard. No one ever knew about Jamie's particular medical vulnerability, not even Jamie, and an afternoon of paid fun rounding up herbivorous beetles in glass jars morphs in an instant into a shocking tragedy no one could have foreseen. The boy whom the word irrepressible could have been invented to describe is gone in a few minutes of fateful inaction, so quickly there's no time for his friends to fear the worst before it comes upon them. How Jamie's best friend would love to endure the anxiety of his daring escapades now, to resurrect to existence the kid whose presence changed those around him moment by moment, never allowing a careful approach to spoil the fun of any situation.

Step by step as he wanders through his normal routine, Jamie's best friend runs up against places in his life where Jamie made his mark, a far deeper mark than he'd ever noticed. It's the window he stood at flashing morse code across their yards to Jamie and receiving signals back, communicating without words as effectively as if they were speaking face to face. It's the blackberry patch that sits untouched now down by the river, luscious berries hanging ready to be picked and added to the basket, so ripe they practically fall off the stem at the faintest touch. This new silence in the neighborhood is as loud a presence as Jamie ever was, conspicuously lacking an untamed, unrepentant boy to start the party. What can Jamie's best friend do to fill the quiet of missing someone he often viewed as an exasperation to be tolerated, now that Jamie has stepped off the gangplank of this life into the ether of eternity, never to rile up the neighbors again, never to show up at his mother's door with a fresh batch of blackberries ready for baking, never to take on the world with his crazy ideas and keep everyone on their toes?

Jamie's friend has no way of knowing what he's supposed to do with the fact that Jamie is dead. Should he talk to Jamie's mother or four-year-old sister, Martha, about the boy in their life who was taken too soon? Should he know what the loss means to himself and his family, or how it affects the community, and come up with a meaningful tribute to Jamie based on that knowledge? Jamie's best friend has no idea how to handle any of this. All he has is his reaction in the present moment, dealing in the next breath with what has been lost and trying to figure out what he wants to do about it. There are no outside expectations for his response to Jamie's death, leaving him free to react naturally to the tragedy that has touched them all. And in an afternoon of dawning perception as he takes time to listen to what Jamie would say to him now, Jamie's friend comes up with a gesture of love so breathtakingly beautiful in its simplicity of expression, the most hardened readers will be unable to staunch the flow of tears as a boy lost without the friend he has known forever reunites with the spirit of the only one who could ever be a best friend in his life. The moment is fleeting and bittersweet, but its resounding emotion will never loosen its hold on the reader's heart.

"(R)ipples go on forever and ever, even when you can't see them anymore."

—*A Taste of Blackberries*, P. 45

The name of Jamie's best friend is withheld throughout *A Taste of Blackberries*, and I think that's a good thing. Rather than just reading a sad story about friends separated by the perplexing injustice of childhood death, we are invited to fill the shoes of Jamie's friend, to feel his imminent loss as our own, but only after meeting Jamie and getting to have him as our friend a little while, too. Jamie isn't perfect, and there's no need for him to be; who ever heard of a perfect friend? But he *is* a friend, along with everything that designation entails, and the loss of a friend forever hits much harder than the death of a paragon of kindness, fairness and virtuosity from afar. Because we are brought so close to the story by stepping into the position of Jamie's best friend, the sudden loss is much more real and emotional than it would have been, and the final moment as the story closes is as personal and intense as anything I've ever read.

A Taste of Blackberries is a master work of human emotion, perhaps the greatest novel of its size I've encountered. I can scarcely conceive how Doris Buchanan Smith was able to infuse a story of such brevity with so much power, a classic for the ages that will never lose its ability to touch hearts, no matter how much the world changes. A big part of me wants to give four and a half stars to this book, and had it won the 1974 Newbery Medal, I'm not sure I could have come up with a more deserving alternative. *A Taste of Blackberries* will always be one of the most memorable, meaningful books I've ever read, and its echo will never cease ringing in my heart.

Clackamas says

Oh gosh... this was the book that taught me to pre-read before reading aloud to my kid. He and I were both bawling when I read it to him. Later though, it stimulated a great talk about death and dying.

I wish this book had been around when I was in fourth grade and a friend died in a fire. That was before the days of grief counseling in schools and such, so those of us who felt the loss weren't allowed to talk about it and just had to ignore our feelings and hope they'd go away. I hope that my son never has to go through the loss of a close friend like that, but if he does, at least now we've had a talk about how mourning is normal and okay. We probably wouldn't have if we hadn't read this book together.

Michelle says

A touching tear-jerker, written with a terse, yet thoughtful voice that the youngest chapter-book readers can identify with.

Diana Pettis says

This is a good book for parents to read with children so that they can understand someone close to them dying rather suddenly. I am not sure if I would do it as a guided reading text or not, it would depend on the level of maturity of the children. Copyrighted in 1973, I noticed some interesting vocabulary that you don't hear often which included; hitch-hiking and attention getter.

Guided Reading Level S, DRA 40, grade level equivalent 3.2, and lexile 640.

Kathy says

As a project for my kids, I've asked each member of my family to pick the very first book they remember making an impression on them. I will purchase the books and each of us will inscribe our choices. This was my choice. A teacher gave me this book to read when I was in the third grade (or so) and it has stayed with me all these many years since. In re-reading it, I found it just as meaningful although I met it on a different level and from a different perspective this go-round. I am again devastated but reminded even more powerfully of the pull and power of books in my life.

Lexi says

I love this book, both because it is a great story, but also because the character Jamie was named after my dad.

My dad's grandmother was neighbors with Doris Buchanan Smith when my dad was little, and they were

great friends. Of course my great-grandma Beard would always brag about her grandchildren and update her friends on how they were doing. While Doris was writing this story, she needed a seemingly pointless and sudden death to give it the angle she wanted. Around that time my dad's parents discovered that he was allergic to a rare type of wasp sting (but he didn't die), and my great-grandma told Doris about it. Suddenly she knew the way she would have the character Jamie die, and she named him after my dad because she borrowed his allergy for the book.

Nicole says

I read this book to my 2nd graders, and they lived it! We are writing this review together. Emelia said " It has some sad parts, and everybody is sad- not just you." Spoiler Alert

Wyatt said "It was sad that Jamie died." Esperanza said "It was very intelligent."
