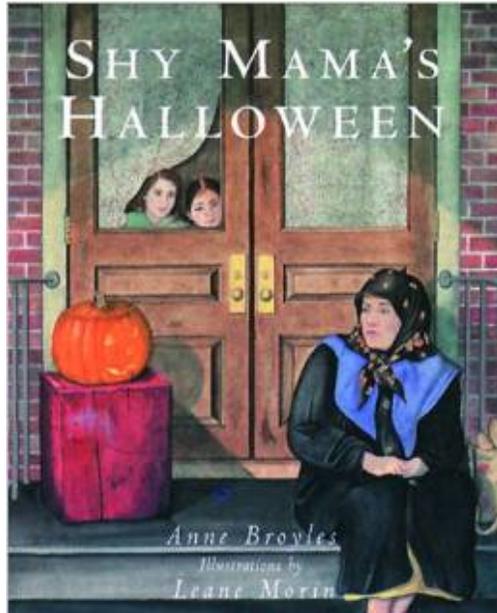


Literary Guide for Anne Broyles and Leane Morin's

Shy Mama's Halloween



by Robin M. Huntley

Summary

Shy Mama's Halloween beautifully illustrates the experience of learning a new and unfamiliar culture. Though the book is set in the past (mid-20th century), the story itself is timeless, capturing the uncertainty, nervousness, and even excitement that accompany new experiences.

In the story, an immigrant family prepares for Halloween – a holiday that they've never celebrated before because they're new to the United States and, in their home country of Russia, Halloween wasn't part of the culture. While Mama is willing to help her four children prepare their costumes, she's equally wary of both going door to door in her new neighborhood and a holiday whose theme is centered around sinister characters. It is decided that the children's father will bring them trick-or-treating, but when he comes home from work sick on the evening of Halloween, it is up to shy Mama to supervise the family's Halloween outing.

Anya, the oldest of the four children, is well aware of her mother's uncertainty and helps her to see that Halloween isn't scary, and neither is their new world. Though she too longs for her former home and has yet to settle in in her new home, Anya recognizes that experiencing the magic and fun of Halloween will help her mother better understand the culture of their new country.

Context

With its immigration theme, Shy Mama's Halloween matters now more than ever since its publication. At a time when US immigration policy has drawn such controversy, this book serves a tool to teach children empathy. The story compels readers to connect emotionally with the experiences of its characters, and in doing so compels readers to empathize with others who have experienced similar things.

Communities nationwide are home to immigrants who have come to the United States for a variety of reasons; whether they've joined us out of necessity or choice, legally or illegally, these new Americans have all experienced major change. Exploring the thoughts, feelings, and actions behind such an experience can help children better understand exactly what it means to be an immigrant.

Critical Thinking Questions

Copies of Shy Mama's Halloween include a guide for parents and teachers that includes a list of questions that can be used to support readers in processing what they've learned from the story and connecting it to their own lives. The questions below can be used in addition to those in the book, as they are designed to support readers in noticing details and subtleties and making inferences while the book is being read. Written with readers ages 7-10 in mind, the questions can be adapted for use with other ages as well.

- What are Vas'movo and Pyervova Maya? What makes you think that?

- What does it mean for words to “sound clumsy” when Mama says them? Why do you think they sound this way?
- If Mama is shy, why do you think she has befriended Mrs. Rumanski?
- Why is Anya glad that her costume will mean nobody bothers her?
- Anya says “*the* trick or treat,” whereas generally we say just plain “trick or treat.” Why do you think she’s saying it differently?
- Though they’re disappointed when it seems like they won’t get to trick-or-treat, the children are very quiet in their sadness. Why do you think they don’t voice their feelings more?
- Anya comforts Dimitrii in his sadness. How do you think she’s feeling as she does this? How can you tell?
- Mama thinks that Halloween is especially American because it involves free treats to strangers. What does this tell you her life in Russia might have been like?
- How does Anya’s experience with Halloween reflect how she feels about American culture?
- Anya notices that Mama’s eyes look different after they have trick-or-treated. Why do you think Mama has changed?

Extension Activities

Each of the activities outlined below is written loosely so as to allow for easy adaptation for use with readers of any age, skill set, and context.

A New Holiday

Just as Halloween was new to Anya’s family, Russian holidays are foreign to most Americans. Research Russian holidays and explore the specifics of a major one that is not internationally recognized (for example, don’t choose the Russian equivalent of Christmas). Once you’ve learned the ins and outs of the holiday, try celebrating it yourself! Find out if there’s a Russian cultural center or religious center near you offering public events to celebrate major holidays. If so, attend and participate if you are able. Compare Anya’s experience of Halloween to your own experience with a Russian holiday. What’s the same? What’s different?

Why Immigrate?

Why do immigrants come to the United States? Research Russian immigration to the United States during the mid-20th century to find out why Anya’s family might have been interested in immigrating. Then, explore the circumstances driving modern immigration. Leaving your country, your culture, and your home

forever is unquestionably difficult – understanding the circumstances that drive immigration can add context to both the past and the present.

Halloween Roots

Halloween is new to Anya's family because it wasn't celebrated in their native Russia. In fact, most of the countries in the world don't celebrate Halloween – despite American enthusiasm for the holiday, we're in the minority worldwide. So where does Halloween come from, anyway? Why is it that it's only celebrated in a few countries? And do all countries celebrate the same way? Explore the story behind Halloween to gain perspective on immigrants' experience with the holiday.

Russian Culture

The story mentions a few Russian holidays, and the characters' names come straight from their native Russia as well. Explore Russian culture and language to better understand these characters. What are their traditions like? How does their language compare to ours? What might their religious beliefs have been? What kind of community might they have lived in before they came to the United States? Learning answers to these questions and more can help to add depth to readers' understanding of the story.

Modern Immigrants

Immigration in one form or another has been happening all over the planet for just about as long as humans have existed, but the form that it takes shifts as human culture does. While Russians came to the United States in large numbers in the mid-20th century, they are not the largest immigrant group to the United States today. Research the numbers behind modern immigration to the US to learn about where immigrants originate from. Then, explore current events, recent history, and national and international policies that have contributed to such waves of immigration. While Anya's family came to the United States for work opportunities, not all immigrants come for economic reasons. Learning to understand the current state of immigration and the forces driving it can help to bring the concept behind the story into a modern context.

Community Connections

The following is a list of organizations local to western Massachusetts that offer volunteer opportunities, education, activist opportunities, community events, and other services and learning opportunities. Each organization or resource serves immigrants somehow. Engaging with one or all of these resources can add a community-based component to learning derived from a reading of [Shy Mama's Halloween](#).

Center for New Americans, Northampton. 413-587-0084. www.cnam.org

Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition, Boston. 617-350-5480. www.miracoalition.org

Berkshire Immigrant Center, Pittsfield. 413-445-4881. www.berkshireic.com

Further Resources from Hilltown Families

[Literature Guide for Barbara Cohen's "Molly's Pilgrim"](#)

[Music Trekking: The Russian Guitar](#)