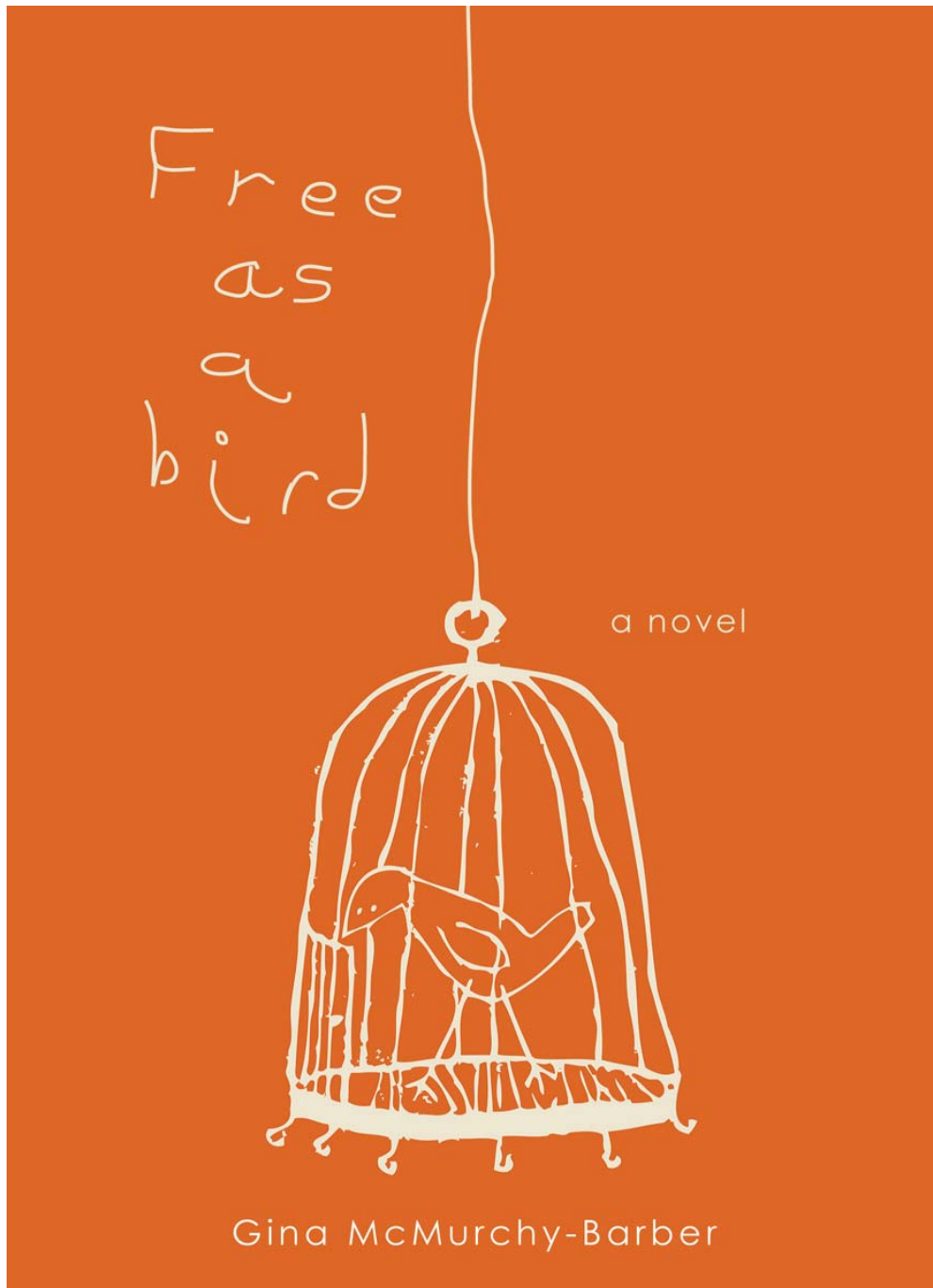


# Teacher Resource Guide

By

Gina McMurchy-Barber



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## About the Book

Ruby Jean Sharp was born in a time when being developmentally disabled could mean growing up behind locked doors and barred windows and being called names like retard and moron. Born with Down syndrome, Ruby Jean is at first lovingly cared for by her grandmother. But after Grandma dies her mother has her institutionalized in Woodlands School in New Westminster, British Columbia. Ruby Jean says: “Can’t say why they called it a school—a school’s a place you go for learnin an then after you get to go home. I never learnt much bout ledders and numbers, an I sure never got to go home—nope, only stayed at Woodlands all day an all night. I lived on Ward 33.”

It is here in an institution that opened in 1878, and was originally called the Provincial Lunatic Asylum, that Ruby Jean learns to survive isolation, boredom and every kind of abuse. Just when she can hardly remember if she was ever happy she learns a lesson about patience and perseverance from an old crow.

## About the Author

Gina McMurchy-Barber is the recipient of the 2004 Governor General’s Award for Excellence in Teaching Canadian History. Prior to teaching she majored in Archeology at Simon Fraser University, studied orangutans with Dr. Birute Galdikas in Borneo, led backpack tours to Asia and South America and studied journalism at Langara College. Her first novel, *Reading the Bones*, revolves around archeology and the prehistoric Coast Salish of B.C. It was nominated for the Silver Birch Award and the Langley Book of the Year Award.

As a young student, Gina worked at Woodlands School in New Westminster, British Columbia -- the setting for *Free as a Bird*. Her impressions of the place and its treatment of people with mental disabilities left a lifelong impression that eventually led her to write this book. The author’s older sister was born with Down syndrome, but unlike the main character in her novel, Gina’s sister grew up in a loving home and lived *Free as a Bird*.



## Historical Background on Woodlands School

Woodlands first opened in 1878 under the name of “Provincial Asylum for the Insane”. Soon after it opened a report was written with the following description of the facility: “The place is gloomy in the extreme, the corridors narrow and somber, the windows high and unnecessarily barred....The establishment exceedingly overcrowded....The patients being herded together more like cattle than human beings.” (Commission of Enquiry Report of the Provincial Asylum for the Insane, 1878.) The name changed in 1950 to Woodlands School, though at best there were about twelve teachers for the fifteen hundred residents.



At its peak, Woodlands population reached an estimated 1500 residents. The residents were labeled as “severely or profoundly retarded” or as “morons.” Some were not mentally disabled at all, but had physical disabilities or behaviour problems which were only made worse by the isolation, monotonous environment and lack of normal human interactions. While some came to Woodlands as older children or even adults, others were abandoned as babies and knew no other home. Many lived out their lives behind its walls, locked doors and jail-like windows. Ironically some could even look out from this fortress to the B.C. Penitentiary next door, a maximum security prison.

Some of the residents had visits from relatives, but most had no contact with the outside community. Those that could build friendships with other residents cried each night when they had to be separated. More often than not, the ones who needed the most attention and love got the least.

Woodlands -- like many similar institutions -- was self-sufficient. It was staffed by medical and dental professionals, therapists, cooks, teachers, ward staff, and child care workers. As a result there was little contact with outside services such as public health, victim support or police. In essence it was like a self-contained "city" with citizens who had no say in the running of it.

After Woodlands closed in 1996 the B.C. provincial government requested Ombudsman, Dulcie McCallum, to investigate the many complaints of abuse directed at the institution. Her report, *The Need to Know: Administrative Review of Woodlands School*, brought to light many of the problems inherent in institutions of this kind. She reported that most residents had little if any contact with family or friends outside the institution. Nor did they have control over any aspect of their lives. Even those who were capable were classified as "retardates" and treated as if they were unable to speak for themselves or had any intellectual insight whatsoever. Some children were used for drug experiments and genetic research — experiments known today to be quite painful. And it was not uncommon for unclaimed bodies to be regularly donated to UBC for research.

McCallum stated that Woodlands, "was a perfect place for perpetrators seeking an opportunity to physically and sexually abuse children and adults who were silent, unable to complain, not knowing how or to whom to report or who would, in many instances, not be believed. Severe punishment and threats were used to dissuade children from reporting abuse."

McCallum's report also stated that the cruel behaviour modification techniques were rationalized by staff who felt residents "didn't understand or feel pain, and in any event, required a strict disciplinary approach in order to learn". Little consideration was given to the fact that "bad behavior was a response to confinement, only spending time with people of similar disabilities, absence of effort to socialize or integrate residents into normal life, boring, bland, sterile environment". One former resident of Woodlands described the place as "a garbage can for society's garbage kids".

Throughout the years there were many reported cases of physical and sexual abuse that leaked out. But according to reports they were always handled internally. In most cases the investigation into the reported abuses were stalled by an apparent "code of silence" amongst the staff. There were stories drifting around that staff who did report were punished by some of their peers, threatened, transferred, and in one case drugged and institutionalized. As a result abuse was usually brought to light by people visiting the ward, like student nurses or family members.

After the institution closed it remained empty for many years, although the buildings were occasionally used by the film industry. Eventually the government sold the land to developers who have been slowly erasing all evidence of the institution's existence. During a period of public debates over what was to happen to the few remaining buildings a terrible fire broke out on July 10, 2008. In a few short hours it destroyed all but the façade of the centre block and tower — the oldest part of the institution. Two days after the fire, developers were given permission to demolish and remove the debris. No in-depth investigation was conducted.

At the back of Woodlands was a small cemetery. In 1977 the government ordered all the headstones be removed. The reasons are not completely clear, but some speculate it was to appease the directors of the new Queen's Park Hospital next door, who felt it was disturbing for patients to look out their windows at a cemetery. Between 1977 and 1980 some eighteen hundred headstones were removed and recycled for such purposes as lining walkways, steps and making a staff barbeque. Many headstones were simply discarded in the creek or sold off as used building supplies. Eventually the cemetery was turned into a park.

Today the cemetery has become the Woodlands Memorial Garden and honors the more than 3,000 deceased individuals who were buried at the former Woodlands cemetery. To date, only about 900 grave markers have been recovered. Officials say no more graves will be removed or dismantled.

## Pre-Reading Activities

1. Discuss the ways people judge one another or measure success. Examples: appearance (weight, skin/hair colour, facial features, age), wealth (own a fancy car and house, jewelry, techno-toys), intelligence (grades in school, education) etc.
2. When people want to put someone else down they often make remarks about the person's intelligence. Make a list of words used to insult someone's intelligence. Examples: retard, moron, idiot, stupid, dunce, brain-dead. Have students research word definitions and origins.
3. Break students into pairs. The first partner will make a negative statement about the other's intelligence. The second partner is to note his emotional response to the words being spoken. Example: "You're such a retard, you make me sick!" Discuss with class the thoughts, feelings and physical responses these statements created.
4. Everyone has something they find easy to do and other things that are difficult. Invite students to consider their own strengths and weaknesses and discuss them with their partners. Do you ever feel stigmatized or isolated because of your weaknesses? Can you imagine being isolated or kept apart from the group because of your weaknesses?
5. Using the information provided inform students about developmental disabilities such as Down syndrome.
6. Using the historical information provided and other resources teach students about the history of Woodlands School, other similar institutions, and the treatment of people with development disabilities.
7. People with developmental disabilities, such as Down syndrome, often find ordinary things difficult to do, such as speaking, walking, or picking up small objects. Ask for volunteers who would be willing to experience some of the challenges these people face on a day to day basis and follow up the activity with a group discussion.
  - To inhibit proper speaking have the volunteers place half a large marshmallow into the palate cavity and read aloud from a book.
  - To inhibit fine motor skills have volunteers wear wool mittens during class time. Then find activities for students to do that involve using their hands, like writing with a pencil, picking up small objects, tying shoes, crafts etc.
  - To inhibit locomotion tie weights, such as heavy bean bags or small sand bags to the volunteers' ankles during recess and then have a game of soccer or something similar.
  - After these activities discuss how important it is for people with Down syndrome or any similar disability to try to be independent and do things even if they are

difficult. Realize too that it is a help to them when the activity or game is modified for their special needs.

8. One of the most difficult things to come to terms with historically is how many people with developmental and physical disabilities were kept apart from society in institutions such as Woodlands. Ask for a couple of volunteers who would be willing to be isolated from the class for a period of time. For example, one volunteer could sit at the back of the room in the corner and another in the cloakroom or hallway. The other students should be instructed to not talk or interact in any way with these volunteers. The volunteers should be given no help with work, excluded from activities—especially the fun ones, and given as little stimulation as possible. At the end of the isolation period have the volunteers explain how it felt when others were enjoying their time or doing something fun and they had to remain isolated.

## Down Syndrome

Developmental disability is a term used to describe anyone who has a below normal or diminished intellectual quotient (IQ). The degree of mental impairment or retardation varies depending on the type of developmental disability and other circumstances, like access to specialists, home environment, and educational opportunities. Sometimes people with a developmental disability have trouble taking care of themselves, do not speak clearly, have difficulty making decisions, and are unable to earn or manage an income and live independently. Types of developmental disabilities include Rett syndrome, Autism, Fragile X syndrome, William syndrome and Down syndrome.

What is Down syndrome?

Our bodies are made up of tiny units called cells. Under normal circumstances each cell has 46 chromosomes, 23 come from our fathers and 23 from our mothers. Chromosomes contain the genetic information that determines what a person's hair, skin and eye colour are going to be, or whether a person is going to be tall or chunky. But sometimes there is an error during cell division that causes each cell in a person's body to have an extra or partial extra chromosome. That means that every cell in the body has 47 chromosomes and though they're very tiny it causes the cells to be over crowded. This makes it harder for each cell to do its job. Stomach cells have a harder time digesting food, muscle cells have a harder time lifting arms and legs, and brain cells have a harder time learning and understanding new things. This condition is known as Down syndrome and was named after John Langdon Down, the British doctor who first identified it in 1866.

While extra chromosomes can lead to impairments in physical growth, functioning and intellectual abilities, the degree of impairment varies in each individual. In most cases people with this type of developmental disability can learn all the same things that others do only it takes longer.

Individuals with Down syndrome often have distinct physical characteristics, such as eyes with an extra fold of skin on the inner corner and have an upward slant, protruding tongue, small stature with short neck, and large spaces between first and second toes. Sometimes they need specialists to help them learn to use their mouth and face muscles so their speech is clear, or help with strengthening their large muscles so they can walk and run better.

The important thing to remember is that people with Down syndrome are capable of living productive and interesting lives and have more in common with the general population than differences. They can go to school, work, shop, vote, and have homes and families. And like everyone else, they have gifts and talents that should be nurtured.

### **Activities:**

1. To illustrate the concept of over-crowded cells mark off on the floor with tape a two metre square. Invite five students to go inside the square and walk, twirl, bend and reach without touching each other. They can do so fairly easily because there is plenty of space. Now invite another student to enter the square and do the same things. They will have difficulty walking, bending and twirling without bumping into each other because the space is now too crowded.
2. Another way to illustrate the concept of cells with one extra chromosome causing over-crowding is by placing some miniature marshmallows into a small clear container—make sure they are loose and move freely. In another container exactly the same size place large marshmallows. They will not move as freely because they are taking up more space.

## ***Free as a Bird***

By

*Gina McMurchy-Barber*

### **Novel Study Questions**

1. How are birds a symbol for freedom? How does the picture on the cover contrast with the title?
2. What was your initial reaction to the main character as she described herself and her life in Woodlands School? Did your perception of her change as you read the story?
3. Why do you think Ruby Jean's mother neglected to tell her about Woodlands until they were already on Ward 33?
4. Would Ruby Jean's life have been better or worse if she had lived with her mom and Harold? Why?
5. Why do you think they originally built the institution with windows so high that children like Ruby Jean couldn't see out?
6. Why do ambulances make Ruby Jean nervous?
7. Ruby Jean had very little control over her own life. What were some of the ways that she tried to be in control?
8. What name did Ruby Jean have for the ward staff? How did that name reflect her attitude towards them? How did that contrast with the reasons her grandmother called her Ruby Jean?
9. What was ironic about the TV shows that Ruby Jean and the other residents had to watch?
10. How does Ruby Jean's aggressive behaviour compare to that of caged animals?
11. Ruby Jean enjoyed being outdoors and one of the places she liked to go was the little park behind Willow Clinic. What did she learn from Norval about what the park used to be? How and why did the institution change it?
12. Why did Mister Crow impress Ruby Jean?
13. At first, Ruby Jean thought Jimmy T was Mister Crow in disguise. Why did she think that and what happened to change her mind?

14. Who were the villains in the story? How did Ruby Jean defend herself against them?
15. How did Grace's and Mrs. Gentry's attitude towards Ruby Jean differ from the ward staff?
16. Ruby Jean realized it's not always a good thing to be a "fly on the wall". What did she overhear Morris telling the others about Paulina?
17. What did Ruby Jean think heaven would be like for people like her?
18. Grace gave Ruby Jean something to look forward to every day. What did they both begin to realize about Ruby Jean's ability?
19. Morris compared the care of the residents to objects in a factory assembly line. What did this say about how he viewed people like Ruby Jean?
20. Why did Nurse Millie object to Ruby Jean leaving Woodlands and why didn't she attend her going away party?
21. What were the similarities Ruby Jean saw between the lives of the fish in the backyard pond and the kids back at Woodlands?
22. What caused Ruby Jean to start talking again?
23. Compare the atmosphere at the sheltered workshop and Ward 33.
24. Was Ruby Jean better off being a homeless person sleeping on the streets than being a resident in Woodlands? Why? What was similar about the homeless people in this story and the residents of Woodlands?
25. Was Mabel a good friend to Ruby Jean? Why or why not?
26. What were the things that Ruby Jean had to overcome in order to help Mabel?
27. St. Paul's hospital was where Ruby Jean was born and it was the place of her rebirth after saving Mabel. Compare these two events.

28. A lot of bad things happened to Ruby Jean. What character strengths did she possess that helped her survive it all?
29. It is not uncommon for people with developmental disabilities to have some area where they excel. What was Ruby Jean good at?
30. Another novel that deals with someone with a developmental disability is *Forrest Gump* by Winston Groom. In that story Forrest won a medal of honour during the Vietnam War, became a world famous ping pong champion and exceedingly wealthy--all signs of success in most societies. Ruby Jean didn't do anything to become famous or rich, nor did she want those things. How do you define a successful life? Was Forrest more successful than Ruby Jean and if so, did that make his life more worth living?

## Post Reading Activities

1. Write: What would you want to do if you knew someone like Ruby Jean was being locked away because of her disability?
2. Draw a picture of Woodlands as you see it in your mind and place Ruby Jean somewhere in the picture.
3. Research Dr. John Langdon Down—someone who was ahead of his time.
4. Role-play: Act out the scene when Ruby Jean's mother and Harold bring her to Woodlands and then abandon her in the room with the locked door and barred windows; in contrast act out the scene when Ruby Jean sees her new bedroom for the first time at Nan's and Pops' house.
5. Research the differences between mental illness and developmental disability.
6. Research the United Nations Rights of Disabled Persons and how the treatment of people in Woodlands violated these rights.
7. Write a newspaper article based on Mr. Turner's interview with Ruby Jean at the end of the story.
8. Draw a timeline of Ruby Jean's life. Possible things to include: her birth date, the time she was left at Woodlands, etc. You can tie in events such as when she heard about the first man to walk on the moon and TV shows like The Price is Right and the Julia Child Cooking Show. Don't forget to include the year Woodlands closed.
9. Have the students read the poem "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" by Maya Angelou and contrast it to Free as a Bird. In what ways is the caged bird's behaviour reminiscent of how the residents at Woodlands behaved? Both the free bird and the caged bird sing, but how are their songs different? Why?  
<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/i-know-why-the-caged-bird-sings/>

## Curriculum Connections

**The Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy**, which was launched in April, 2009, was designed to help educators identify and remove discriminatory prejudices and barriers to student achievement. These potential barriers include racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination that may prevent certain students from reaching their full potential. Can you see how it may have been possible in the past that students with Down syndrome or other learning disabilities might have been discriminated against or prevented from reaching their full potential? How are things different in schools today in regards to people with developmental disabilities? Do you have someone in your class or school who has a developmental disability? If so, is there something you can do to help improve the chances of their success?

## Glossary

**Beltleash:** this restrictive device was used on Woodlands' residents who were considered unpredictable when outdoors and was much like a collar and leash a dog wears only it was worn around the wrist or waist.

**B.C. Penitentiary:** the maximum security prison next to Woodlands School that opened the same year as Woodlands, in 1878 and closed in 1980.

**Developmental disability:** a term used to describe a life-long disability attributed to mental and possibly physical impairments manifested at birth or during childhood.

**Down syndrome:** a genetic disorder that causes a delay in physical and intellectual development.

**John Langdon Down:** the British doctor who identified Down syndrome in the mid 1800s. He was considered a visionary leader in his time and a humanitarian.

**Institutionalization:** in this case, when someone is placed or committed to a facility, such as Woodlands, where his/her freedom to leave is restrained or prohibited.

**Retard:** to hinder, delay or slow the advance of progress. In the past this word was used to refer to someone deemed stupid or with below average intelligence. Today it would be considered rude and cruel to use this in reference to someone with a developmental disability.

**Self abuse:** many residents at Woodlands were self abusive, likely due to neglect, loneliness or frustration. Examples of self abuse included biting hands and arms, scratching self, head banging, eating cigarettes and feces.

**Sideroom:** this was the room Ruby Jean referred to as the "bad kid room". It was used as a time-out room for residents whose behaviour was considered dangerous and out of control. There was usually nothing in the room except perhaps a blanket.

**Ward:** in the case of an institution like Woodlands a ward refers to the specific places where residents slept and spent most of their days.

## References

- For more information go to: [www.bcacl.org/index.cfm?act=main&call=A75B1B75](http://www.bcacl.org/index.cfm?act=main&call=A75B1B75)
- To read the report written by Dulcie McCallum go to: [http://www.bcacl.org/documents/Woodlands\\_Abuse/The\\_Need\\_to\\_Know.pdf](http://www.bcacl.org/documents/Woodlands_Abuse/The_Need_to_Know.pdf)
- To view “Asylum: A long last look at Woodlands” by photographer and artist, Michael de Courcy, go to: <http://www.michaeldecourcy.com/asylum/>
- Latest news on survivors of Woodlands: <http://www.straight.com/article-262829/woodlands-school-survivors-seek-settlement>
- History of Mental Illness and the building of Woodlands School: <http://www.bcmhas.ca/AboutUs/History.htm>
- Photos of Woodlands before it burned down in 2008: <http://community.livejournal.com/abandonedplaces/1333320.html>
- Video About Down Syndrome - Virginia Commonwealth University <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/145554.php>
- Education about Down syndrome: <http://downsyndrome.com/category/education/>
- Refer to Gina McMurchy-Barber’s official site for photographs of what is left of Woodlands today: <http://members.shaw.ca/readingthebones>
- An excellent dramatic film that addresses a similar theme: *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter*, starring Dermot Mulroney, Emily Watson, Gretchen Mol and Krystal Hope Nausbaum. It is based on the New York Times Bestseller by Kim Edwards.