

Saving Grace
By Priscilla Cummings

Background and Curriculum indications, courtesy of Junior Library Guild, 2003:

The year is 1932, and Grace McFarland's family has been hit hard by the Great Depression. They are evicted from their apartment, and Grace and her two younger brothers are sent temporarily to a children's home. At Christmas, a wealthy woman invites Grace to visit. After the holidays are over, Grace must decide whether she will return to her family or accept an offer to be adopted. Inspired by a true story.

Priscilla Cummings writes: “For years, I enjoyed listening to my mother-in-law, Prudence Shannon Frece, tell stories about her days as a White House secretary to President Franklin Roosevelt. But equally fascinating to me were her stories about a little girl named Betty Stone, whose family was so destitute they allowed her to be taken in by my mother-in-law's family on Christmas Eve of 1932. Betty ended up staying with the family for four years.

“My own children found this difficult to understand. Why would someone want to go live with another family for so long? It is a challenge indeed to explain the hardships of the Great Depression to young Americans today, most of whom can't even imagine worrying about where their next meal is coming from.

“Before my mother-in-law passed away in 1995, she asked my husband and me to take possession of all her White House scrapbooks and diaries. Two years passed before I read through those journals, shaking my

head at all the history my mother-in-law had witnessed. I was captivated by her references to family life and the little girl, Betty. I began to wonder about a story . . .

“The first thing I did was track down Betty again. (I had been the one to call her, after Prudence died.) By then, Betty was seventy-two years old. A widowed grandmother, she lived in a small town outside of Atlanta, Georgia, and welcomed me for a weekend of reminiscing about her life with “Prudie,” whom she dearly loved. For hours, I sat at Betty’s kitchen table asking questions, taking notes, and tape recording her memories. That part was easy. The hard part was all the research I had to do over the next year.

“Although inspired by Betty’s experience and documented by research, *Saving Grace* is a piece of fiction, because I made up much of the story,” Ms. Cummings says. “That was the fun part because I always loved making up things. From the time I was a little girl myself, growing up on a dairy farm in western Massachusetts, I have loved writing stories, real and imagined. After graduating from the University of New Hampshire, I worked for thirteen years as a newspaper reporter and magazine writer. Then, in 1986, when my first child was born and my first picture book was published, I decided to stay home to be a fulltime mom and part time writer.”

Priscilla Cummings lives in Annapolis, Maryland, with her husband, John Frece, their children, William and Hannah, a dog, and two cats. She is the author of twelve picture books and has written four other young adult novels, *Autumn Journey*, *A Face First*, *Red Kayak* and *What Mr. Mattero Did*.

Curriculum Indications:

Themes: The hardships of being a victim of the Great Depression. Having to make a difficult decision. Choosing between comfort and family. Being worried about members of your family. Separation from family. Having a special relationship with your brother. Giving back to the community. The effect of joblessness and eviction on a family. Keeping prized possessions. Understanding the deaf. Stealing to help yourself and your family survive hard times. Recovering from loss.

Subjects: Language arts. Social studies.

Who: Grace, a young girl from a family facing such financial hardship that they can't afford to care for her.

What: Finding comfort and friendship at the home of the Hammond family and being offered a chance to stay.

Where: In Washington, D.C., 1932.