

The COOKING GENE

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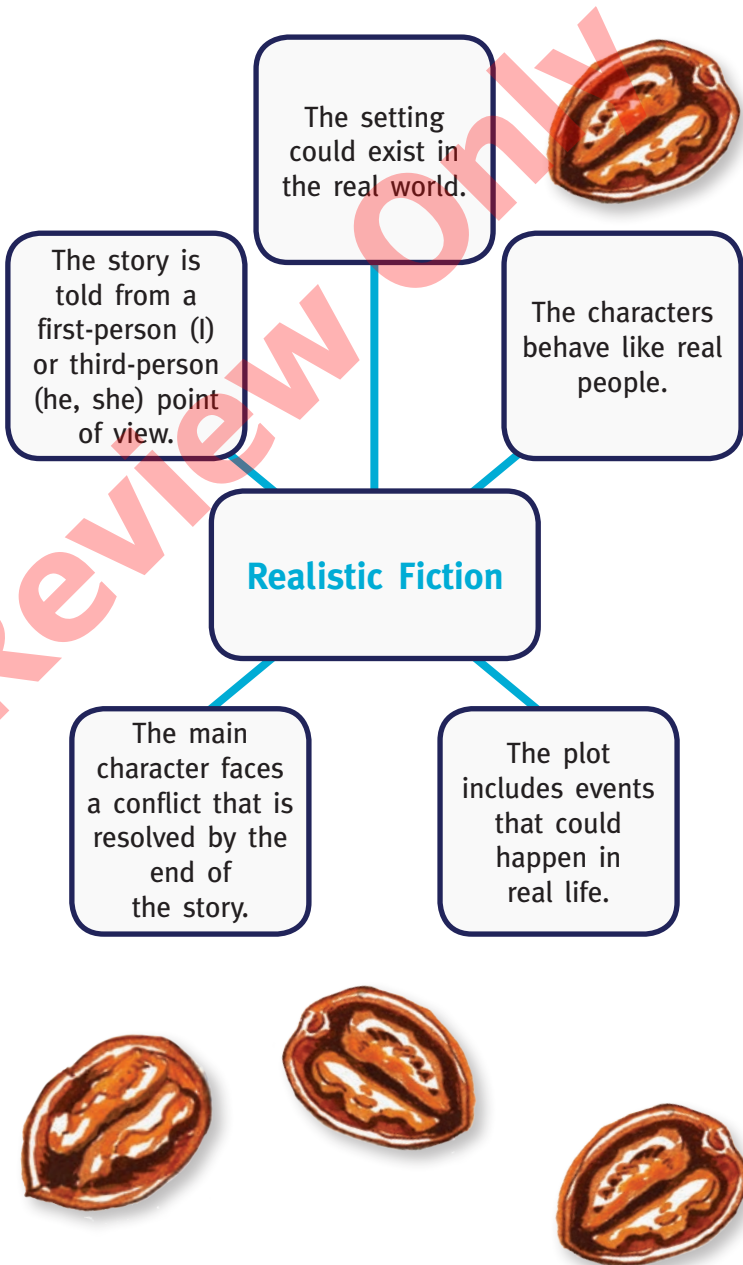


REALISTIC FICTION
LITERATURE

Level	P/38
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Realistic Fiction

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Remembering Bubby

Ben closed his eyes and breathed in all the delicious scents—roast chicken and potato pancakes, plates stacked with knishes, and steaming noodle kugel in casserole dishes. He imagined his Bubby working her magic in their kitchen. But today the oven was cold.

Instead, it was her friends who brought in aluminum trays and big plastic plates of favorite foods to a memorial in her honor. “We’re so sorry about your grandmother,” they said, hugging him. “We’ll all miss her.”

Not as much as I will, Ben thought. He already missed Bubby’s laugh and all the recipes they would never get to cook together.

Aunt Linda sat next to Ben. She wasn’t really his aunt. He called her that because she was Bubby’s best friend. She had piled her plate high with chicken and noodle kugel. She took a bite, and then she whispered to Ben, “Bubby’s cooking was so much better.”

Ben pushed his plate aside. “The noodle kugel tastes like cardboard,” he said. “Her potato kugel had much more flavor.”

Aunt Linda patted his shoulder. "I remember you helping her make potato kugel for the monthly potluck. She used to say you got her cooking gene."

Ben smiled. He remembered how he would rush home from school the second Friday of each month to help Bubby make the kugel for her monthly gatherings. People always crowded around the table to get more before it all ran out.



Ben's father, who had come in from the suburbs, took a seat in the chair beside them.

"It won't be the same without Bubby," he said. "The way she acted out how to make potato kugel while telling that folktale about the competition between potato and noodle kugel. What a storyteller!"

"I remember!" Ben jumped to his feet as Bubby's words rushed through his head. "Two hundred years ago, my Russian ancestors competed in the Battle of the Kugels. The winner would decide whether to plant buckwheat or potatoes throughout the village for the coming year. One side presented a kugel made with the limp buckwheat noodle."

He plucked a noodle from his father's plate and waved it. "But my ancestors offered a kugel made from the noble potato. The villagers tasted them both and they voted, and it was victory to"—he dropped the noodle onto his plate and slapped a potato pancake over it—"the potato!"

Ben cocked his head at the potato pancake on his plate. It wasn't kugel, but it was the only thing made of potatoes, so it would have to stand in.

His father and Aunt Linda clapped. “I was amazed she could act out the story while cooking at the same time. She never got distracted,” said Aunt Linda.

“It’s because she had the cooking gene!” said Ben.



A Delicious Idea

Later in the week, after all the leftovers from the memorial were finished, Ben and his mother sat alone in their kitchen. Ben's mother didn't like to cook, and so there were no delicious smells and no sizzles and pops coming from the oven.

Ben's mother thumbed through a pile of take-out menus to find food for dinner. "It's not the same here without Bubby," Ben said.

He remembered that whenever a take-out menu was slipped under their front door, Bubby would hold it up and laugh.

"Some people have nerve, Ben. To think they could make our dinner for us! You and I would beat every one of them in a cook-off."

"It's definitely not the same without her," his mother said as she held up a menu. "What about Caesar salads?"

"Nah, let's order sushi," Ben suggested.

His mother shook her head. “Hmm, I’m not in the mood.” She fanned out the menus on the table. “Chinese? Thai? Roast chicken from the deli? Any of those strike your fancy?”

Ben looked through the menus. He and his mother sighed at the same time. They knew nothing would ever be as good as Bubby’s cooking.



Later, as they ate pad thai and green curry chicken, Ben asked, “Did Bubby ever try to teach you to cook?”

“Not really,” his mother answered. “She and your grandpa wanted me to study hard in school so I would go far in my career. I never really needed to learn to cook because she was always there. And to be honest, cooking never really interested me.” She dabbed her eyes with a paper napkin.

Ben tried to lift his mother’s spirits. “Remember when you were promoted to head of the library branch, and I helped Bubby prepare your luncheon celebration?” Ben said.

“Yes!” His mother smiled. “She made a meatloaf in the shape of a book. It was so creative!”

“And delicious!” they said together.

After dinner, Ben got an idea. He didn’t want Bubby’s wonderful cooking to go away. He opened a cabinet and took out the sauce-stained cookbook that held her recipes.

“What if I start cooking for us? Bubby used to say I had the cooking gene, too.”

“That’s an excellent idea, Ben!” his mother said. “You’re at a good age to start cooking. I will keep an eye on you, but you do all the work.”

Ben flipped through the book and stopped at a well-worn potato kugel recipe. “That’s my favorite.”

“Maybe you can make some for my library’s children’s story hour at the end of the month and tell some of Bubby’s stories,” Ben’s mother said. “The children would like that.”

