

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for A Long Way from Chicago by Richard Peck

Book Information

Richard Peck, A Long Way from Chicago
Quiz Number: 27940
Dial/Penguin, 1998
ISBN 0-8037-2290-7; LCCN
148 Pages
Book Level: 5.0
Interest Level: MG

A boy recounts his annual summer trips to rural Illinois with his sister during the Great Depression to visit their larger-than-life grandmother.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Horn Book Fanfare; Jefferson Cup Award/Honor; National Book Award/ Honors; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Honor; Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book; State Award

Topics: Family Life, Grandparents; History, Depression Era America; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

Main Characters

Aunt Puss Chapman a very old woman who had once employed Grandma

Cowgill family a dairy farming family with several trouble-making boys

Grandma Dowdel Joey and Mary Alice's unique grandmother

Joey a young boy who tells the stories of his summers at his grandmother's home

Junior Stubbs a boy who is in love with a waitress

Mary Alice Joey's younger sister, who becomes more and more like Grandma

Mrs. Effie Wilcox Grandma's neighbor who seems like an enemy, but is really a friend

Mrs. Weidenbach the banker's wife, who persuades Grandma to enter her pie in the fair
Uncle Grady Griswold the oldest settler in the area
Vandalia Junior Stubbs's sweetheart, who hides in Grandma's house

Vocabulary

gallivant to roam about in search of amusement

massacre the slaughter of a large number of animals or humans

privy an outhouse

superstition a belief held in spite of its contradiction to the laws of nature

Synopsis

Joey and Mary Alice, who live in the hustle and bustle of Depression-era Chicago, have a unique grandmother whose country lifestyle in rural Illinois is vastly different. Each summer they visit her for one week in August and encounter many adventures there.

Their first adventure begins in the summer of 1929 with the death of Shotgun Cheatham. A nosy reporter who is seeking a sensational human-interest story annoys Grandma with his questions about Shotgun's life. Grandma seeks revenge on the reporter by inventing a fanciful story about Shotgun being a Civil War veteran. She then invites the reporter and an equally nosy neighbor, Effie Wilcox, to attend Shotgun's wake in her home. During the night, a cat slips into the open coffin and bumps the veil covering the body, making Shotgun appear alive. Only Grandma knows the cat is responsible, so Grandma takes advantage of the situation by firing a shotgun shell into the coffin to halt Shotgun's apparent resurrection. Terrified, the cat, the reporter, and Effie all make a hasty retreat.

The next summer, the Cowgill boys blow up Grandma's mailbox with firecrackers. When she learns that the boys have also destroyed Effie's outhouse, Grandma makes a plan. Knowing that the boys want to steal her shotgun, she lures them to break into her house by telling them that she and

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the kids would be out of town. As expected, they sneak into the house at night, but Grandma catches them and sends Joey to get their parents. Grandma then forces Mr. Cowgill to discipline his boys with a leather strop.

Grandma and the children go fishing the following summer, "borrowing" the sheriff's boat to retrieve her catch from her illegal catfish traps. On the way down the river to deliver the fish to a poverty-stricken woman, they pass the sheriff and other local officials at their lodge, drunk and almost naked. That evening, Grandma and the children feed the remainder of the catfish to hungry drifters just outside of town. When the sheriff accuses Grandma of violating a town law, she quickly reminds him of seeing him and his friends in a compromising situation earlier in the day. He chooses to ignore her violation in return for her silence about their activities.

The next summer, Grandma enters a gooseberry pie in the county fair. When she finds that Rupert Pennypacker, the best baker in the state, has also entered the contest, she switches name cards on the two pies to ensure a win. She places second, though, and Rupert is awarded the blue ribbon for her pie. Rupert then claims his award - a free flight in a biplane. Not to be outdone, Grandma also tries to get a ride in the plane by telling the pilot that she had also won a blue ribbon. She is too heavy for the plane to take off, so Joey takes the ride in her place.

The following August, Mary Alice rescues Vandalia Eubanks from a cruel mother by hiding her in her room until Vandalia can elope with Junior Stubbs and leave town. Then, Junior's parents learn of Vandalia's hideout and attempt to persuade Grandma to prevent their son from marrying Vandalia. Mrs. Eubanks also discovers that Vandalia is hiding in Grandma's house, and she climbs a ladder to Vandalia's window to retrieve her, but Grandma knocks down the ladder to stop her. That night expectant crowds gather at the train station to see Junior and Vandalia's attempted escape, but they do not appear. Joey, however, dressed as the legendary "phantom brakeman" signals the train to

stop farther down the track, and the two board there to make their escape.

Effie Wilcox is forced to leave her home the next summer as the bank forecloses on her property and plans to build an implement shed there, but Grandma creates a plan to save Effie's house. She brings a stovepipe hat and quilt to a church rummage sale. They have markings suggesting that they once belonged to Abraham Lincoln and his wife and, according to Grandma, were found in Effie's house. Rumors about the find spread throughout town. The banker, realizing the items are counterfeit, asks to see Grandma to explain that her "finds" are risking the bank's plans to build the implement shed. She agrees to admit that the articles are not genuine in return for the bank giving back Effie her house. She also forces the banker to give each of her grandchildren two dollars, which is just enough for Joey to pay for his driving lessons.

During the children's final week at Grandma's the next summer, the town holds a Centennial celebration. When Mrs. Weidenbach insults Grandma by saying she is old and by asking her to do menial jobs for the celebration such as cleaning the ladies' restroom, Grandma seeks to show her up. She arranges to upstage Mrs. Weidenbach's nephew at the talent show by having Mary Alice perform an elegant ballroom dance. She also brings a 103-year-old Mexican War veteran to steal the Oldest Settler award from Mrs. Weidenbach's father, an aged Civil War veteran. Grandma successfully defeats Mrs. Weidenbach in both competitions to exact her revenge.

The novel ends during World War II with Joey leaving Chicago on a troop train headed for army basic training. Joey notifies Grandma by telegram that, although his train would not be stopping in her town, it would be passing through. As the train passes by her house before dawn, he sees all the lights of her house on and her waving at the train as it speeds by.

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Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Grandma is a woman who usually keeps to herself. However, she spends a lot of time and energy to ensure that the Cowgill boys will be caught and punished for their crimes. Why do you think she does this?

Grandma is a person who is concerned with justice. When Mrs. Wilcox comes to her home and relays the story of what the Cowgills did to her privy, Grandma is ready to take action. Although it seems that Mrs. Wilcox and Grandma do not get along, Grandma's defense of her so-called enemy would point to the contrary. Also, the Cowgills had already blown up Grandma's mailbox, and she was determined to stop their destructive ways. Another reason for her retaliation is that Grandma seems to enjoy tricking people and causing some trouble herself.

Literary Analysis

A Long Way from Chicago takes place in a rural community. Why do you think the author chose this setting for this story?

Many of the happenings in this novel would not be as comical or interesting if they happened in the city. For instance, the small town feel of the Centennial parade would be missing if the parade had taken place in Chicago. Also, the author establishes irony in that the siblings live in a city of gangsters, but they see more hijinks in their own grandmother's town. Another possible explanation is that Joey and Mary Alice live in Chicago, so perhaps the author wants to make a clear distinction between the setting of their everyday life and the setting of their adventures with Grandma.

Inferential Comprehension

Even though she claims she did not know what was going on, Grandma helps Vandalia and Junior Stubbs stay together. Why do you think she helps these two people?

Throughout most of the novel, Grandma seems to care only for herself and her grandchildren. However, there are times when a truly kind and generous nature shines through. Grandma pretends that she does not know Vandalia is in her home when Mrs. Eubanks tries to retrieve her daughter. She also refuses to let Junior's parents into her home. Although she never says anything until after the lovers are safely on the train, it is easy to see that Grandma enjoyed helping them. Perhaps Grandma has a soft spot in her heart for young lovers. It is obvious from her reaction to her grandchildren in wedding clothes that she loves and misses her husband very much. It is possible that Vandalia and Junior remind her of her own love and youth.

Constructing Meaning

Some of the events in this novel are suspenseful. In your opinion, what is the most exciting part of the story? Why?

The answers to this question will vary. One possible answer might be the scene in which Grandma cheats at the county fair in order to get Joey a ride on the airplane. This scene is exciting and interesting because the reader is not sure if Grandma is going to let Joey have the plane ride until the chapter is almost over. It is also exciting because the reader is not quite sure if Grandma cheated in the pie contest until the very end of the chapter.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Grandma is a unique character. She is creative and fun. Have your students create a drawing of Grandma. Under the drawing, ask your students to create a list of five words that best describe Grandma.

Making Predictions At the end of the novel, Joey

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leaves for the war. Ask your students to assume that, in the future, Joey survives the war, marries, and has a family. Based on his experiences with Grandma, what kind of a grandfather do they think Joey will be? Will he be creative and make trouble just like Grandma? Ask your students to write a short story that includes Joey as a grandfather.

Recognizing Feelings Joey and Mary Alice are siblings who seem to get along quite well. Throughout the novel their views of each other change because of circumstances. Joey begins to see Mary Alice as a girl on the verge of womanhood. Ask your students to write a short explanation of how each character changes his or her opinion of the other by the end of the novel.

Responding to Literature This book is a series of stories about a grandmother. The children learn about their grandmother through many interesting adventures. They are surprised when they find valentines in the attic that they believe belong to their grandmother. Contact a local nursing home and schedule a visit for your class. During the visit, ask each student to interview a resident. Make sure they have some questions ready beforehand. Next, ask the students to write a report on their interview. Those who choose to may share their report with the class.