

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Apprenticeship of Lucas Whitaker

by
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Book Information

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Twelve-year-old Lucas Whitaker, orphaned in 1849 when his entire family is claimed by consumption, takes a job as an apprentice with Doc Beecher, and learns the truth about the difference between superstition and science.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Bank Street College Best Book of the Year; Jefferson Cup Award/Honor; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; SLJ Best Book; Society of School Libr. International Best/Honor

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Main Characters

Daniel Oaks a young boy whom Dr. Beecher treats by removing an aching tooth

Lucas Whitaker a twelve-year-old boy whose family dies from consumption

Lydia Stukeley a twelve-year-old girl whose sister has consumption

Moll Garfield an elderly woman who is half Pequot Indian; she is knowledgeable in herbal medicines

Mr. and Mrs. Rood the neighbors of the Whitaker family; they lose a son to consumption

Mr. and Mrs. Stukeley farmers from the Southwick area whose daughter Sarah makes a seemingly complete recovery from consumption

Mrs. Cora Bunce Dr. Beecher's widowed sister, who lives with him and does cooking and cleaning

Uriah Beecher an elderly doctor who is also the dentist, barber, apothecary, and undertaker for the small town of Southwick, Connecticut

William Sheldon a Southwick farmer whose wife is suffering from consumption and who helps organize the village curing ceremony

Vocabulary

apothecary one who prepares and sells medicinal drugs

apprentice one who is learning by practical experience from another

consumption a progressive wasting away of the body; tuberculosis

hygienic pertaining to cleanliness conducive to health

inoculation the act of introducing an antibody into a living organism

vaccine a preparation of killed or living organisms which is injected into a living human or animal

Synopsis

As the story opens, twelve-year-old Lucas Whitaker is burying his mother, who died of consumption. At the grave site Lucas remembers all the other members of his family who died from this dreaded disease, and he thinks about all the pain and suffering it has caused. His neighbor, Mr. Rood, arrives with food and a bizarre story about the undead and a cure for consumption that he believes has worked on his son, Enoch. When he informs Lucas that he tried to tell him two days earlier, Lucas realizes he might have saved his mother if he had only answered the door. This guilt causes Lucas to leave home rather than accept the invitation to live with the Roods, and he sets out on his own.

Two days later, dirty, hungry, and tired, he finds himself outside the house of Doctor Beecher and his sister, Mrs. Bunce, in Southwick, Connecticut. A sign

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advertises "Help Wanted" and Lucas becomes the doctor's apprentice. Mrs. Bunce makes Lucas bathe completely, which seems strange to him. The next day Doc Beecher assigns Lucas to measure out medicine while Doc works as a barber. Doc tells Lucas he is part barber, dentist, apothecary, and undertaker for the small town. When Daniel Oaks arrives with an infected tooth, Lucas assists by calming the youngster during the painful tooth extraction, much to the satisfaction of Doc Beecher. Several days later, Lydia Stukeley urgently requests that Doc come to her house because her sister is dying of consumption. After Doc does everything he can for the sick girl, Lucas wonders why Doc does not tell the family about the cure, but he refrains from asking. Mr. Stukeley is disappointed that Doc can provide no cure, so he tells Doc that he is no longer needed and that they will try another cure. Doc and Lucas are called to Clem Buell's where Doc finds Clem's infected leg beyond healing. He realizes he must amputate or Clem will die. Lucas assists with the amputation but becomes dizzy from the sight of blood and horror of the cauterization process.

Doc sends Lucas to check on the Stukeley girl where Lucas finds the family trying the cure that the Roods mentioned. Lucas helps them dig up their eldest son's body, cut out the heart, and burn it so that Sarah can breathe in the smoke and get well. Back at Doc's house, Lucas excitedly tells Doc about what happened and how sure he is that Sarah will be cured. Doc does not share his belief in the cure and tells him it is just superstition. Showing Lucas his record books and patient information, Doc explains the scientific method and how medical people go about finding cures. Later that night, William Sheldon, whose wife also has consumption, comes to the house, asking if Doc will help with the curing ceremony planned for the next day. Doc declines and tries to discourage Lucas from going, but he eventually gives Lucas permission to go. When Lucas hears the townspeople exaggerating about things that happened at the Stukeley grave site, he begins to have some nagging doubts. But, since Sarah seems to be healthy, Lucas reassures himself that the cure must work.

Doc sends Lucas to Moll Garfield's house to learn about herbal medicine. Moll is half Pequot and performs healing cures with herbs and plants that she learned from her Native American ancestors. While she teaches Lucas about nature, plants, and herbal healing, Lucas explains the "cure." Moll cautions Lucas to go back to the beginning to find out how a story ends. After a few weeks with Moll, he decides to go back to see if Enoch Rood is still alive. Arriving at the Rood farm, Lucas learns that Enoch died, and the family asks Lucas to help them try the cure on their son Matthew, using Enoch's heart. Lucas realizes that Doc is right and dead people do not cause consumption. He tells the Roods he cannot help them and, after retrieving some family items from his old farm, he returns to Southwick. Lucas arrives to find Doc peering into his newly acquired microscope. He shows Lucas living organisms in water droplets. Lucas tells Doctor Beecher that he wants to find cures for diseases and has decided to pursue a medical career.

Open-Ended Questions

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

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Initial Understanding

Why is the doctor also asked to perform jobs such as barbering, dentistry, pharmacy, and undertaking?

In the mid-1800's, doctors in small towns performed other jobs which required similar tools or skills that a physician might have. Scalpels, or sharp knives used for surgery, could be used to shave, so the doctor could also be the barber. There was not a distinction between dentistry and medical practice, so any extraction of teeth was also handled by the doctor. Since the doctor prescribed medicine, he also had on hand many of the powders needed. Just like Doc Beecher, who prepared medicine in his office, many doctors used herbal remedies and plants from the surrounding area. Doctors dealt with death on a regular basis, so it seemed only natural that the doctor could also perform the job of undertaker. Funeral homes did not exist back then, so the undertaker would embalm the body and then the family would bury it. Also in a small town, the jobs were not profitable enough for one person to specialize, so a doctor might do as many as he could handle.

Literary Analysis

What is Moll like? Why do others call her a witch?

Superstition is very strong among these people at this time, and they are likely to attribute anything unusual to witchcraft. Moll is different from the townspeople in a number of ways, making her a target of suspicion. First, she is half Native American and practices native medicine. Second, she lives alone and is very independent, unlike the typical white woman of the time. And last, she can tell things about people just by looking at them because she is very observant, but many people believe she gains this knowledge supernaturally.

Inferential Comprehension

How are Mrs. Bunce's ideas about washing and taking baths different from those of Mr. Oaks and Lucas? Why does Doc say he thinks his sister has the right idea?

Mrs. Bunce believes it is important to stay clean. She probably learned this from her brother and from doctors in Philadelphia. Mr. Oaks and Lucas, on the other hand, apparently share Lucas's mother's belief that the body's natural protection should not be washed off.

Constructing Meaning

What is the scientific method that Doctor Beecher discusses? How does his story about the bee and rooster explain the scientific method?

The scientific method involves five steps: 1 - State the problem. 2 - State the hypothesis or theory about the problem. 3 - Experiment, using trial and error. 4 - Observe what happens. 5 - State the conclusion, or the solution to the problem. In the story, Doc tells Lucas to observe what happens when the rooster crows and to make sure the same thing happens each time or else the conclusion might be wrong. Doc tells Lucas he has to make sure he knows all the facts and receives consistent results before he can be sure the cure actually works.

Teachable Skills

Comparing and Contrasting Doctor Beecher explains to Lucas the type of medical education he had to go through to become a doctor. Check into the requirements for a person to be certified to practice medicine today. How are they different from what Doctor Beecher had to do? Are any of the programs or practices similar today?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Doctor Beecher and Moll Garfield both use herbs and plants as part of their treatment of ailments. Research some of the plants that Moll Garfield mentions in chapter sixteen. How do they help treat diseases and medical problems? Investigate holistic medicine. How do the two relate? Do

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people use herbal remedies today? Make posters with pictures of herbs and label them with their medical uses.

Responding to Literature Lucas is startled by the exaggerations he overhears at the curing ceremony. He wants to tell the people that much of what they claimed was "true," never actually happened that way. Discuss how stories are exaggerated. Have students think of examples of exaggerated stories they have heard. Why does this occur? Does exaggeration help or hurt?

Recognizing Details Back in 1849 there was no cure for consumption, or what is now called tuberculosis. Today doctors have a vaccine for tuberculosis and also have other medicines which can aid in curing the disease. Have students look up other diseases which have vaccines for them such as polio, smallpox, and measles. Give reports to the class about the scientists who discovered the vaccines and how they developed them.