

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Bigger

by

Patricia Calvert

Book Information

Patricia Calvert, Bigger
Quiz Number: 10204
Atheneum, 1994
ISBN 0-684-19685-9; LCCN
137 Pages
Book Level: 5.7
Interest Level: MG

A boy fails to persuade his Confederate father to return home to a life of peace -- and defeat.

Topics: Animals, Dogs; Countries/Regions, Mexico; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Sons; People, Pioneers/Settlers; Wars, American Civil War

Main Characters

Aunt Margaret Riley Uncle Matt's wife

Bigger the dog that accompanies Tyler on the search for his father

Black Jack Bohannon Tyler's adventure-seeking father; he is a soldier of the Confederacy who wants to continue the war even though it has ended

Clayton Riley Tyler's cousin; a spoiled and overprotected boy about Tyler's age

General Joseph Shelby the renegade Confederate officer who leads Missouri's Iron Cavalry Brigade, including Black Jack Bohannon

Isaac Peerce a recently freed slave about Tyler's age who meets Tyler on his journey and accidentally injures him

Lucas Bohannon Tyler's younger brother

Mama Tyler's mother

Rosa Lee Bohannon Tyler's younger sister

Sooner one of Bigger's offspring; a male pup that Tyler takes to raise after Bigger's tragic death

the stranger a Confederate soldier who stops at the Bohannon farm on his way home from the war and tells some of his battle experiences

Tyler Bohannon the twelve-year-old main character, who walks 800 miles to find his father

Uncle Matt Riley Tyler's kind and mild-mannered uncle

Vocabulary

aggie nickname for agate, a marble made from a semiprecious stone called chalcedony
chortled chuckled or snorted with joy
conscripted ordered to serve in the armed forces
guffawing laughing in a loud manner
peeved irritated or annoyed
scalawags white Southern Republicans who were guilty of inappropriate dealings during the Reconstruction period of the South after the Civil War; in modern times, anyone who behaves like a rascal
secession the act of separating, such as the Southern states from the United States before the outbreak of the Civil War

Synopsis

Twelve-year-old Tyler Bohannon is the oldest son of John and Ellen Bohannon. The Bohannons are waiting for John's return from the American Civil War, which has just ended, or for news of his death. While traveling home, a former Confederate soldier stops at the Bohannon farm in Sweet Creek, Missouri. Tyler asks him many questions about his father and refers to his father as Black Jack Bohannon. The stranger suggests that Tyler's father and hundreds of others from General Joseph Shelby's Missouri Iron Cavalry Brigade have chosen to stay with the general. Rather than be taken prisoner by the victorious Union Army, Shelby and his followers plan to cross the Rio Grande into Mexico. They hope to reorganize and resupply themselves with the weapons they will need to return and continue the fight. The stranger leaves a map with Tyler, marked with the path he believes Shelby's soldiers are taking.

Tyler vows to find his father. He tells his mother that he intends to leave for Mexico, a journey of about 800 miles, according to the stranger. Reluctantly, Mrs. Bohannon provides Tyler with as many supplies as she is able. She also advises that he stop at his Uncle Matt and Aunt Margaret's house in New Hope. There Uncle Matt and Aunt Margaret give him a few

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Bigger

by

Patricia Calvert

extra things for his trip, including some money.

During his short stay, Tyler meets the "devil" dog, a mean stray that Uncle Matt has chained. The dog's eyes of two different colors, its curled lip, and its low growls make Tyler uneasy. After spending the night in New Hope, he leaves, heading for Arkansas. The next night, Tyler discovers that the dog has followed him. After Tyler feeds the dog with some leftovers from his own meal, the dog disappears. The next night he returns. As Tyler ventures farther and farther south, the dog gradually becomes friendlier. He even allows Tyler to pet him, and Tyler gives him the name of "Bigger."

Along the way, Tyler encounters Isaac Peerce, a barefoot black boy who accidentally knocks Tyler unconscious with a stone hurled from a slingshot. Isaac later tells Tyler that he was aiming at a rabbit. Bigger catches the rabbit, and the boys roast it over an open fire for that night's meal. Tyler learns a great deal from Isaac in the short time the two of them travel together. Tyler is especially interested in the different troubles Isaac had as a slave before the war compared to the struggle he is having to provide for himself now that he is free. Several days later, Tyler and Isaac go separate ways at Tuttle River. As parting gifts, Isaac gives Tyler his fishing pole and Tyler gives Isaac his extra pair of shoes.

Tyler next comes upon a group of men who are digging individual graves for soldiers who had been buried in mass graves during battle. Only skulls, skeletons, some clothing, and shoes remain of these men. The gravediggers confirm for Tyler what he had previously heard about the horrors of war. He leaves the gravediggers, who first encourage him to take a pair of shoes that one of the dead men will no longer be needing. Tyler does take a pair, replacing the ones he had given to Isaac.

The long journey ends at Eagle Pass on the Rio Grande. Tyler and his father are reunited. Tyler believes that everything is going to be fine now. He believes his father will return to Missouri with him where Mrs. Bohannon and Tyler's sister, Rosa Lee, and brother, Lucas, await their return. However, it is

not to be. Black Jack Bohannon is a different man. The effects of the war have planted the seeds of a new mission in life for him. He wants to stay with General Shelby's soldiers and continue battling for Confederate ideals.

Tyler next retraces his route, knowing that at the other end, he must break this disheartening news to his family. In McMinnville, not far from Sweet Creek, he encounters the man who had owned Bigger and who had tormented him to make him an aggressive guard dog. The man says that Bigger belongs to him. Tyler offers to buy Bigger, using the last of the money Uncle Matt had given him. The man tries to take both the money and the dog. In a skirmish that follows, the man shoots and kills Bigger. Tyler insists to the townspeople of McMinnville that he wants to take the dead dog with him. Tyler buries him near Sweet Creek, a place suitable for the animal that had become his friend and traveling companion. It is a spot that will enable Tyler to visit him often.

Once home, Tyler learns that Uncle Matt's dog, Daisy, had birthed a litter of dogs that had been sired by Bigger before they left. Tyler is allowed to take a pup, and he chooses the one that resembles Bigger. He leaves for home, hoping for his father's change of heart and eventual safe return.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Bigger

by

Patricia Calvert

Initial Understanding

Tyler is surprised that his father has changed so much over the course of the war. In what ways has he changed?

His physical appearance has changed. Not only does he look much older with gray streaks in his once pure black hair, but also his eyes are different. "The rider's eyes burned like hot coals in his head, not with the cheery, sassy glow that Tyler remembered." His physical appearance reflects the change in his personality from lightheartedness to a deadly seriousness. One of Black Jack's fellow soldiers says, "Doesn't have much time for spinnin' yarns or playin' the fool." Tyler is stunned by these words because "that's what Papa was famous for all up and down Sweet Creek...."

Literary Analysis

Neither Tyler nor Isaac knows of his father's present status. How is the relationship between Tyler and his father different from the connection Isaac has with his father?

Isaac never knew his father because his father was sold to a new owner when Isaac's mother was pregnant with him, yet there is a chance that Mr. Peerce is looking for his family. It is apparent, however, that Black Jack Bohannon has no intention of returning to his home and family. He has chosen another course and a different allegiance.

Inferential Comprehension

Does Tyler make the right decision when he chooses to leave home to find his father?

Some students will say that he does make the right decision and that his journey is worth the risk and hardship in order to learn of his father's fate. They may say that endless waiting and not knowing would be more of a hardship than the journey and that they would do the same thing under the circumstances. Other students may say that the evidence suggested that Tyler's father was either dead or did not want to come home. Therefore, in Tyler's place, they would have just stayed home and let fate take its course, awaiting his father's return or the news of his death.

Constructing Meaning

When Tyler meets the gravediggers, one of them says, "These chaps are brothers now, whether they aimed to be in life or not." How does death make brothers of enemy soldiers?

Students might be able to reason that no matter how proudly people might fight for a cause, no matter how right they may think they are, death makes them all the same. And now that they can no longer fight, they are at peace with each other.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Many towns, rivers, and other geographic features are mentioned in Tyler's travels to search for his father. Hand out blank maps of the United States. Ask students to track Tyler's route from Sweet Creek, Missouri to Eagle Pass, Texas. They should locate as many places mentioned in the story as they can find.

Recognizing Details Tyler usually describes his surroundings in terms of indigenous flora. Hemlock, dogwood, chaparral, and timothy are some of the types of vegetation that mark his travels. Ask the class to bring in pictures of such vegetation and/or research and write a brief report about their characteristics and uses.

Understanding Sequence The story spans about

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Bigger by Patricia Calvert

five months, beginning in May. The author frequently refers to how much time has passed as Tyler advances in his search. Provide graph paper to students and have them work in pairs to construct a timeline. Encourage them to be thoughtful in showing the correct spacing between any two events on the timeline.

Extending Meaning There are several references to Tyler reading letters from his father. Ask students to write a letter from Tyler to his family about his experiences and observations on the journey.