

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Finishing Becca

by
Ann Rinaldi

Book Information

Ann Rinaldi, Finishing Becca
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362 Pages
Book Level: 4.6
Interest Level: MG+

This story illustrates how a social-climber influences Benedict Arnold so that he betrays his own forces, as seen by a young maid during the Revolutionary War. The plot contains mild profanity and sexual references.

Topics: Series, Great Episodes; Wars, American Revolutionary War

Main Characters

Andre a suave British captain with whom Peggy falls in love
Becca the main character and Peggy Shippen's personal maid
Coxie the Shippens' black cook and friend to Becca
Henry Job Becca's stepfather, later revealed to be a double agent
Mama Becca's mother, a dressmaker for the wealthy families of Philadelphia
Peggy Shippen a beautiful woman who marries Benedict Arnold and convinces him to turn traitor

Vocabulary

circumspect careful, cautious, prudent
flummox bring to confusion; bewilder
fowling piece a light gun for shooting wild birds
turncoat person who changes to another set of beliefs or political party
vindicated cleared from suspicion

Synopsis

Mama takes Becca to the Shippens to be a personal maid to Peggy. Mama feels this will be like finishing school for Becca. At the Shippens' Becca thinks she

will find her "missing pieces," and when she is "finished," she will be a refined lady. Here, she learns to speak French, play the harpsichord, dance, and paint.

Becca comes to know Peggy, a beautiful, spoiled woman who manipulates her father into buying things even though he's facing financial disaster. Becca helps Elizabeth Shippen, Peggy's sister and a rebel sympathizer, by giving a bundle of clothes to Frazor, a rebel soldier. He is able to escape to Camp Valley Forge where Becca's brother is stationed.

Peggy and her sisters are not allowed to go to Meschianza, the biggest social event of the season, after their Quaker father learns they are to wear gowns of Turkish slave girls. Peggy is infuriated that she has missed the event. When her relationship with Andre, a suave English officer, ends, she dramatically concludes that her life is over. Not long after, however, Peggy and Benedict Arnold meet. Feeling persecuted herself, she feels sympathy for a "persecuted" Arnold.

Peggy asks Becca to work for her after her marriage to Arnold. Becca agrees to go despite the objection of Henry Job, her stepfather. By listening at doors and reading a letter, Becca learns of Arnold's traitorous ways. She is discovered eavesdropping though, and Arnold threatens her if she tells anyone what she knows. She goes back home to her farm. There she learns Henry Job, a double agent, has run away.

At the end of the book, Becca reflects on the many things she learned while working for Peggy and realizes that "no one is ever finished."

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

Blair made up Mama's world more than Becca did. Why do you think this was a heavy burden on him?

He had to live up to her expectations. He might feel guilty if he chose to go his own way.

Literary Analysis

The author includes a story of militiamen throwing stones at Arnold. Why do you think the author included this story?

It was included to show that Arnold's men disliked him and to show the reality of war.

Inferential Comprehension

What do you think would have happened if Becca had told someone about Benedict Arnold's plans?

Perhaps no one would have believed her. Perhaps she would have been asked to go back and spy on him. Arnold would have been arrested.

Constructing Meaning

In this book, Becca sees Andre's outfit and thinks of the men at Camp Valley Forge. What do you think the author was hoping to show by this comparison?

Answers might refer to the deprivation of Washington's men, the arrogance of Andre, and the deep conviction of Washington's men.

about Arnold's traitorous ways. Have students discuss ways in which their decisions would have been the same as Becca's. How would their decisions have been different? Why would they have made these decisions?

Identifying Reason Coxie, a slave of the Shippens, read *Common Sense* so many times that she memorized it. Have the students research this pamphlet and explain why a slave might find *Common Sense* significant.

Responding to Literature At the end of the book, Benedict Arnold's son, Edward, was mentioned. He was still a baby, so we are not told of his feelings. Have the students pretend they are Edward at twelve years of age. Have them write a short paper on their feelings. This paper could answer such questions as: What would they think of their father's betrayal? Would they blame their mother for her role in it? Would they be angry over the "bad name" given to them by their parents? How would they respond to the taunts of other children?

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In this book, both Mama and Becca become involved in the dyeing business. To make yellow dye, Mama required peach leaves, goldenrod, butternut bark, smartweed, and hemlock. Ask the students what they might use if they wanted to dye something yellow. Tell them to find information on how modern industry makes yellow dye.

Comparing and Contrasting Becca made many decisions. For example, she decided to give Henry Job the coins so she could stay on at the Shippens. She decided to follow Peggy when she became Mrs. Arnold. She decided to tell no one