

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Giants in the Earth

by  
O.E. Rolvaag

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### Book Information

O.E. Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth  
Quiz Number: 739  
HarperCollins Publishers, Inc, 1999  
ISBN 0-06-093193-0; LCCN  
529 Pages  
Book Level: 8.4  
Interest Level: UG

This powerful novel depicts the challenges of pioneer life in America.

**Topics:** Countries/Regions, Norway;  
Countries/Regions, United States; People,  
Pioneers/Settlers; Popular Groupings,  
College Bound

### Main Characters

Beret Hansa Per Hansa's wife, who believes people are not meant to live in the empty prairies

Hans Olsa Per's oldest and dearest friend, who agrees to settle the West with Per and others

Henry and Sam Solum young Norwegian men born and raised in the United States who move West with the others

Kjersti Tonseten Syvert's wife, who is unable to bear children and thinks her husband is a bit of a dolt

Per Hansa a Norwegian man whose heart is set on building his fairy tale life on the American prairie

Permand Hansa Per and Beret's youngest son, who is believed to be destined for great things

Sofie Olsa, And-Ongen, Store-Hans, and Ole Hansa the older Hansa and Olsa children

Sorine Olsa Hans Olsa's wife, who is kind and strong and adjusts well to life in their new home

Syvert Tonseten a Norwegian man who located the area where the Norwegian settlers decide to move

### Vocabulary

**paroxysm** a sudden, sharp attack, as of pain or coughing

**pedagogical** related to the art of teaching

**pestilence** a destructive, infectious, quickly spreading disease

**reconnoitering** engaging in a preliminary survey of an area

**retribution** something administered or exacted in recompense; punishment

**taciturn** disinclined to talk

**vouchsafe** to grant as a privilege or special favor

### Synopsis

In the spring of 1873, four Norwegian families take advantage of the opportunity to own their own farms and move west to the Dakota Territory. Per and Beret Hansa begin the trip with the others but fall behind when their wagon is damaged. When their wagon is repaired, they head out on the trail again. At one point, Per loses the trail but is still able to find the others when he finds remnants of their camps.

Despite the lost time, Per Hansa is able to build his homestead up better and faster than the others while also getting in his first crop of potatoes. Per is able to set his property apart from others when he builds his home and barn together, covers them with strong timber and plants some trees around them. Per becomes known as a man who can accomplish nearly anything. He even cures an Indian chief who was at the brink of death.

As the time goes by, the settlers encounter many people and events. The group deals with harsh winters and many years of locusts. They come together as a group by trading goods, visiting with one another, starting a school, and eventually establishing a church.

One character, however, has a particularly difficult time coping with the new surroundings: Beret Hansa. She feels the area is not fit for humans and will create savage beasts out of those who stay. During the first winter she bears a son who is believed to be destined for great things. Beret, however, feels he was sent from the devil, and until a minister arrives to help her see differently, she struggles with the idea that he should go to be with her dead mother. With the minister's help, she sees

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the boy in a greater light and seems to recover from her illness.

In the winter of 1880-81, the prairie is hit by so much snow that houses are buried and cattle are lost. Many people lose their lives, including two of the original settlers in the area, Hans Olsa and Per Hansa. Hans catches a cough while trying to save his cattle, and Per freezes to death while trying to get the minister for Hans.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

When the characters first settle their land, they built sod houses. Why did they build sod houses rather than wood, brick, or stone ones?

*The material was readily available; they were essentially free to build; they did not require a great deal of time or effort to build.*

#### Literary Analysis

The Norwegian culture seems to be influenced by a number of superstitious beliefs. List some of the beliefs that were addressed in the book.

*Trolls do mischievous things on the earth. A child born with "the helmet" is destined to greatness. Evil things come from the north.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

The school becomes an important feature in the lives of the settlers, especially in their first winter. Explain the importance of the school.

*The winters are harsh and lonely times for the settlers, and the school helps ease that loneliness. It also helps the older people to learn some English, keeps the children (and adults) occupied, and helps bring the group together as a community.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Beret describes the fever to move West that swept the United States about the time she arrived. What was so appealing about moving West to areas like the Dakotas?

*There was a great deal of land to be had. The people could feel the sense of pride in conquering the land. Many people were doing it, and it seemed like a great adventure.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Tonseten is elected justice of the peace by the community. He does not necessarily relish the job because of some of the things he is required to do. Have the students research the role of the justice of the peace in the pioneer community.

**Comparing and Contrasting** In different parts of the story, the meaning of some of the characters' names is explained. In addition, the characters discuss changing their names to accommodate the government. Have the students research either their own names or those of the characters and find their meanings. Divide the students into groups to create charts that outline the meanings of names in different languages and how names were changed when people immigrated.

**Recognizing Details** The Norwegians are able to defend their right to the property they settle because they have properly registered with the land office in Sioux Falls. The reason they are able to claim the land is because of the Homestead Act, enacted after the Civil War. Have the students research the Homestead Act in order to understand what its provisions were and why it was created. Have the students note the success or failure of the program in different parts of the country and the factors that contributed to that success or failure.

**Responding to Literature** Life as a pioneer on the prairie was often difficult and frustrating. Most of the characters in this story cope with it very well. Have the students reflect on the things they read here and elsewhere on the pioneer

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experience. Have them share which aspects of pioneer life they would have enjoyed and those which they would not have enjoyed. This sharing could be done orally or as a reflection paper.