

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Grey King

by

Susan Cooper

Book Information

Susan Cooper, The Grey King

Quiz Number: 33

Aladdin, 1999

ISBN 0-689-82984-1; LCCN

165 Pages

Book Level: 6.2

Interest Level: MG

Will Stanton, visiting in Wales, is swept into a desperate quest to find the golden harp and to awaken the ancient Sleepers. Book #4

Award: Carnegie Medal/Honors; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Medal

Topics: Fantasy/Imagination, Fantasy; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Series, Dark Is Rising

Main Characters

Bran Davies a twelve-year-old albino boy who joins Will on his quest

Cafall Bran's white dog, who accompanies and protects Bran and Will

Caradog Prichard a bitter sheep farmer on the property adjoining the Evanses' farm; he is used as a channel of the Grey King's malevolence

David Evans Will Stanton's "uncle," who raises sheep for a living

Gwen a woman who, many years ago, came out of the mountains and left her baby, Bran, with Owen Davies

Jen Evans Will Stanton's "aunt," who welcomes Will to her home in Wales, where he can recuperate from his illness

John Rowlands a kind employee of David Evans who knows the old tales about the Light and Dark; he defends others against the wrath of Caradog Prichard

Merriman a wizard and the first, strongest, and wisest of the Old Ones; he is Will's master

Owen Davies Bran's adoptive father, who tries to keep the story of Bran's origins from him

Pen John Rowlands's black dog

Rhys David Evans's grown son

the Grey King a powerful Lord of the Dark who inhabits the mountainous area near the Evanses' farm and brings destruction to the area

the milgwn grey foxes that are agents of the Grey King

Will Stanton the principal character of the story; a twelve-year-old boy, the last of the Old Ones born on Earth, who is given the quest to find the harp and awaken the Sleepers in order to resist the Dark

Vocabulary

arpeggio the playing of a musical chord in rapid succession, rather than simultaneously

conundrum a difficult problem or dilemma, such as the solving of a riddle

kestrel a small falcon

semantics the study of the meaning in language

temerity foolish boldness, recklessness

Synopsis

Young Will Stanton has been severely ill with hepatitis. As he starts to recover, he feels that he has forgotten something important. In his fitful moments, he recalls a phrase, "on the day of the dead," which seems important to him. His worried parents send Will to relatives, David and Jen Evans, in Wales to convalesce.

Will is picked up at the train station by his cousin, Rhys. Enroute to the farm, the vehicle lurches in a strange way and a tire is punctured. Will encounters Caradog Prichard, a disagreeable neighbor of the Evanses, as the tire is being changed. When Will and Rhys are on their way again, Rhys explains that the foreboding clouds on the mountain are called the breath of the Grey King. This stirs a memory in Will.

Will accompanies his uncle the next day to town where he enters a church, St. Cadfan's. Once again his memory is stirred, and he knows he needs to find Cadfan's Way, a long forgotten path. When he returns to the farm, he seeks advice from John

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Rowlands, a hand on his uncle's farm, who suggests he search along the ridge but cautions him not to go onto Caradog Prichard's land. While Will is walking, a white sheepdog with silver eyes knocks Will down after shepherding him onto Cadfan's Way. Will's memory is jogged, and he recalls all the lines of the three verses he was supposed to remember. He then realizes he is in Wales on a quest.

Cafall, the sheepdog, belongs to an albino boy named Bran. Bran recognizes Will -- an Old One and defender of the Light -- whose job it is to hold back the rising power of the Dark. Will is the youngest and last of the Old Ones born on Earth. Will's quest is to find the harp, one of the Six Signs of the Light. He has been given the verses to direct him on the quest. Will's master, a wizard named Merriman, had also given Bran a few lines of the verses to assure Will that he can trust Bran.

As the two boys are discussing the quest and trying to determine the meaning of the mysterious verses, Caradog Prichard arrives and claims Cafall is bothering his sheep, but Bran claims his dog is innocent. After Caradog leaves, Bran explains that Caradog is unruly because he comes from a tribe of villains and because he spent an entire night alone on Cader, a haunted mountain, where the Grey King lives.

A few days later, while Will is helping John Rowlands bring a flock of sheep to winter pasture, a ewe is attacked. John moves the injured sheep to an abandoned cottage, but when he and Will return for it, it has disappeared. Shortly after they arrive back on the farm, Bran and Will go out to the fields, where they learn from Bran's father, Owen Davies, and John that four more sheep have been attacked. Bran suspects grey foxes are to blame, and Will has a vision telling him Bran is correct.

At that moment, they discover that a fire of mysterious nature has broken out on the dry mountainside. Will and Bran find themselves by Bird Rock surrounded by fire and threatened by grey foxes. When Will recites some magic words, a cleft in the rock opens, and they walk into a huge

chamber. After descending a stone staircase, they come to the roof of another world, where they are scrutinized by High Magic and allowed to pass. Descending another staircase, they enter a chamber with three men on thrones -- the Lords of the High Magic. Will and Bran must answer three riddles, which they do successfully. Merriman, Will's master, reveals himself as one of the Lords. Another is Lord of the Dark. The third Lord is a king who knows Cafall and is tender towards Bran. Will is given the harp and is told it will protect him when played. He must now complete the second and harder part of his quest -- to awaken the Sleepers.

After retracing their steps and leaving the rock chamber, Cafall saves Will and Bran from the wrath of the Grey King, who has appeared in the form of a fierce wind. When the wind subsides, Cafall disappears, and a grey fox, invisible to all but Will and Bran, makes it look as if Cafall has killed a sheep. Caradog Prichard shoots and kills Cafall. Bran is devastated and refuses to talk or help Will anymore.

Will seeks the counsel of John Rowlands, who explains Bran's past to him. When Bran was just a baby, a beautiful woman named Gwen suddenly appeared with Bran, and Owen Davies took her in. A few days later, Caradog Prichard attacked her, and John Rowlands and Owen fought him off. Gwen left shortly afterward, leaving Bran with Owen, who adopted him. Thanking John for this information, Will leaves to retrieve the harp from the place where he has kept it hidden. He recovers it and then witnesses two amazing things. He sees a grey fox change its color to black to appear to look like Pen, John Rowlands's dog. The Grey King then appears to him and warns him to cease his quest or be destroyed. Will learns that the Grey King is using Prichard as a tool for his evil.

Caradog Prichard is now accusing Pen of attacking his sheep and is threatening to kill the dog, so John and Will move him to another farm. There, they find the body of the first sheep that was attacked. The farm is near a lake, Tal y Llyn, and Will realizes this is where the Sleepers lie. Bran arrives at the new

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farm unexpectedly to warn Will that Caradog is on his way to kill Pen. Bran, Will, and Pen hide in the abandoned cottage where the sheep had originally disappeared. The hut is a stronghold of the Dark where the Dark has placed a warestone, a small rock with supernatural powers that paralyze Pen. Will leaves to retrieve the harp to use its magic to break the spell on Pen. While he is gone, Owen Davies arrives. He explains to Bran how Bran became his son. Bran realizes his own power and breaks the spell on Pen, and they leave. When Will returns, he finds the cottage empty. From the warestone, he learns of Bran's parentage; Bran's real father is one of the Lords of High Magic, who saw Bran for the first time when Will and Bran descended into the chamber. Will realizes Bran holds tremendous power and was brought out of the past for a reason.

Will searches for Bran and is again confronted by a crazed Caradog Prichard. Will strums his harp, and six horsemen, the Sleepers, awaken and ride by in the air to rescue the world from the rising Dark. Prichard grabs the harp and throws it into the lake. John Rowlands arrives and fights off Prichard. When John and Caradog's previous fight about Gwen is mentioned, Will finally comes to realize Bran's mother and father are Guinevere and King Arthur. Prichard goes insane as the Grey King leaves him and retreats, and the Dark and the grey foxes disappear from the valley.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

In what way can the harp be considered a weapon?

In the story, the Dark's power is ineffective while the harp is being played. Whether it weakens the Dark, or empowers Will and Bran is a matter of debate. In either case, it prevents the Dark from having total control over Will and Bran. Therefore, it plays an essential role in helping them gain victory over the Dark.

Literary Analysis

What attitude toward youth does Susan Cooper want to communicate to readers through this book?

Answers will vary. However, in general, Susan Cooper's attitude toward youth is positive. She presents them as capable of great responsibility because they are given an important task; clever and intelligent because they can remember things and solve tricky riddles; able to stand up for their beliefs because they affirm they had seen the milgwn when others could not; compassionate because they mourn the loss of Cafall; and respectful because they honor those who hold great power.

Inferential Comprehension

A number of times during the story Will senses that Owen Davies knows more than he says. What are these moments and what does Owen finally reveal?

Perhaps what Will senses is that Owen Davies knows more about Bran and the Dark than he admits. When Will first meets Owen, he has the feeling the real man is not behind Owen's eyes. Owen is always quick with a reproof when magic is mentioned -- as if he is defensive and hiding something. When Will explains to Owen that Bran is near the farm in Ty-Bont, Owen calmly but swiftly goes to his old abandoned home "knowing" Bran will be there and tells Bran some things about his mother. In the end, Owen reveals he knew that Gwen was Guinevere and that she brought Bran into the future.

Constructing Meaning

Caradog Prichard is described as being "as mad as a hatter." To what does this expression refer?

"Mad as a hatter" means to be crazy or deranged. Hat makers used to use mercury compounds in their trade. Exposure to these compounds over time causes brain damage, and some hatters began to act deranged -- thus the expression, "mad as a hatter."

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they did. Display the illustrations in class.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors It might add richness to the student's appreciation of *The Grey King* to research the story of King Arthur and Guinevere and to determine what aspects of their lives are woven into the story. Have students explain their findings in a short oral or written report.

Comparing and Contrasting There have been a number of book series that have the same basic conflict as *The Grey King* -- the battle between good and evil. Some examples include series like *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*; *Star Wars*; *Redwall*; and *Harry Potter*. Choose one of the books in one of these series and compare and contrast the characters with those in *The Grey King*. Identify the protagonists and antagonists and their goals in the two stories. Draw parallels between the characters in *The Grey King* and the other book. Other elements of literature could also be compared, such as setting, genre, point of view, tone, etc.

Making Predictions If the students have not already read the entire sequence of *The Dark is Rising* series by Susan Cooper, have them write an outline for their own version of a sequel, perhaps with Bran as the central character carrying on the battle against the Dark. They can then read the sequel, *Silver on the Tree*, and see how Susan Cooper's version matches their predicted version.

Recognizing Setting Susan Cooper wrote that although the characters in *The Grey King* are fictitious, the places are real. She took certain liberties, however, as to the setting of the farms. Using the maps and descriptive details in the book, have the students make a drawing of the area in which the action of the story takes place. Include the places mentioned in the story such as Clwyd, Caradog Prichard's farm, Tywyn, Ty-Bont, and lake Tal y Llyn. Indicate where important incidents took place, such as those at the cottage, St. Cadfan's, Craig yr Aderyn, etc. Have students explain why they placed things where