

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Long Winter

by

Laura Ingalls Wilder

Book Information

Laura Ingalls Wilder, The Long Winter

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Book Level: 5.3

Interest Level: MG

Almanzo Wilder makes a dangerous trip to save the village from starvation.

Award: Newbery Honor

Topics: Family Life, Misc./Other; People, Pioneers/Settlers; Series, Little House

Main Characters

Cap Garland a fourteen-year-old classmate of Laura; the schoolteacher's brother

Caroline Ingalls (Ma) Laura's mother

Carrie Ingalls Laura's ten-year-old sister

Charles Ingalls (Pa) Laura's father

Grace Ingalls Laura's three-year-old sister

Laura Ingalls the fourteen-year-old central character of the story; the narrator focuses on her thoughts and feelings

Mary Ingalls Laura's blind, older sister

Mr. Loftus the owner of Loftus' Groceries, who provides the money to purchase wheat from the man south of town

Royal and Almanzo Wilder two brothers who are friends and neighbors of the Ingalls family

Vocabulary

calico a simple cotton material with a pattern

gruel a thin porridge made with grain and water

homestead a piece of land given by the government to a person or family in exchange for cultivating it and living on it for a specified number of years

migrant someone who frequently moves in search of work

shanty a poorly built dwelling

sober serious

Synopsis

Charles Ingalls has staked a claim in the Dakota prairies. He and his wife and four daughters live in a small shanty and have planted their first crop of hay. Pa's daughter Laura is helping him to harvest the hay when they see clues that the upcoming winter will be a hard one. In early October, the first blizzard of the season arrives. Pa realizes he must move his family into the small nearby town where they will be better able to survive the winter. Fourteen-year-old Laura and her ten-year-old sister, Carrie, attend the school in town. Their older sister, Mary, is not able to attend because she is blind, but the family is trying to save up enough money to send Mary to a school for the blind.

Royal and Almanzo Wilder are two brothers who have also come from their homesteads to spend the winter in town. Nineteen-year-old Almanzo has saved some wheat from his first crop to use for planting in the spring in case the train with supplies cannot get through in time for the spring planting.

During November, more blizzards hit the town. The men try to clear the snow from the track so that the train filled with food and supplies for winter can get through. Meanwhile, Pa is making many trips back to the homestead to bring the hay into town for winter. Before the track can be cleared of snow, another blizzard comes. The school is closed, and the town's supply of food and fuel begins to run low. Over the next few weeks, the men continue to try to clear the track, only to have more blizzards come and cover their work. The Ingalls family begins to realize that the train may not get through until spring. After they run out of coal, they begin burning hay to heat the one room in which they now spend their days.

After Christmas, blizzard after blizzard hits the town. The food supply is dangerously low for the Ingalls family, and Pa buys a bag of wheat, which they grind into flour in a small coffee grinder to make bread. As the wheat supply dwindles, Pa realizes that Almanzo has hidden his wheat behind a false wall. Fearful that his family may starve, Pa fills a pail

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full of wheat over Almanzo's protests, but Pa insists on paying for it. Royal and Almanzo realize that the other families in town may also be in danger of starving. Almanzo decides to investigate a rumor that a homesteader out on the prairie has a lot of wheat stored. Almanzo and his friend Cap Garland make the long journey through the snow to the man's shanty and bargain with him for the wheat. On the return trip they encounter a blizzard, and the two boys barely arrive safely in town. The wheat is enough to last the townspeople through the remainder of the winter, so they are saved from starving.

After struggling through the long, cold, monotonous winter, Laura finally sees small signs of spring. When May comes, the train finally arrives with the food and supplies the townspeople have so desperately needed. The Ingalls family once again talks of returning to their shanty on the homestead to begin the spring planting.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What are the signs that led Pa to think the winter would be hard and long?

When Pa and Laura find the muskrat house, Pa notices that its walls are thicker than usual and believes that indicates a severe winter is coming. Pa also notices that by early autumn the geese and other birds are already gone on their way south. He has an uneasy feeling about the weather that he does not like. The final sign occurs when the Indian comes into the store predicting lots of snow and a seven-month-long winter.

Literary Analysis

Describe the mood of the story during the days and nights of winter. Consider what Ma and Pa are thinking as the winter progresses.

As the bitter cold, deep snows, high winds, and frequent blizzards continue day after day, the mood is one of monotony and helplessness. The family is at the mercy of the weather. Through the droning on and on of winter, Ma and Pa are facing the reality that they may not survive until more supplies arrive. They realize that they must not let the children know their fears. Ma and Pa maintain an attitude of hope that enables the family to avoid feelings of despair.

Inferential Comprehension

Would Almanzo have sold his wheat if he had not been able to bring back the wheat from the man who lived south of town?

Almanzo knows that the hope of his future is in the seeds and realizes there is a strong possibility that the spring train will not arrive in time to bring seeds for spring planting. If Almanzo cannot plant his seeds, there will be even less grain for the next winter. It is likely, however, that were his neighbors on the brink of death, he would have surrendered the seeds to spare their lives.

Constructing Meaning

During a howling blizzard in chapter twenty-two, Laura asks Pa to play the fiddle. Pa tries, but his fingers are too stiff from the cold, so he has to put it away. Why is this significant to the story? How does Pa feel about not being able to play? How does Laura feel? What does this mean to the family?

This is a significant event because Pa's fiddle playing was the way the family kept up their spirits and took their minds off the cold and the blizzards. Pa feels ashamed that he cannot play anymore. He realizes he will not be able to play until winter is over. Laura feels guilty for asking him to play. If she had not asked, he would not feel bad about not being able to play. To the family, the event means one more hardship of winter to endure and one more pleasure they will miss.

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Teachable Skills

Describing Actions or Events *The Long Winter* is a story of how the Ingalls family manages to survive the worst winter in twenty-one years. There are a series of blizzards, clear days, simple celebrations, shortages and discoveries of fuel and food, and attempts to clear the track for the train. Have the students work in groups of three or four to create a board game to be played with dice and colored markers. The beginning of the game should be related to the beginning of the book, when the weather is fair and the crops are being harvested. The end of the game should be related to the arrival of spring and the train. For example, "Train comes to town -- you win!" Steps along the way should be connected with the events of the book. For example, one step could be, "Out of coal -- lose two turns." Another example could be, "Ma makes delicious codfish soup -- move ahead two squares." There should be blank squares and event squares to move the markers backward and forward to finish the game. The students can then play their games within their groups or with other groups.

Recognizing Setting The story takes place in the Dakota prairie land, which has its unique features of terrain and weather conditions. Ask the students to do research in the library or on the internet on the Dakota prairies. They should gather information on the prairies, weather conditions, early settlers of the area, and why the early settlers were attracted to the area. They should write a short report on their findings.

Understanding the Main Idea Pa often plays his fiddle as the family sings and dances to the music. The music puts the family in a happier mood and temporarily helps them to forget their troubles and fears. Have each student select a passage in the book and write a poem or song that either describes the event or provides a distraction from a fear or problem within the passage. Each student should then present the song or poem to the class.

Responding to Literature The Ingalls family is

able to survive the winter by wisely using the food and supplies they had stored and by searching for other resources when their supplies run out. The students can learn how to make survival decisions by working in teams to select items that would help them get through a long, bitter winter. Have the class agree on a list of supplies that would be necessary to survive a long winter in the prairie town. They should assume they already have shelter, clothing, furniture, a fireplace, a cooking stove, and housewares. The list should have twenty to twenty-five items and should include quantities of food, fuel, other supplies, and any other materials they can think of. After the list is complete, divide the students into two teams. Have each team prioritize their list so that it only includes ten items. Teams should discuss what they are keeping on the list and reasons why. After the lists have been trimmed to ten items, each team should present its list to the class with an explanation of why they would need each item. Class discussion should follow after all groups have presented their lists.