

Lyddie
by
Katherine Paterson

Book Information

Katherine Paterson, Lyddie
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Impoverished Vermont farm girl Lyddie Worthen is determined to gain her independence by becoming a factory worker in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1840's.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Booklist Editors' Choice; Canadian Library Association Honour; Horn Book Fanfare; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies; U.S. States/Regions, Massachusetts; U.S. States/Regions, Vermont

Main Characters

Amelia, Betsy, and Prudence Lyddie's roommates at the boarding house in Lowell

Aunt Clarissa and Uncle Judah Mama's sister and brother-in-law, where Mama, Agnes, and Rachel seek refuge to avoid the poor farm

Brigid an Irish immigrant whom Lyddie resents at first because she is forced to train her on the loom; later Lyddie befriends Brigid and teaches her to read

Charlie Worthen Lyddie's ten-year-old brother, who helps Lyddie on the farm until Mama hires him out to work and live at Baker's Mill

Diana Goss a helpful and able loom operator who is a leader in the Association that tries to get better working conditions for the factory girls

Ezekial Abernathy Freeman a runaway slave whom Lyddie helps

Luke Stevens the youngest son of the neighboring Quaker farm family, who hopes to marry Lyddie

Lyddie Worthen the principal character of the story; a thirteen-year-old girl who works to save the family farm from debt and reunite her family

Mattie Worthen (Mama) the mother of the four Worthen children, who is subject to severe depression after her husband leaves; she moves in with her sister when she can no longer make ends meet

Mr. Marsden the overseer of the loom floor at the factory where Lyddie works; he makes uninvited advances towards girls when he can get them alone

Mrs. Bedlow the kind and generous keeper of a Lowell boardinghouse

Rachel Worthen Lyddie's younger sister who is brought to Lowell by Uncle Judah for Lyddie to raise after Mama is committed to an asylum

Triphena the kindhearted cook at Cutler's Tavern, who helps make it possible for Lyddie to visit her home and get to Lowell more easily

Vocabulary

abolitionist one who opposes slavery

broadside a sheet of paper printed on one side containing information intended to be posted

doffer one who removes; in a textile factory, one who removes empty spools

perdition hell, eternal damnation

plaits braids

shuttle a weaving device used to carry the woof threads through the warp threads

warp the threads that run lengthwise in a fabric

weft, woof the horizontal threads laced through the warp threads in a piece of fabric

Synopsis

When the wool prices dropped, the father of the Worthen family left their farm in Vermont for the West to seek another means of supporting his wife and four children. Lyddie Worthen, the thirteen-year-old oldest daughter, had to drop out of school to keep the farm going.

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Now, several years later, Mama suffers from delusions since her husband left, and after a bear raids their small cabin, Mama claims the attack is the sign of the devil. She leaves to live with her sister Clarissa and Clarissa's husband, Judah, and takes the two youngest girls, Rachel and Agnes, with her. Lyddie and her ten-year-old brother, Charlie, remain on the land for the winter until Mama hires them out; Lyddie is to work as a housekeeper at a nearby inn, Cutler's Tavern, and Charlie is to help at Baker's Mill. Lyddie promises Charlie she will get the money to pay off the farm's debts and reunite the family. They sell their calf to their Quaker neighbors, the Stevenses, for a large sum and go to their new homes.

Lyddie befriends the cook of the inn, Triphena, who allows Lyddie to return to the farm when the mistress of the inn is away. There, Lyddie finds Ezekial, a fugitive slave, living in the house. Ezekial explains that the Stevenses brought him to the cabin, since their place was being watched. At first Lyddie is tempted to claim the reward for turning in runaways, but instead she gives Ezekial the calf money to help him get to Canada and send for his family. In their conversation, Lyddie realizes she is not much more than a slave, for she has nothing to show for the time she has been employed at the inn.

When she returns to Cutler's, the mistress is fuming about her absence and tells Lyddie to leave. Lyddie gladly obliges and vows to go to Lowell, Massachusetts and work as a factory girl. Triphena gives her money for her journey. The driver of the coach in which she travels takes her to his sister's boarding house in Lowell. She begins work as a loom operator for the Concord Corporation.

The first days are difficult. Lyddie must get used to thirteen-hour workdays, head-splitting noise levels, and a dusty, dim workroom. Diana Goss, a loom operator, is patient with Lyddie and teaches her the routine. Betsy, Lyddie's roommate who hopes to attend college in Ohio, comforts Lyddie at night by reading. Her other roommates warn her about Diana because Diana is a leader in a reform association

that is petitioning for better working conditions. The corporation threatens to blacklist any girls who sign the petition. Slowly, the days get easier for Lyddie, and she is energized by a thirst to read. She puts most of her earnings in the bank, spending extra money only on books and her mother.

Occasional letters and visits punctuate Lyddie's life at Mrs. Bedlow's boarding house. She learns from her mother of her sister Agnes's death. And Luke Stevens, the son of the Quaker farmer, visits while passing through Lowell and delivers to Lyddie the repayment of a loan she had made to Ezekial.

An Irish girl, Brigid, comes to work at the factory and Lyddie is asked by the overseer, Mr. Marsden, to train her. She resents the time the training takes away from her own work. A flying shuttle injures Lyddie, and Diana brings a strange doctor to tend to her. She heals, and is never sent a bill.

The routine of Lyddie's life changes when Uncle Judah appears and brings Rachel with him. He and Aunt Clarissa have committed Mama to an asylum. They refuse to care for Rachel any longer and Judah tells her he will sell the farm and take whatever is left as repayment. Mrs. Bedlow is charitable, and although against the rules, she allows Rachel to stay until other arrangements can be made.

Mr. Marsden approaches Lyddie one day when she is not feeling well and tries to make sexual advances. Lyddie escapes but remains out of work for weeks, nearly dying from a raging fever. When she returns, the incident is never mentioned. Rachel works as a doffer at the factory until Charlie arrives one day to take Rachel back with him to his employer's family. They are more than happy to have a little girl to parent. Charlie leaves a letter for Lyddie from Luke Stevens that explains the Stevenses have bought the Worthen farm. Luke asks for Lyddie's hand in marriage. Lyddie, feeling that Luke is trying to buy her, destroys the letter and never replies.

Life becomes lonely for Lyddie. She misses Rachel

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and begins to notice Diana is not looking well. Determined to do something nice for Diana, Lyddie decides to sign the labor petition. She finds Diana but learns the petition has already been filed. Diana tells Lyddie she is leaving. She is pregnant with a married man's child and does not want to jeopardize the Association with a scandal. At the factory, Lyddie becomes more patient with Brigid and begins to teach her the alphabet. Their friendship begins to grow.

Lyddie rescues Brigid one evening from the clutches of Mr. Marsden, for which Lyddie loses her job. With no place to call home, she visits Diana in Boston and finds that Diana has found a home with a seamstress who needs her. Going back to Cutler's Tavern, Lyddie visits Triphena and finds the mistress has hired another housegirl. She walks to the farm to say goodbye to the house. Luke comes by, apologizes for his letter, and asks what Lyddie will do. She realizes she needs to take control of her life and formulates a plan to go to college. She thinks to herself that she may marry Luke if he is willing to wait.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why is Lyddie able to be dismissed from her job at the factory so easily?

In this story's time period, workers have very little power or ability to address wrongdoing. Lyddie is a relatively uneducated, poor woman who chooses to disregard the suggestion of the corporation to attend church services. So, when it comes to defending herself against the word of a male supervisor who is a deacon in his church, she has very little recourse. With no one to represent her, she is dismissed without an honorable discharge, even after giving two years of hard work to the corporation.

Literary Analysis

What role does Luke play in the story?

Luke is helpful, gentle, and dependable. Lyddie, who is so determined to do things on her own, often overlooks him. His goodness shines through, however, as he works to aid the slaves, look in on Charlie, and take care of the Worthen homestead. Through him the reader can learn a little about the role the Quakers played in helping slaves and also gain a deeper understanding of Lyddie.

Inferential Comprehension

What makes Lyddie's attitude toward Brigid change?

When Brigid first comes to the factory, Lyddie does not see her as an individual, but as a strange immigrant who will slow Lyddie's pace and decrease her pay. But as she learns more about Brigid as an individual, she begins to sympathize with her and appreciate her. She shares similarities with Brigid -- both have an ailing mother, are poverty-stricken, and were poor readers at one time. Their improved relationship becomes even more apparent when Lyddie returns to the factory after suffering from a fever, and Brigid smiles and tells her how she was missed. After Rachel and Diana leave, Brigid becomes Lyddie's friend. Lyddie spends her free time with Brigid and protects her from Mr. Marsden's advances.

Constructing Meaning

Has reading this book changed your opinion of life in this time period? How?

Students sometimes have romantic ideas about the past, thinking life was simpler and easier then. In reality, for many youth, life held few choices and most of the young people's energy went to survival. The youth were expected to be contributors to the family's income. Without child labor laws, teens worked long days in factories and did not have the benefit of an education. Students should explain what opinion they held of the past they previously held and how this story may have changed that view.

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Teachable Skills

Recognizing Details In the time period of the story, a typical factory girl's wage was two dollars a week. A dress cost a dollar, a leather-bound book was two dollars, and a heifer calf sold for twenty-five dollars. Have students create a list of expenses a worker during this period would need to pay for over a one-month period of time. Have them estimate the price of each and then develop a budget based on an eight dollar a month income.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The Stevenses are Quakers. Have the students research Quakers to find out some of their beliefs and practices. Have them look into the political and social issues the Quakers became involved in and explain their stand or response to them. Some examples of issues are religious persecution, slavery, capital punishment, military service, and individual rights.

Understanding Literary Features One theme of the labor movement is to bring fairness and just wages to workers. Look into the history of the labor movements and unionization in this country. Have the students create a timeline of the major associations and unions and the issues they fought for. The Disney movie, *Newsies*, depicts the plight of paperboys at the turn of the century in America. Students can get some sense of life in boarding houses, political corruption, and the power that corporations wielded at that time. The video could be viewed as a class at the conclusion of research.

Understanding Sequence The processes in a manufacturing plant or factory follow a prescribed sequence of events. Either individually, or as a class, visit a local manufacturing plant. Learn the sequence of steps necessary to complete the manufacture of goods from the raw products to a finished commodity. Learn how the product is distributed to buyers and outlets. Make a poster illustrating the manufacturing sequence and distributing process.