

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Moccasin Trail

by

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Book Information

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Jim Keath attempts to re-orient himself to life as a white man, after living for six years as a Crow Indian.

Award: Newbery Honor

Topics: Adventure, Travel; Family Life, Misc./Other; People, Native American

Main Characters

Dan'l Jim's eleven-year-old brother, who is enamored with Jim's Indian skills

Jim Keath a nineteen-year-old white man who had lived with the Crow Indians for six years but now must decide whether to live as a white man or as an Indian

Joe Meek the sheriff of the Oregon Territory, who had once been a well-known trapper

Jonathan (Jonnie) Jim's seventeen-year-old brother, who is taking the family out to Oregon to lay claim to the free land

Rutledge a settler and his family who come West with the Keaths and live across the river from them

Sally Jim's fifteen-year-old sister, who cannot accept Jim's Indian ways

Tom Rivers a trapper and friend of Jim Keath

Vocabulary

bourgeyway inexperienced settlers coming West in wagon trains

careening swaying from side to side

fooforaw frills and flashy finery

incredulous skeptical

lugubrious exaggeratedly mournful, dismal

Synopsis

Dressed in buckskin and wearing long braids, Jim Keath resembles the Crow Indians with whom he has spent the last six years. When Jim was eleven, he had become discontent living on a farm in Missouri and went west with his uncle. A year later, he was attacked and nearly killed by a bear. Some Crow Indians rescued him, adopted him as their own, and taught him their ways. Seven years later, though, he left them to return to the white world. He then teamed up with Tom Rivers, a beaver trapper.

As the story opens, two Indians deliver a letter to Jim from his brother, Jonnie. Jim then travels to a trading post at The Dalles to find someone to read it. Rutledge, a pioneer, reads the letter and tells Jim that his two brothers and sister are camped nearby and need his help in claiming land in the Oregon Territory. The reunion is not what Jim expects, since his siblings want him to give up his Indian ways immediately. Only Dan'l, the youngest, accepts Jim the way he is.

They set out on the trip to Oregon Territory together, and when Jim offers to take the cattle over the mountains while the others ride the rapids with the wagon, Dan'l accompanies him. After meeting again a week later at the Cascades, they head further into the territory and find a beautiful valley. Jonnie stakes out a claim and the family begins working to clear the land. For a time Jim assists Jonnie, but then he begins teaching Dan'l Indian ways of listening, hunting, and playing, which displeases both Sally and Jonnie. Even though Jim does not like logging and building a cabin, he agrees to help to make his brother and sister happy.

Throughout the winter, Jim grows restless for the Indian ways and finds an eager listener in Dan'l. He teaches him how to count coup, or steal things without being caught, but always has Dan'l put the items back. Sally is worried that Dan'l is becoming too attached to Jim and afraid that Dan'l might leave with Jim in the summer.

In early spring, local settlers have cattle stolen. Jim offers to track the thieves, whom he believes to be a band of Indians, and steal the cattle back rather

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than get the sheriff involved. The men agree to the plan as long as there is no bloodshed. That night, while stealing the cattle, Jim also takes a beautiful horse, which he plans to give to Jonnie as a gift. When Jonnie realizes that Jim has stolen it, he refuses to accept it and tells Jim he must take it back. Angry at Jonnie's refusal, Jim returns the horse and is almost killed in the process.

Jim realizes he values his friends and family more than being an Indian and returns to the cabin. The next day the sheriff, Joe Meek, visits Jim, who recognizes Joe as having been a famous trapper. Joe informs Jim that he cannot be an Indian among the white people, but he understands Jim's lack of interest in farming, since Joe also tried but abandoned it after giving up the mountain life. Jim reluctantly hides his Indian belongings and agrees to try being white again.

Later that spring when the fields are cleared, Tom Rivers stops by. When Tom rides towards the mountains three days later, Jim accompanies him, intending to return to the wilderness for good. He quickly realizes, though, that he really belongs with his brother and sister and returns to them only to learn that Dan'l has run away to become an Indian like Jim had. Jim knows that the only tribe in the area is the Umpquas, who take slaves, and that Dan'l is in great danger. While rescuing Dan'l, Jim is captured. Joe Meek arrives and together they fight off the Umpquas. Jim realizes he must give up his Indian appearance to be accepted as white again. Back at the cabin, Jim cuts off his braids to show Dan'l that he has returned to his family for good.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why are Jonnie and Sally so surprised that Jim looks like an Indian?

It has been nine years since Jim left home at age eleven with his uncle to become a trapper. Since none of the family knew about the uncle's death or Jim's experience with the Crow Indians, they expect Jim to be as he was when he was a child.

Literary Analysis

Although Jim lived at home for eleven years, he still feels closer to the Crow people with whom he spent only six years. What might be some reasons for Jim to consider himself more Crow than white?

Jim did not want to be a farmer like his father and was discontent with his early life. He ran away from his family because he wanted a more exciting life. After the bear attack, the Crow people nursed him back to health and accepted him as a chief's son. He was taught many skills which made him feel competent. He enjoyed the danger associated with counting coup and the games of the Crow children. He could handle any situation as a Crow but feels awkward in trying to be white.

Inferential Comprehension

Why does bringing a wagon over the mountain mean the end to the wild territory?

When the settlers could only use the river to get across, the number of people who could come was limited. When it is possible to drive over the mountains, more people can settle the area. The settlers then clear large areas for farm land and deplete the population of wild animals.

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Constructing Meaning

Why do Sally and Jonnie have such negative opinions of Indians?

Sally and Jonnie's experiences with Indians only involved the uprisings of hostile Indians. They heard about scalplings and knew some people who were killed. They were taught that the Indians are heathen. And when Jim informs them that their uncle was also scalped, it only reinforces their opinion that Indians are murdering savages. After Jim rescues Dan'l, however, they begin to appreciate the courage and skills Jim learned from the Indians.

small aluminum pie-plate on a grill.

Identifying Reading Strategies Jim's medicine dream included a passage from the book of Psalms that prompted him to look for the valley mentioned in his dream. Have students look at the passage that Jonnie recites in chapter nineteen. Ask them to find specific events or places in Jim's life that correspond to parts of this passage and, in a short composition, explain how they correspond.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The wagons and settlers come across the prairie, stopping at The Dalles to ride the rapids toward the Oregon Territory. Have students trace a United States map and locate various places from the story: the Powder River, The Dalles, Snake River, Columbia River, Cascades, Mount Hood, and Cache Valley. Also have students choose and trace an automobile route from Missouri to Oregon. Have them compose a list of historic sites they could visit along the way.

Comparing and Contrasting Although Jim is the older brother, many times in the story Jonnie seems to be more mature in dealing with situations and problems. Have students identify several examples from the story which show the maturity of Jonnie compared to Jim. Then ask them to create a chart illustrating the contrast between the two in attitudes and actions.

Recognizing Details A typical trail meal for the settlers was dried bread, salted bacon, cold beans, and potatoes. As a class project, try making the bread using the following recipe and cooking it over a grill or stove. If it burns or comes out doughy in the middle, you will experience what the settlers did on the trail. Recipe: Add enough water to 1 cup flour and 1/4 teaspoon baking soda to create a firm dough. Pat into a flat pancake. Cook in a frying pan on stove or in a