

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## My Louisiana Sky

by

### Kimberly Willis Holt

### Book Information

Kimberly Willis Holt, My Louisiana Sky

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Interest Level: MG

Growing up in Saitter, Louisiana, in the 1950's, twelve-year-old Tiger Ann struggles with her feelings about her stern but loving grandmother, her mentally slow parents, and her good friend and neighbor, Jesse.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Booklist Editors' Choice; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Josette Frank Children's Book Award; Society of School Libr. International Best/Honor; State Award; YALSA Top Ten

**Topics:** Disabilities, Learning; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Grandparents; Family Life, Mothers; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, See All Sides; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Recommended Reading, Crown/Lamplighter Nominee; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice

### Main Characters

Abby Lynn Anders a classmate of Tiger

Bobby Dean a classmate of Tiger

Brando Tiger's one-eyed cat

Brother Dave a Baptist minister

Corrina Parker (Momma) Lonnie's wife, Tiger's mother, and Dorie Kay's sister

Doreen Ramsey (Aunt Dorie Kay) Corrina's younger sister, who lives in Baton Rouge

Dr. Randall a doctor who lives in Saitter

Jesse Wade Thompson Tiger's classmate and best friend

Jewel Ramsey (Granny) the mother of Corrina and Dorie Kay and grandmother to Tiger

Lonnie Parker (Daddy) Corrina's husband and Tiger's father

Magnolia Aunt Dorie Kay's cleaning lady from Baton Rouge

Milton Lambert a man who works at the nursery with Lonnie

Miz Eula a friend of Granny and the town gossip

Mr. Thompson the man who owns the local nursery; Jesse Wade's father

Mrs. Arlette Thompson a Sunday school teacher and Jesse Wade's mother

Shorty Calhoun a man who works at the nursery with Lonnie

Tiger Ann Parker the main character in the story, who is the daughter of Corrina and Lonnie

### Vocabulary

**Cajun** a native of Louisiana said to have had Acadian French ancestors

**calico** a kind of cotton cloth usually having a printed pattern

**preserves** fruit which has been prepared by cooking with sugar

**puckered** drawn up or gathered into wrinkles or pleats

**stethoscope** a medical instrument used to listen to sounds produced by the body

**viciously** fiercely or cruelly

### Synopsis

*My Louisiana Sky* begins in Saitter, Louisiana in early June, 1957. Tiger Ann Parker, the central character of the story, is an intelligent twelve-year-old girl whose father, Lonnie, and mother, Corrina, are both mentally handicapped, though Tiger prefers to think of them as "slow." Corrina's widowed mother, Granny, lives with them and watches over them all.

A week after Tiger finishes sixth grade, Corrina's

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younger sister, Doreen, known as Dorie Kay, comes from Baton Rouge for an overnight visit. She is a secretary to the state governor and is quite wealthy and sophisticated compared to the rest of her family. During Dorie Kay's stay, Granny's resentment toward her for leaving the family for the city becomes evident.

The next day at a church picnic, Tiger reveals a conflict developing in her own life when she decides to quit playing baseball with the boys because she thinks it is time for her to grow up and act like a girl. Her best friend, Jesse Wade Thompson, whose father owns the nursery where her father works, is disappointed and confused by the change in her.

Several weeks later, Granny suffers a heart attack and dies while working in her garden. Tiger calls Dorie Kay to notify her of Granny's death. Several hours later, Dorie Kay arrives and quickly makes arrangements for the funeral. After the funeral, Dorie Kay offers to have Tiger return to Baton Rouge with her for several days and then accompany her maid, Magnolia, to Saitter. Magnolia will stay with Lonnie and Corrina for the summer to help Corrina with housework while Corrina recovers from the shock of Granny's death. Dorie Kay also offers Tiger the opportunity to live with her permanently at the end of the summer. Tiger eagerly accepts the offer because she considers it a chance to escape the embarrassment her parents cause her. It will also give her a chance, like Dorie Kay, to begin a new life outside of the narrow confines of her community.

The following day Dorie Kay and Tiger set out for Baton Rouge. On the way, Dorie Kay talks about the tension that existed between Granny and her. Though Dorie Kay had been five years younger than Corrina, she had to take care of Corrina because of Corrina's disability. She further reveals that Corrina had not been born that way. Tiger is curious about what happened to her mother but does not ask. Later that day, however, Dorie Kay sees Tiger staring at a childhood picture of her mother and her aunt. Dorie Kay explains that Corrina's disability is the result of a head injury she received.

Two days later, Magnolia and Tiger return to Saitter by bus. Magnolia begins working at the Parker home the next morning. Corrina is still moping and has not washed herself or done any cleaning in the house. When Lonnie and Tiger return from the nursery that night, though, it is apparent that Magnolia has been able to draw Corrina out of her shell because she is dressed and is helping with dinner.

That same night, Lonnie notices strange behavior among the birds outside. He believes it means that bad weather is coming. The next morning, he tells Mrs. Thompson that the weather may damage her husband's valuable plants. She takes his advice to move the plants to safety in spite of the taunts of workers who think Lonnie is too simple to know anything about weather conditions. Within hours, the wind and rain increase and Lonnie sends Tiger home to be with Corrina. When she arrives, she discovers that her mother is out searching for her. Tiger finds her in the woods, and they return to the house battered by the storm. Later, Corrina is watching the storm through the window when she sees the bonnet that Granny used to wear being torn from the clothesline. She dashes outside to retrieve it, and Magnolia and Tiger follow her to bring her back to safety. Just then Lonnie returns, and they all enter the house. After experiencing the dangers of the storm, Tiger realizes that she would rather remain in Saitter and help her parents than move to Baton Rouge.

Mr. Thompson's camellias survive the storm, and he tells a newspaper reporter about the plants that Lonnie is responsible for saving. Tiger is proud of her father, and she returns to playing baseball, content just to be herself and live with her family in Saitter.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

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#### Initial Understanding

Why did the storm make Tiger decide to stay in Saitter instead of living in Baton Rouge with Dorie Kay?

*The dangerous winds made Tiger realize how much she loved her family and how much they needed her. She also realized she would be happier just being herself rather than trying to play a role to please others.*

#### Literary Analysis

Lonnie Parker is able to predict the weather using signs in nature. Do you believe people really can do this?

*Students who believe people can predict the weather from nature may cite personal experience with family members or friends who have aches and pains during weather changes. Or they may mention traditional folk wisdom, such as sailors' adages about the appearance of the sky. Other students, however, may discount the accuracy of such methods in favor of more modern and technological techniques of forecasting, using barometers, satellite tracking, etc.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Why doesn't Granny approve of Dorie Kay's lifestyle, even though she is successful in her career?

*Granny's resentment can probably be attributed to several factors. First, she values strong family ties, which she believes Dorie Kay has betrayed by moving to Baton Rouge. Second, she may think that Dorie Kay feels superior to the rest of the family because of her higher social status. And finally, Granny's stubborn resistance to Dorie Kay's success may be unconsciously rooted in jealousy, since Dorie Kay has had opportunities for freedom and self-fulfillment that were never open to her.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Tiger had to make a decision about what was most important to her: her relationship with her parents or an opportunity to find self-fulfillment the way Aunt Dorie Kay did. Which do you think is most important? Why?

*Some students may be eagerly anticipating their future and achieving certain goals and ambitions. Other students may be more concerned with their relationships with other people, especially close friends and family members.*

### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Details** Have the students write an obituary for Granny. The obituary should be suitable for the local Saitter newspaper. Be sure to include specific information from the story to make it accurate and realistic.

**Understanding Sequence** In the story, Mr. Thompson owns a nursery and works at starting new plants. Have the students research how a new flower, plant, or tree is developed. After the students have done the research, they should prepare a chart or poster showing these steps and the estimated time for each step.

**Drawing Conclusions** The first televisions were manufactured for home use in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Have students research what effect television has had on our lives. Have them prepare a written or oral report for the class emphasizing one aspect of life that television has influenced: the family unit, education, communication, ethical and moral values.

**Describing Actions or Events** At the end of the book, Tiger must make a major decision. Assign the students to re-write the story's ending with Tiger going to live with Aunt Dorie Kay in her apartment in Baton Rouge. Instruct them to emphasize the effects of her decision on her family, friends, and herself.