

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Sing down the Moon

by
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Book Information

Scott O'Dell, Sing down the Moon
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The forced migration of Navahos from their homeland, is described from the Native American point of view.

Award: Newbery Honor; Phoenix Award/Honor

Topics: Adventure, Life Changes; People, Native American; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Take a Stand: Leadership; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, NY Times Editor's Choice

Main Characters

Bright Morning a fourteen-year-old Navaho girl who narrates the story
Bright Morning's Father the girl's father, who accepts Tall Boy
Bright Morning's Mother the girl's mother, who is not tolerant of Tall Boy
Long Knives American soldiers who force the tribe to move to Fort Sumner
Nehana a slave girl who helps Bright Morning and Running Bird escape slavery
Rosita another slave in the Senora's home
Running Bird a friend of Bright Morning who is captured by the Spaniards and sold into slavery
Senora the woman who buys Bright Morning from the Spaniard
Tall Boy a young Navaho warrior wounded during his rescue of Bright Morning

Vocabulary

Apaches a formerly nomadic tribe of North American Indians
hogan an earth-covered Navaho home

Kin-nadl-dah the Navaho ceremony of womanhood

mesa a flat-topped elevation with cliff-like sides

Utes a tribe of North American Indians

Synopsis

The story begins with Bright Morning, a fourteen-year-old Navaho girl, welcoming spring to her village. She recalls the last spring when she left her mother's flock of sheep under an aspen grove because she was frightened by a storm. This year she is determined to take better care of the sheep and make her mother proud.

A few days later, Bright Morning's mother allows her to take the sheep to the mesa. Bright Morning and her friends sit atop the mesa and chat while their flocks graze. When they return to the village, the tribe is discussing how the Long Knives continue to harass them. The Long Knives have threatened to burn the village if the tribe does not keep the peace. The village is quiet that evening as everyone is troubled by the threat.

The next morning Bright Morning and Running Bird take their flocks to the mesa. Soon they are disturbed by two Spaniards. As one Spaniard asks for directions, the other grabs Bright Morning. Running Bird is also caught, and the two girls are sold into slavery. Bright Morning is sold to the Senora and works with another slave, Rosita. Four days later, Bright Morning meets Nehana, another slave who warns her about Rosita's loyalty to the Senora. Nehana also tells Bright Morning where Running Bird is being held. Several days later, Nehana helps Bright Morning and Running Bird escape.

The girls steal horses and make their way toward home. Soon they meet Tall Boy, a young Navaho Warrior from Bright Morning's tribe. While helping the girls get away from the Spanish slave catcher, Tall Boy is shot. He survives but can no longer be a warrior because he cannot use his arm.

Soon after they arrive at their village, Bright Morning

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goes through her womanhood ceremony called Kin-nadl-dah. She endures four days of orders from her family members before she is known as a woman. Early that winter, the Long Knives leave a note that commands the tribe to leave their village. The tribe hides, but when the Long Knives burn their village and destroy their orchard, the tribe is defeated. Soon, the Long Knives capture them and force them to travel many miles to Fort Sumner. During the trek, Bright Morning helps a young woman from another tribe by carrying her baby girl. When the baby dies, Bright Morning is forced to admit the devastation of the Navahos.

At Fort Sumner, many different tribes are forced to live together in squalor. There is little food and little to do. The men of the tribe become idle and lazy. By the next winter, Tall Boy and Bright Morning are married. When Bright Morning becomes pregnant, she promises herself that the baby will not be born at the fort. Over the winter Bright Morning saves flour to feed her small family during their escape. Meanwhile, when Tall Boy punches an Apache in self-defense, he is jailed by the Long Knives. He escapes through a garbage hole, and he and Bright Morning escape on horseback. In the spring, Tall Boy and Bright Morning take their son to Hidden Canyon where Tall Boy sings songs of Navaho warriors, and Bright Morning cares for her sheep.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How could you know that Bright Morning cares for Tall Boy? Find examples in the book to illustrate your answer.

Bright Morning is very patient with Tall Boy after his injury. She is careful not to say things that will upset him. She even slows her pace during a race to make him feel he is faster. Also, when Tall Boy cuts his forehead while climbing, Bright Morning does not contradict him when he claims the climb was not difficult.

Literary Analysis

In what ways is your life similar to Bright Morning's? In what ways is it different? Explain three examples of each.

Students may answer that, like Bright Morning, they are close to their families. They may help with daily chores and upkeep of their homes. Students may also answer that they are close to family pets, much like Bright Morning is close to her dog. Unlike Bright Morning, students may not have close ties to their entire community. They were most likely not forced to move to another location. Also, students may indicate that they could not personally identify with being a slave.

Inferential Comprehension

Compare and contrast Bright Morning's Navaho village and their settlement near Fort Sumner. How are they similar? How are they different? Find examples in the book to illustrate your answer.

Bright Morning's Navaho village is filled with the people she cares for such as her family members, Tall Boy, and Running Bird. Even in the devastation at Fort Sumner, these people are still together. Their settlement is a crowded, dirty place in comparison to the Navaho village. There is a shortage of food, space, and sanitary conditions. There is much fighting and arguing between the different tribes that are forced to live together. Most people are idle as there are no daily chores to do. There is no hunting or sheep tending. Unlike Bright Morning's village, their new home is a very bleak place to live.

Constructing Meaning

Which character do you relate to most? Why?

Some students may relate to Bright Morning because she is close to her family, nurturing, and brave. Other students may relate to Tall Boy because he is proud and stubborn, and he cares for his tribe.

Teachable Skills

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Recognizing Setting Much of the story takes place near Fort Sumner. It may be helpful to have your students research the location and history of the fort. The students could also write a short report on Fort Sumner's importance to the story.

Comparing and Contrasting The Navahos and the Long Knives had very different cultures that affected their ways of life. Divide the class into two sections: the Navahos and the Long Knives. Ask the students to prepare a short skit for the class representing the daily lives of each group. Present each skit to the other group. Ask the students to discuss the similarities and differences between each group.

Describing Actions or Events Bright Morning and Running Bird were captured and taken from their families with no warning. Have students write a brief news story that covers the incident. Tell them to include the five W's (who, what, when, where, how/why) in the opening paragraph.

Responding to Literature Choose a recent event in the news in which one group of people forced another group of people to move against their will. Have your students discuss the situation. Ask them to compare the recent event to the "Long Walk" described in the book.