

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Strawberry Girl

by
Lois Lenski

Book Information

Lois Lenski, Strawberry Girl
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This is the story of Birdie Boyer and how she battles nature, animals, and feuding neighbors in the backwoods of Florida to become a "strawberry girl."

Award: Newbery Medal

Topics: Family Life, Moving to a New Area; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Respect All Voices: Respect; U.S. States/Regions, Florida

Main Characters

Berthenia Lou Boyer (Birdie) a ten-year-old girl who is the principal character of the story; she weathers the trials of nature and feuding neighbors to realize her hopes of being a "strawberry girl"

Bihu Boyer Birdie's father, who moves his family to the Florida backwoods and attempts to tame the land

Bihu, Daniel, Dixie, Dovey, and Robert Boyer Birdie's siblings

Essie and Zephy Slater two younger girls with whom Birdie and her younger sister play

Gus and Joe Slater the eldest sons of the Slaters, who take after their father's unfriendly ways

Jefferson Davis Slater (Shoestring) the twelve-year-old boy who tries to befriend Birdie in his strange way; he turns to the Boyers for help when his family is in need

Miss Annie Laurie Dunnaway the church organist and new schoolteacher

Miss Liddy Evans the warm-hearted milliner in the town

Mr. Pearce the schoolteacher who was beaten up by Gus and Joe Slater

Mrs. Boyer Birdie's mother, who runs an efficient household and is kind and helpful toward the neighbors

Mrs. Slater the wife of Sam and mother of six children, who is jealous of the Boyers' nice things

Sam Slater the feuding neighbor of the Boyers, who is an open-range rancher; his family is poverty-stricken because of his drinking and gambling sprees

Vocabulary

akimbo a stance in which the hands are placed on the hips and the elbows are pointed out

bream a freshwater sunfish such as the bluegill

corduroy road a road made of parallel logs laid down crosswise

genial gracious; having a pleasant manner

millinery a place where women's hats are sold

Synopsis

Birdie Boyer's family has recently moved to land they have purchased in the backwoods of Florida. There they hope to establish a farm that will allow them to sell produce to northern markets. Their neighbors, the Slaters, have been accustomed to letting their cattle roam freely on the same land, which they consider to be open range. When little Essie Slater sees that one of their cows is nibbling on a Boyer orange tree, she warns her father, who snickers and does nothing. Later, Mrs. Slater visits the Boyers with her four youngest in tow. The children are poor and unkempt, never having seen a comb or mirror before. The Slaters do not stay long, claiming the Boyers are uppity.

Real trouble begins between the Boyers and the Slaters soon afterward. Mr. Boyer puts up a fence to keep the Slaters' cows, pigs, and horses out of the Boyer strawberry field. Shoestring, the Slaters' twelve-year-old son, comes by to tell Birdie he wishes they would not put up fences because his father will not like it. He warns her of his father's temper, especially when drunk. Threats are passed back and forth between Mr. Slater and Mr. Boyer. Meanwhile, Mrs. Boyer is looking for a peaceable solution to the dilemma. She continually reaches out to Mrs. Slater in kindness, but Mrs. Slater rejects her friendship.

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Things quiet for awhile when the families winter their cattle farther away. The calm is short-lived, however, because the Slaters take one of the Boyers' new calves. The next time the Slater hogs are in the strawberry field, Mr. Boyer kills them and takes them to the Slater porch. One of the Slaters leaves a note threatening to burn the Boyers' property. First, Mr. Slater poisons the Boyers' mule and then sets fire to the land. Fearing their house will burn down, Birdie goes to the Slaters to ask for help but is refused. The Boyers are able to save their house and the small children playing near the burning fields, but the schoolhouse farther up the road is burned to the ground.

Mrs. Slater tries to bridge the divide between the neighbors by having a frolic, or gathering of all nearby neighbors and friends, after her husband gets drunk and kills all her chickens. He leaves to sober up, and she feels comfortable inviting the neighbors. A week later Shoestring comes to the Boyers' door saying his mother and the younger children are ill. He wants Mrs. Boyer to come and help. Birdie and Mrs. Boyer nurse Mrs. Slater and the children until they start to improve.

While Mrs. Slater is still recuperating, an itinerant preacher stops by and prays with the families. Mr. Slater returns and orders the Boyers out of his house, but Shoestring stands up to him, explaining how ill Mrs. Slater had been. Mr. Slater apologizes, attends the revival the preacher is holding, and is converted. The rift between the families is healed, and they welcome each other as true neighbors.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What purpose does a frolic serve?

A frolic serves as a way of getting the community together to share work and give the people a chance to socialize. Two frolics are held during the course of the story. One of the frolics, a candy pull, relates how wood is gathered to boil down sugar cane to syrup to be made into candy. After a day of grinding the sugar cane, the rituals of a dance and a candy pull always follow. Mrs. Slater calls for a frolic when she needs to use all her slaughtered chickens. Everyone comes to cook and then to enjoy the meal. During the time of this story, individual families did not have the conveniences that many families do now. Without electricity and the capacity to store food that may spoil, a frolic was a perfect way to get the help needed to either eat everything or preserve food for future use.

Literary Analysis

How does the prologue of the story set the stage for what is to follow?

In the prologue the reader is introduced to a lazy father and a young girl who is yearning to have a friend. He does not seem the least concerned about getting his cow off his neighbor's property, and by the way he chuckles about the situation, he seems to want to cause trouble. The reader learns he is often gone for long periods of time, for the neighbors have been there for a month without him knowing about it. He repeats these behaviors later in the story. Finally, the reader also learns in the prologue that the setting is someplace where it is warm, because orange trees are growing.

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Inferential Comprehension

What kind of relationship do Mr. and Mrs. Slater have?

Mr. Slater is a man who seems to expect his animals to take care of themselves while he squanders his money on gambling and drink. He feels he has the right to come and go as he pleases without any word to anyone concerning his whereabouts. He orders Mrs. Slater around and expects her to obey. Mrs. Slater seems to accept this role, even though she is miserable most of the time. She does not openly confront her husband about his behavior but, instead, adjusts her life. For example, she returns all the things she bought when her husband went on a spree. Her role is to serve him and raise the children.

Constructing Meaning

Which is the better way of dealing with Sam Slater -- Mr. Boyer's way of revenge or Mrs. Boyer's way of ignoring the problems?

Answers will vary on this question. Some students may feel that retaliation is the answer when an unjust act is committed. This, however, often leads to a never-ending cycle of vengeful acts. Some students may say Mrs. Boyer has the more sensible approach. Others may counter that being passive will only lead to others taking advantage, such as when Mr. Slater poisons the Boyer mule. However, in the end, it is Mrs. Boyer's steady kindness that finally leads to a change of heart in the Slaters and the end of the fighting.

Teachable Skills

Identifying Persuasive Language As Florida became more settled, conflicts arose when the interests of agriculture and animal husbandry clashed. Farmers and ranchers today face similar problems around the world as the needs and interests of the farmer and rancher clash with encroaching human populations, industrial interests, and environmental concerns. Divide the class into small groups, and ask each group to choose a topic of current controversy in one of

these areas and research it. Assign them to investigate both sides of the issue. Have each group hold a mini debate during which both sides of the issue are presented. Members of each group should try to persuade the class to their point of view on each issue.

Understanding Sequence Mr. Boyer explains to Birdie that growing strawberries is not something that occurs quickly. He talks her through the process of what it will take in order for her to become a strawberry girl. The students may come to understand the process of raising plants for food a bit better if they grow their own. If the climate permits, assign students to plant a small plot outdoors with fruit or vegetables. They will need to tend their garden by working and fertilizing the soil before planting and then weeding and watering it until the fruit or vegetable is ready to be harvested. If outdoor planting is not possible, have the students grow plants in a window box inside. They should rotate the box so that the plants grow straight. Have them keep a journal of the process and note the number of days from planting till harvest.

Understanding Dialogue Sometimes, in the midst of reading a story that is written in colloquial language, readers miss the humor or seriousness of a situation because they get caught up in trying to understand the words. Have students act out a scene or two of the story. There are a number of places in *Strawberry Girl* that are rich in dialogue and would be easy to dramatize. Have the students choose roles and practice their lines so they can be delivered with emphasis. After the skits have been presented, lead a class discussion on how the presentation may have helped the students understand the scene better.

Responding to Literature The students may wish to host a frolic themselves. Have them find a need they feel they could meet either in their school or community, and have them invite others to join them in accomplishing the task. Some examples may include a community rake-a-thon or clean-up-day, working on a Habitat for Humanity house, or painting and rearranging classrooms at the end of the school year. They

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may wish to have everyone bring food or drink to share at the end of the work time and then play some music to dance to at the end of the day.