

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for True North: A Novel of the Underground Railroad by Kathryn Lasky

Book Information

Kathryn Lasky, True North: A Novel of the Underground Railroad

Quiz Number: 16983
Scholastic, Inc, 1996
ISBN 0-590-20523-4; LCCN
266 Pages
Book Level: 5.2
Interest Level: MG

Because of the strong influence that her grandfather, an abolitionist, has in her life, fourteen-year-old Lucy assists a fugitive slave girl in her escape.

Topics: Family Life, Grandparents; History, Slavery; People, African American; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice

Main Characters

Afrika a run-away slave, also known as Frieda and Joe Bell, who is determined to reach freedom by traveling the Underground Railroad to Canada

Dr. Levi Bradford Lucy's grandfather, whom she refers to as "Pap," a physician and secret abolitionist.

Edmund de Rosey a cousin of Elwyn Van Schuyler, the man betrothed to Iris Bradford

Henry Van Schuyler another cousin of the groom
Iris, Rose, Daisy and Delphinia Bradford minor characters; Lucy's sisters

Lucy Bradford a wealthy fourteen-year-old Bostonian who has a very close relationship with her grandfather and does not go along with the mores of her times

Sherbourne and Emeraldalda Bradford Lucy's parents

Zephy Pap's maid

Vocabulary

bilious suffering from disordered liver function

eschew to shun or avoid

jib a triangular sail extending from the foremast of a ship

laudanum a drug used to induce sleep

leviathan something large and formidable

lurid shining with a red glow

pelisse a wrap worn by women many years ago

reclusive acting like a recluse; someone who likes to be alone

Synopsis

True North is the story of two young women in contrast: fourteen-year-old Lucy Bradford, the daughter of a wealthy Boston family; and Afrika, a young escaped slave trying to make her way to freedom in Canada via the Underground Railroad.

The story opens with a diary entry of Lucy's from 1917, as she recalls the events of her young life. Lucy is fourteen, and her family is busy preparing for the wedding of one of Lucy's sisters. Lucy finds all the pomp and circumstance rather silly. Instead, she is very close to her grandfather, whom she refers to as "Pap." He is a physician, and Lucy enjoys spending hours in his study, learning about many things.

At this same time, in a swamp in the South, a young escaped slave gives premature birth to a baby, sired by her overseer. She is Afrika and is separated, because of the birth, from Harriet Tubman, a black woman famous for helping slaves traverse the Underground Railroad.

Lucy begins to wonder about some of Pap's activities; he seems to be attending meetings of some sort or another, and he often goes on nighttime "owling" expeditions. She eventually finds out that he is an abolitionist, and she joins him as an observer during these activities.

Meanwhile, as the story moves back and forth between the activities of Lucy and Afrika, we learn how difficult it was for slaves to make their way North. Afrika faces many perils, both natural and man-made, in her quest for freedom. We learn

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for True North: A Novel of the Underground Railroad by Kathryn Lasky

about her past life through reflections and dream sequences. She is aided by several Quakers, a religious group known for their beliefs in abolition. She is discovered once by slave-catchers and uses some poisoned hush puppies to kill them and escape.

It is inevitable that the two young women will meet. Pap dies of complications from a stroke, and it is not long afterward that Afrika finds her way to Pap's study, where she is hiding behind a secret passage inside a grandfather clock. Lucy finds her and decides to help Afrika in her quest. Along the way, because of her boating skills (taught to her by Pap), she kills Edmund de Rosey, a slave-catcher and cousin of Lucy's future brother-in law. She is gone several months, and her parents think her dead. She makes her reappearance at the wedding of her sister, causing her mother to faint.

The story closes with Lucy and Afrika meeting fifty years later. Afrika indeed had made her way to freedom, married and become educated. Lucy married late in life and spent much of her wealth on charitable causes.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

If Lucy had NOT supported the abolitionist cause as Pap did, what might have happened?

Certainly, if she had found Afrika hiding in the clock and not agreed with her grandfather, Afrika would have had to face other extreme circumstances. She might have had to harm Lucy, or Lucy might have been successful in subduing Afrika and garnering the fifteen-hundred-dollar reward on Afrika's head.

Literary Analysis

How is Lucy different from her sisters?

Lucy is not a person affected by the social customs of her times; she finds her sisters trite. Her sisters are busy discussing men, clothing and social events; Lucy studies anatomy in her grandfather's study.

Inferential Comprehension

How do we know Afrika is of strong character and has determination?

Afrika endures much physical hardship in her quest: she delivers her premature baby, and when it dies, hides her in a tree; she hides in a casket above the dead body; she almost drowns; she contracts pneumonia from exposure to the elements; she spends days and nights alone in a swamp. We know, through her dream sequences and past remembrances, that she was whipped for refusing the overseer; we know that she was sold like an animal at auction.

Constructing Meaning

Why did the abolitionists go to such great lengths to use code words, such as the arrival of "Levant dates," to speak of the slaves?

Abolitionists were considered radicals of their times, with their desire to help free the slaves. Their careers and professions could be in jeopardy if they were discovered; but most of all, their ability to help other slaves would be diminished if found out.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Afrika makes her way from Marlymont Plantation in the South, to Boston, Massachusetts, and then beyond to freedom in Canada. Locate a large map of North America. With information from the book, make a sketch of the route probably taken by Afrika. Keeping in mind that there were no modern amenities along these back roads, draw an alternate route that might have been easier to follow, had there been "stations" for the slaves to stop at along this new route.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for True North: A Novel of the Underground Railroad by Kathryn Lasky

Comparing and Contrasting In this story, the escaped slave, Afrika, is separated from Harriet Tubman in the beginning of her journey. She is forced to experience all that Harriet must have suffered, albeit alone. To compare Afrika's and Harriet's experiences, read an autobiography about Ms. Tubman. Talk about the grave hardships endured and risks taken by the brave people in search of freedom via the Underground Railroad.

Recognizing Details In the story, the reader learns that Edmund de Rosey had been a member of a secret society known as the Improved Order of the Red Men. The author explains that these men were a "bizarre group of Southern gentlemen whose activities and practices are almost entirely shrouded in secrecy ... they are linked to a system of spies and false stations ... dedicated to interrupting the work of the Underground Railroad and abolitionists." Research the era of the Underground Railroad to see if such a group existed, and then compare it to other secret societies, such as the Ku Klux Klan.

Recognizing Feelings Much of Afrika's past and experiences are told through dream sequences, the only way Afrika can allow herself to be disturbed by her past; she must stay alert while awake for her escape to be successful. In one dream, she remembers that she told her new master that she wanted to be a piano. She then realizes how crazy she sounded saying that. Discuss why she would have thought such a thing. For example, the piano sounded and looked beautiful; it was inanimate and had no feelings; it brought joy to people.