

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Blue Willow

by
Doris Gates

Book Information

Doris Gates, Blue Willow
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172 Pages
Book Level: 6.5
Interest Level: MG

A family forced to become migratory workers finally finds a permanent home again.

Award: Misc./Other; Newbery Honor

Topics: Places, Farms; U.S. States/Regions, California

Main Characters

Bounce Reyburn Mr. Anderson's foreman; a shrewd and shady character

Clara Larkin Janey's hardworking, serious stepmother, who loves Janey as her own

Dr. Peirce an elderly, compassionate physician who tends Mrs. Larkin when she has pneumonia

Janey Larkin the main character of the story; a ten-year-old girl who longs for a permanent home

Lupe Romero a girl about Janey's age who becomes Janey's friend

Manuel Romero Lupe's father, who becomes a friend to the Larkins; he and Mr. Larkin work together at times

Miss Peterson the friendly and caring teacher at the camp school

Mr. Larkin Janey's father; a diligent migrant farm worker who makes the best of most situations but misses his work as a cattle rancher

Mrs. Romero Lupe's mother, who is generous and helpful to the Larkin family

Nils Anderson a kind-hearted ranch owner; he owns the shack in which the Larkins live

Vocabulary

grafting extorting money; using a position of power to gain unfair advantage over another

mote a speck or small particle

pantomime to tell a story without words, to gesture

precariously dangerously, lacking in stability, hazardously

remonstrate to plead in protest, to object to

savvy to comprehend or understand

Synopsis

Ever since the Larkin family lost their Texas ranch five years ago during the Dust Bowl of the Great Depression, Janey, her father, and her stepmother have had to travel wherever her father can find work. The one thing that gives Janey a sense of permanence is the blue willow plate from her biological mother's great-grandmother. The picture on the plate and the story that goes along with it gives ten-year-old Janey a beautiful place to escape to in her mind.

When the family moves into a shack in California's San Joaquin Valley, they expect to stay only until the cotton harvest is finished. But Janey wishes that they would not have to move. She finds her first friend in Lupe Romero, who lives across the road and has a wonderful teacher at the camp school. The only unpleasant aspects of this new home are the small size and poor condition of the shack and the encounters with Bounce Reyburn, the foreman of the ranch on which the shack is located. Mr. Reyburn visits each month and demands five dollars for the rent, but Mr. Larkin always makes Bounce sign receipts for the payments. When Janey wanders into the yard of the ranch owner, Nils Anderson, one day, drawn by its similarity to the scene on the willow plate, Bounce accuses her of planning to steal eggs from the hen house. Their confrontation is broken up when Anderson arrives and sympathizes with Janey.

Toward the end of the cotton-picking season, Janey's hardworking stepmother contracts pneumonia. A kindly doctor donates his services to see her through the illness. When Bounce comes for the rent, Mr. Larkin explains the family cannot spare the money. Bounce threatens him, and to avoid a confrontation that might send her father to

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jail, Janey offers her beloved blue willow plate as payment. Bounce takes it, thinking he will exchange it for the rent receipts that he never wants Mr. Anderson to see.

The cotton season ends, and Mr. Larkin can find no other work. The family must move on before Mrs. Larkin is fully recovered. The day before their departure, Janey sneaks away to the Andersons to ask for one last glimpse of the willow plate. Mr. Anderson, who had not known anything about the plate or Bounce's rent arrangements, asks Janey to explain the full story. Angered by the revelations, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson drive Janey back to the shack, discuss Bounce's dishonest dealings with the Larkins, and give Bounce's position as foreman of the ranch to Mr. Larkin.

Janey at last has a place to belong -- with friends, a regular school, and a real house Mr. Anderson has built for them. The willow plate has a place where it can be properly displayed.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why has Janey never made a friend before she meets Lupe?

Janey has been moving repeatedly since she was five years old. She has never gone to a regular school, but instead she attends camp schools where the student population constantly changes. Her mother advises against getting interested or entangled in others' affairs because it will become too painful to say goodbye. Consequently, Janey spends many lonely days. Lupe, having the stability of living in one place for a whole year, approaches Janey in friendship. A natural in the give and take of relationships, Lupe is fascinated rather than put off by Janey's imaginings and somewhat strange ways. Janey enjoys Lupe's companionship, and as the months pass, she allows herself to get involved in Lupe's life. Thus, it is more difficult to leave when Mr. Larkin says they must move. However, Janey is the richer for having offered and accepted friendship with another.

Literary Analysis

How is *Blue Willow* like a fairy tale?

*The plot of a fairy tale usually has a good person facing some adversity over which they have little or no control. There is usually an evil character involved and someone who comes to save the person in need. Most fairy tales turn out "happily ever after." The plot of *Blue Willow* uses these same conventions. Janey is faced with her family's poverty, over which she has little control. She longs for a more stable life, but prospects look bleak. Bounce Reyburn makes her family's life even more difficult. Nils Anderson is the savior who comes along and rids the Larkin family of Bounce's threats and brings them out of the severe poverty in which they are living by giving them a house and a decent wage. All is well, and the reader is led to believe that the Larkins will live "happily ever after."*

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Inferential Comprehension

How are Mr. Anderson and Miss Peterson alike?

Janey knows almost instantly she can trust both of them. Mr. Anderson saves her from the anger of Bounce Reyburn, and Miss Peterson rescues her from all her apprehension about attending a camp school. Both are generous and caring people. Mr. Anderson gives Janey eggs initially and later provides a home for her family. Miss Peterson brings gifts when Janey's mother is ill. They both genuinely care about Janey and her family and do not condemn the Larkins because of their poverty.

Constructing Meaning

The blue willow plate is the one thing of tangible value the Larkins have from their ranch in Texas. If your family had to leave home and move from place to place, what one "treasure" would you take? Why?

Children who have grown up in relative affluence may have a difficult time envisioning living as simply as the Larkins did. It is when people have little that possessions mean a lot. The children should try to identify one item they would take with them if they lived on the move constantly. Perhaps it will be something from their childhood such as a doll, stuffed animal, favorite book, or special blanket. It may be a photograph album or something that has been in the family for many years. Encourage them to explain why they have chosen a particular item.

Teachable Skills

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning When an author wishes to emphasize a point, he or she may use a series of similes to do this. Doris Gates uses such a series in *Blue Willow* to give the reader a feeling of new hope and optimism: "The sky was blue, as blue as Janey's eyes, as blue as the willow plate, as blue as the bowl of heaven should be on a day in spring before the sun of summer has had a chance to fade it." Ask the students to develop several series of similes. An example to start them off might be "The day was hot, as hot as...." Have the students try to identify the point or feeling they are trying to

convey by their choice of similes. In the above example, by their choice of words, they may convey a sense of oppressive heat or welcome warmth after a cold spell. The students can read the series of similes to the class, and by the class's response, they can determine if what they intended to convey was understood by the listener.

Identifying Persuasive Language The present day plight of the migrant worker is somewhat the same as it was for Mr. Larkin and his family. Some changes occurred in the 1960's as a result of the work of the United Farm Workers and Cesar Chavez. Have the students find out more about the lives of migrant workers in American society. Ask them to identify the issues that Cesar Chavez addressed and the ways he forced the farm owners to give the workers some concessions that would make life a bit easier for migrant families. The students can also consider themselves as politicians who want to have the migrant workers' support. How would they go about winning their vote? Have them give a persuasive speech that addresses the issues of concern for migrant workers and possible solutions.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In this age of modern medicine, pneumonia, although still serious, is not as life threatening as it once was. Have the students research medical history and choose a disease that claimed many lives. Some examples are smallpox, tuberculosis, pneumonia, bubonic plague, and scarlet fever. Students should conduct some research on the cause and spread of the disease, the early treatments, and any major outbreaks that occurred. They should conclude with the current treatment for the disease and how it was developed or discovered.

Comparing and Contrasting During the course of the story, the houses in which the Larkins lived are described. Ask the students to locate these descriptions and, using them, draw floor plans, diagrams, and interior pictures of what they imagine each of the Larkins' homes looks like. These pictures may be displayed around the classroom. Discuss the similarities and

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differences of the homes.