

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Boy With a Pack

by
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Book Information

Stephen W. Meader, Boy With a Pack
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Seventeen-year-old Bill Crawford enjoys adventure and faces danger as he journeys on foot from New Hampshire to the Ohio country during the pioneer days of 1837.

Award: Newbery Honor

Topics: Adventure, Discovery/Exploration; History, Frontier/Pioneer Life

Main Characters

Alonzo Peel a devious horse trader who tries to steal Bill's pack and is later hanged for stealing horses

Banjo the slave boy who Bill helps to escape to Canada

Bill Crawford a seventeen-year-old boy who journeys through New England and the Northeastern states as a peddler

Buck Hoyle a rough-and-tumble canal boat owner who gives Bill a job

Martha Bill's favorite horse in Peel's string

Mary Ann Bennett a young, attractive woman who works as a cook on the canal boat

Ransome Cawley the Southern slave owner who is looking for his runaway slaves

Vocabulary

breeches pants; blue jeans

gewgaws another word for knickknacks and trinkets

johnnycake a versatile food similar to a pancake

peddler a traveling salesman

shilling a type of currency used in the early history of America and in England

Synopsis

Bill Crawford is a young man who leaves his brother and sister-in-law's Vermont home to make his living as a peddler for the summer. His plan is to make his way to Ohio and return home after he has sold all his wares. Soon after he starts, Bill acquires a traveling companion, Jody, a young hound dog that he releases from the jaws of a trap. Throughout the story, Jody proves his worth time and again, not only as a source of company, but as a protector as well.

There are many people with whom Bill travels during his journey, not all of whom are well intentioned. One of these shady characters is Alonzo Peel, a fox-faced and eloquent horse trader who Bill soon realizes is more interested in stealing Bill's pack of goods than in helping him. Feeling threatened, Bill sneaks away from the man as soon as he is able. His intuitions prove to be correct, as the next person Bill meets, a small town doctor, tells him Peel had tried to steal his horse, but the faithful creature had escaped. The doctor supplies Bill with food and drink, as well as some good advice, and Bill continues his travels.

The young man next finds a job working as a driver on a canal boat headed for Buffalo, whose owner, Buck Hoyle, is recognized as one of the best fighters on the river. Upon arriving at the boat, Bill is immediately smitten by the lovely Mary Ann, who is the cook. The two become fast friends and Bill discovers that her destination is Ohio as well, where her sister lives.

Soon after Bill parts company with Hoyle and Mary Ann in Buffalo, he comes upon a horse auction where he recognizes Peel's string of horses and realizes that Peel has been hanged for stealing a team of horses belonging to the owner of one of the other canal boats. After Bill helps the owner reclaim his stolen horses, the man gives him Martha, the small mare he had wanted, in a gesture of thanks, and Bill sets out again.

That night, Bill crosses paths again with Mary Ann, who is being pursued by a very irate and jealous

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Hoyle, who did not realize she had planned to leave him. Bill willingly helps her, but the girl, fearing that she is endangering him through association, soon separates from him after effectively disguising herself as a boy.

As Bill continues to sell his wares and work odd jobs, he decides to venture off into more remote areas with the hope of making better sales and acquiring valuable beaver pelts. Along the way, Martha gives birth to a handsome colt, which Bill later discovers is the son of Tomahawk, one of the greatest trotters ever.

When Bill begins to get close to the Quaker community, he finds out that several runaway slaves are in the area and are being relentlessly pursued by their owner. While he is staying at one of the farms, he discovers the family is hiding one of the runaways, Banjo, and Bill offers to help the boy reach safety. In spite of a few close calls, the youngster is finally smuggled aboard a canal boat bound for Canada.

With the summer more than halfway over, Bill decides to find Mary Ann at her sister's house. When they are finally reunited, he decides to stay on to help her brother-in-law with his mill and to settle down and begin a life in Ohio.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What might Bill be feeling when he hears that Peel has been hanged, and why might he feel that way?

Bill does not seem happy to hear Peel is dead. This is probably because Bill is a caring person and does not want anyone to be hurt. On the other hand, Bill is probably not surprised at what had happened since he knows Peel had a lot of enemies and had done a lot of bad things. In some ways, Bill may feel that Peel deserved to be hanged for all his misdeeds. However, Bill might be happy that Peel's horses are now for sale, and he is probably excited that he has the chance to buy the little mare he has wanted.

Literary Analysis

How does the author use dialogue to introduce the reader to the characters and to develop the individuality of each one?

The author writes the dialogue of each character in his or her specific dialect. As a result, the reader has an idea of what each person's ancestry is and where he or she comes from. The author uses the dialects of Irish and German frequently, and expresses Cawley's Southern accent as well. He also writes the words the characters speak in such a way as to show the differences in the background of their education. For instance, Peel not only uses big words, but also pronounces every syllable properly, whereas Bill often drops syllables, words, and final consonants when he is speaking. The dialogue in the story also gives the reader a better idea of the personality of each character. For example, Mary Ann's protest that she can go along on her own so as not to get Bill in trouble shows that she is not only brave, but selfless and caring as well.

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Inferential Comprehension

Compare and contrast Bill and Alonzo Peel as salesmen. What actions do they perform that are similar or dissimilar? How do their character traits differ?

As salesmen, both men travel around the country attempting to make their living by selling their goods and horses to those people willing to buy them. They both must be aggressive as well as convincing speakers. The most obvious and important difference between Bill and Peel is that Bill is honest and Peel is not. Bill has fairly earned and bought all the different products that he sells, whereas Peel has probably acquired most of his horses in either dishonest deals or through outright theft. Also, Bill always tries to make fair deals with everyone with whom he trades, whereas Peel seems to try to trick people into buying horses that are nearly worthless, such as the way he tries to persuade Bill to buy the gray horse that later collapses. As a result, Bill is a more trusted person who creates good relationships and even friendships with his customers, whereas Peel creates trouble for himself and others. Nobody trusts him after realizing he has tricked them.

Constructing Meaning

What is Bill's attitude towards slavery? Give examples and facts to support the answer.

Bill is opposed to slavery although he does not speak out strongly against it. The reader is told that he cannot understand why people in the South allow black people to be bought and sold like cattle. He has never been faced with the issue of slavery before, however, and therefore has never felt that it concerned him personally. When he is needed, though, he willingly helps Banjo escape and lies to Cawley about the boy's whereabouts. Bill risking a hefty fine and trouble with the law to help Banjo shows he does not agree with slavery, and although he sounds like he supports it when he talks to Cawley and the sheriff, Bill is actually just saying what he thinks is necessary to make them believe he is not involved.

Understanding Sequence Most events that took place in the story are related to one another. To show students the importance of sequence, have them choose one event in the story and identify another event that directly influences it, such as the way Bill's first encounter with Alonzo Peel eventually leads to his acquisition of Martha. Then have them discuss how the event they chose would have been affected if the first event had come after the second one, had never taken place, or had turned out differently. The class could then discuss how the rest of the book would have changed as well.

Identifying Persuasive Language Throughout the book, almost all the characters try to persuade at least one person to buy something or to do something. As individuals or in groups, have the students think of something they want to sell, whether it is a service, a product, an object or a place, and attempt to "sell it" to the rest of the class using whatever suitable props or slogans they can create. Hold a competition in the class to determine who are the best salespeople, and then discuss what techniques, such as appearances, guarantees, honest claims, catchy jingles, or good presentations, made their pitches so effective.

Responding to Literature It takes a lot of courage for Bill to go off on a journey for several months alone, as he has many adventures and faced many challenges. Have the students think of a time when they, too, had to do something that took a lot of courage, such as going on a trip, standing up for a particular belief, or defending a friend or classmate. How did they conquer their fears? How did they feel after they had overcome the challenge? Ask each child to tell about his or her experience and to offer one piece of advice about how someone can overcome his or her fears. Have students write down their advice and draw a picture to go along with it. Compile all the papers in a "Fear-Fighters" book. Distribute a copy to each child.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The Underground Railroad has an important role in the plot of *Boy with a Pack*. Have the students

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research the history of the Underground Railroad. Identify what its purpose was and who participated in it. Students can prepare group presentations about the Railroad. Have them include a map depicting one or more of the routes that were followed. Each group should include a biography of one of the people who served as a conductor on the Railroad or one of the slaves who traveled on it. Then have them share their findings in a short presentation to the class.