

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Calico Bush

by  
Rachel Field

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### Book Information

Rachel Field, Calico Bush  
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Book Level: 6.2  
Interest Level: MG

Orphaned shortly after her French family arrives in the New World, twelve-year-old Marguerite is bound by contract to live with a family of English settlers who are attempting to make their home on an island frequented by Indians.

**Award:** Newbery Honor

**Topics:** Family Life, Death; Family Life, Orphans; History, Emigration/Immigration

### Main Characters

Abby Welles the pretty eighteen-year-old woman with whom Ira falls in love

Caleb Sargent Joel's thirteen-year-old son from his first marriage; at times he teases and resents Marguerite

Dolly Sargent Joel's wife and the mother of five children; a hardworking and able woman who is hesitant to move to such an unpopulated place

Hepsa Jordan a sprite, wise woman in her seventies living on an island across from the Sargents; she is generous and kind to Maggie

Ira Sargent Joel's younger brother; he joins the Sargent family in their move and claims some land for his own

Joel Sargent the father of the family to which Maggie is bound and the husband of Dolly; he moves his family to a coastal island off Maine to occupy a claim he purchased

Marguerite Ledoux (Maggie) the principal character; a brave and spirited twelve-year-old orphaned French girl who is "bound" under contract to work for an English family until she is eighteen

Uncle Pierre Marguerite's uncle, who brought her to the New World from France but died on the voyage

### Vocabulary

**calico** cotton cloth, either white or brightly colored with a printed design  
**dory** a flat-bottomed fishing boat with a sharp bow and steep sides  
**promontory** a point of high land with a sheer drop extending out over a body of water  
**victuals** food for people

### Synopsis

Marguerite Ledoux is a twelve-year-old French girl who is "bound out" to an English family by contract until she reaches the age of eighteen. The story begins as she travels with the Sargent family and all their worldly possessions aboard the "Isabella B." to occupy a claim of land on an island off the coast of Maine. The boat and its occupants weather a storm in which Marguerite saves a sheep from being washed overboard. Stopping at a harbor for supplies, they acquire a dog, Pumpkin, and learn there has been Indian trouble on the islands. When they arrive at their claim they find the house that once stood there has been burned down. Joel Sargent, who is the father of the family, and his brother Ira quickly go to work cutting logs for a new house. Their closest neighbors, Ethan and Seth Jordan, advise them to move because the land holds special significance to the Indians. Joel refuses and he and his wife, Dolly, their six children and Marguerite make their home on the land. They soon make the acquaintance of the sprite, seventy-year-old Hepsa Jordan, Ethan and Seth's aunt who lives on Sunday Island. Hepsa befriends Marguerite and, because she knows the horticulture of the islands and the medicinal value of plants, often calls upon her to help when someone is hurt or ailing.

The settlers are resourceful, setting up stores for the winter ahead. On one occasion, while gathering witch hazel in the woods, Marguerite and the children lose their way and discover a cave used by the Indians, containing charred bones and a scalp of hair. She reports the chilling find to Joel Sargent, who tells her to keep the discovery a secret from the

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neighbors. At the corn-shelling bee on Sunday Island later in the fall, Abby Welles, who holds the attentions of both Ira Sargent and Ethan Jordan, declares her love for Ira as the men are about to leave to defend the island where the Sargents live. Smoke had been detected coming from the mysterious cave, which means the Indians have returned. The party of men returns to report that the house remains standing and only Pumpkin and the cows are gone. Pumpkin returns a few days later after escaping from the Indians.

Marguerite is disappointed to learn the Sargents do not celebrate Christmas. On Christmas Eve she leaves the cabin to gather berries and encounters an Indian who speaks some French. Feeling it is a miracle from the heavens to hear her own language, she gives him a gift of her uncle's button, one of her two earthly treasures. She keeps the encounter a secret from the Sargents.

The winter is a difficult one for the Sargents; food, clothing, and gunpowder are in short supply and Debby, the youngest child, dies after getting burned from the fireplace. When spring comes, Ira and Caleb sail on a passing ship to Boston for supplies. Joel is left to do the farming with the children, but his leg is crushed when a tree falls on him. Going out to gather kelp for his healing, Marguerite and the children see Indians landing on the beach. They return to the cabin, and Marguerite reasons they should give the Indians their food instead of trying to fight them. When the food is all gone, Marguerite devises a way to occupy the Indians and signal the Jordans on Sunday Island. She rips linen apart and, using an old pole in the ground, builds a Maypole. She, the children, and the Indians dance until the pole topples. As she and the children seek refuge in the cabin, the Indian she had met on Christmas Eve appears and allows them safe passage into the house and moves with the other Indians out to the woods. Dolly, Joel, and the children praise Marguerite. Joel offers Marguerite her freedom and passage to New France, but Marguerite opts to stay with the Sargents because the island has become her home.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Settlers needed to have medical knowledge to survive in the New World, since they were far from any hospitals or doctors. How is this shown in the story?

*The need for medical knowledge is most vividly shown by Hepsa's actions. She knows the plants of the area and their medicinal value. She is able to administer stitches to Jacob when the hammer gashes his head, and she is summoned when Debby is burned. The other characters also administer aid. Dolly knows she must splint Joel's leg, Ira administers some tonic to Pumpkin, and Marguerite is an able apprentice, administering salve and bandaging wounds.*

### Literary Analysis

How are the native people presented in the story?

*The initial image of the Indian from the settlers' point of view is that they were savage. The cave where Marguerite discovers bone fragments is described as evil. When the group of men leave the corn shed to defend the Sargents' claim, they intend to battle and kill the Indians. When the Indians dance around the Maypole, they are wild and violent. In contrast, the Indian who befriends Marguerite is portrayed as a gentle person. He speaks her language, shares her joy, accepts a gift, and is able to convince his fellows to leave the Sargents' claim peaceably. Because this man is familiar with European culture, he is not as frightening to Marguerite.*

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### Inferential Comprehension

Why does Caleb choose a box as Marguerite's gift from Boston?

*Caleb deliberately chooses a box for Marguerite because he probably wishes to let Marguerite know his feelings towards her have changed. Ira suggests some material for a dress, but Caleb thinks otherwise. He had witnessed the happiness that an impractical gift can bring to a woman, such as when Ethan brought china cups to Abby. He also sees that Ira had purchased a coral pin for Abby. He wants to give Marguerite something that would bring a smile to her face and that she would treasure and not outgrow.*

### Constructing Meaning

Grand'mere's ring and Uncle's button are Marguerite's only physical reminders of her loved ones and her old life in France. If you could choose only one thing to remember a loved one by, what would it be? Why would you choose this particular memento?

*Answers will vary. The students should identify the relationship between their loved one and the memento. They should be able to explain why they made that particular choice. Examples may include a piece of jewelry, a book or diary, or something that reminds them of the person's hobby or livelihood.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Literary Features** One of the themes prominent in *Calico Bush* relates to survival. The Sargent family needs to be frugal in order to feed, clothe, and shelter everyone in the family. They use the resources around them to meet these needs, and there are few luxuries. Ask the students for examples that show the Sargents using the materials at hand to meet their needs rather than obtaining them by ship. They could then learn about one particular process and give a demonstration speech about it to the class. Some suggestions are how to make maple syrup, weave, fish, or construct a log home.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Although people today may not be labeled "bound out," the situation in which people are brought to another country and need to repay their passage by forced servitude still occurs. Ask the students to find an example of a group of people in this situation in contemporary society and report their findings to the class. The student's report should include the country of origin of the people, the destinations, and the length and conditions of servitude. They may also contact organizations such as Amnesty International for more information.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Marguerite comes to the New World from France. When she is alone or taken by surprise, she often speaks French. Have the students obtain a French dictionary and translate the French phrases Marguerite uses in the narrative. How do the translations enhance the understanding of the text?

**Describing Actions or Events** When the Sargent family moves to their new claim, they travel by ship to reach their island. Encourage the students to learn about ships. Have them sketch the design of the "Isabella B." and learn about sailing and the dependence on wind to propel the craft. Students may share their drawings or models of the "Isabella B." and give short talks on sailing methods.