

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Chasing Redbird

by

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Book Information

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Thirteen-year-old Zinnia Taylor uncovers family secrets and self-truths while clearing a mysterious settler trail that begins on her family's farm in Kentucky.

Award: ABC (Assoc. of Booksellers for Children) Choice Aw; State Award

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Main Characters

Aunt Jessie Rose's mother and Nate's wife; she is like a second mother to Zinny

Gretchen, May, Bonnie, Will, Ben, and Sam Taylor Zinny's siblings

Jake Boone a sixteen-year-old boy who likes Zinny and hopes to win her affection by giving her gifts

Louanne Boone Jake's concerned mother

Mr. and Mrs. Taylor Zinny's parents

Mrs. Flint the owner of the local grocery store

Rose Zinny's cousin, who died when she was four years old

Sal Hiddle Zinny's best friend, who moved away from Bybanks

Tom Salome (Tommy Salami) a boy who used Zinny as a way to get the attention of May

Uncle Nate a man who is like a father to Zinny; he misses his deceased daughter and wife

Zinny Taylor the principal character of the story, a thirteen-year-old girl who is determined to clear a historic trail and, in the process, unravels the confused feelings in her life

Vocabulary

boogie-woogie a style of jazz piano music known for its rhythmic beat

demented insane or mentally ill

frazzled physically and emotionally exhausted

hollow a small valley between hills or mountains

muddle a confusion or jumble

scythe a hand tool with a single long curved blade and a long bent handle, used to cut or reap grasses

Synopsis

Zinny Taylor is a quiet, thirteen-year-old girl who lives with her parents and six siblings in a crowded, jumbled house on a farm in Bybanks, Kentucky. Attached to their home is Uncle Nate and Aunt Jessie's house, a "quiet zone," where the contemplative Zinny often finds refuge. Aunt Jessie and Uncle Nate are like second parents to Zinny. Zinny and their daughter Rose were always together until Rose died at age four. The image of Rose dead in a dresser drawer is still vivid in Zinny's mind, and she feels guilty since she survived whooping cough, while Rose succumbed. Aunt Jessie and Uncle Nate seem to have taken Zinny on as a special charge after Rose's death, nursing her when she is ill and sharing their love of the outdoors with her. Over the years Uncle Nate and Aunt Jessie, whom he had nicknamed Redbird because of her red hair, often go walking in the woods. As Aunt Jessie's health declines, Uncle Nate goes off alone to see "his sweetheart." All this is very mysterious to Zinny, who thinks Uncle Nate might love someone other than Aunt Jessie. Aunt Jessie dies suddenly, and again, Zinny feels responsible, since she died right after Zinny showed her a snake and a medallion that was discovered on an overgrown trail Zinny is clearing near the Taylor property. Clearing the trail becomes an obsession for Zinny, for she sees it as a way of redemption for her guilt.

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As the Taylor family is emerging from the shock of Aunt Jessie's death, former neighbors, Mrs. Boone and her son Jake, move back to Bybanks, and Mrs. Boone is reunited with her husband. Jake is sixteen and takes a romantic interest in Zinny. He begins to bring her small gifts, but she does not trust his motives, for she had been fooled before by other boys who were just using her as a way to get to her older sister May. Jake begins stealing things to make an even bigger impression on Zinny, and her life becomes further complicated and confused as she tries to cover for his lies and thefts.

When summer arrives, Zinny is allowed to camp on the trail with the stipulation she return home every ten days. Zinny, away from the commotion at home, begins to have dreams and thoughts that have to do with locked up memories about Rose and Aunt Jessie. When she returns on the tenth day, she meets Jake on the trail and discovers he has been watching over her. Arriving home, she finds that Uncle Nate has been injured, and she relieves her mother by taking a turn watching him. Zinny notices that no traces of Rose's things are left in his room, and Aunt Jessie's things seem to be disappearing, too. Uncle Nate is delirious, screams out for his Redbird, and wants to go up the trail once more. Confused by feelings of love and hate, Zinny nearly smothers him with a pillow, but he catches her hand.

Feeling worse than ever, Zinny leaves the next day to go back to her trail, reluctantly promising to return in a week to watch Uncle Nate when her family goes to the circus. During this week, Zinny eludes two drunken hunters and gets lost while escaping a bear. While making her way back home, she stops at a cabin she discovers and, when she peers inside, discovers Aunt Jessie's coat. Filled with both horror and joy, she is determined to bring Uncle Nate to the spot. She steals a horse from a meadow and arrives at the farm. When her family leaves for the circus, she helps Uncle Nate onto the horse and starts up the trail. They meet Jake, who joins them on their trek. When they arrive at the cabin, Uncle Nate passes out, and Jake goes for help. Inside the cabin, Zinny discovers a sort of shrine to the

memories of Rose and Aunt Jessie, with all their belongings. When Uncle Nate revives, he explains many things to Zinny about the circumstances of their deaths and clears up much of her confusion and guilt. The Taylor family arrives, and Uncle Nate is brought back home the next day.

Jake and Zinny are both in trouble with the law because of horse theft, but the understanding sheriff assigns community service to them, and Zinny is ordered to finish clearing the trail. Zinny now trusts Jake's interest in her, and they spend days together in comfortable conversation on the trail.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Jake prefer Zinny to May?

Zinny is a girl who is thoughtful and curious. She is different from the "boy crazy" girl that May represents. From his first gifts to Zinny, the reader sees that Jake is perceptive because he remembers what Zinny likes and collects. He also has a sense of humor that he feels Zinny will appreciate, such as when he gives her a cricket for a thermometer. May would probably see these gifts as "immature." Jake must have sensed Zinny's qualities when he lived in town before and he and Zinny were a lot younger. When he saw Zinny again that first day in the store, his memory must have been jogged, and he pursued Zinny.

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Literary Analysis

What minor conflicts does Zinny face in her relationship with Jake?

Zinny wavers between being protective of Jake and not wanting to turn him in for stealing, to being angry at him for the trouble he is causing in her life. She bears the additional guilt of liking the gifts he brings and tempting him to steal further when there is something she wants, like a horse. She also vacillates between wanting Jake to stop his attentions to her if they are a cover for a real interest in May, to believing he actually likes her.

Inferential Comprehension

What is the importance of the medallion in the story?

The medallion serves as a catalyst to bring to the surface the mystery surrounding Rose and Aunt Jessie's deaths. When the two medallions are finally together, Zinny is able to let go of her guilt surrounding their deaths. Zinny recalls that she had found the medallion in Rose's dead hand and that she had run away to bury it. Aunt Jessie and Uncle Nate had comforted her then. Zinny finally realizes they never blamed her for Rose's death. Uncle Nate explains Aunt Jessie's reaction to the medallion near the time of her death. The meaning of the engraving, " 'Til Next We Meet," on the medallion becomes clear, and Zinny realizes Aunt Jessie is happy now that she is reunited in the afterlife with Rose.

Constructing Meaning

How do the characters respond differently to death?

Aunt Jessie and Uncle Nate choose to keep Rose's memory alive in a very tangible way. They have found a place away from others' eyes to recreate their life with her, as if she were still alive. Zinny is troubled by guilt, but often goes to visit Rose's grave. When Aunt Jessie dies, Zinny's mother's grief shows in her red eyes, forgetfulness, and confusion. Zinny's father loses himself in labor; the older sisters whisper; Will is silent; Ben is angry; and Sam becomes obsessed with funerals, asking countless questions about dying.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Details Zinny makes a list of the necessary equipment she should take for a ten-day excursion into the hills. She travels by foot, so she has to carry all her supplies on her back. Have the students plan a ten-day backpacking trip. They can obtain maps of an area they wish to explore and set a route. They should plan time to set up camp each night before dark. Have them list the gear and the food they will need for the trip. They can then go to a sporting goods store or look in catalogs to price the equipment. Compare lists and have the students note any essential equipment they may have forgotten.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors It is on a "boring" class field trip that Zinny discovers something meaningful. Visit your town's local historical museum to learn the history of your area. Find out how the town has changed over the years. Learn if an important landmark or historical site is being threatened by development. What steps could the students take to save the site? They may want to develop a brochure explaining the historical significance of the site and their plan to stop the destruction of the building or the area.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning *Chasing Redbird* is filled with figurative language. The students can find many examples from the imagery of Zinny's life being a jumble of spaghetti, to the local expression, "since the hogs et Grandma," to the dozens of similes that are used. As an exercise, the students can make a collection of figurative language that describes their lives. Ask them to think of images that reflect their lives right now and explain how they apply. For example, Zinny has many reasons she thinks of her life as spaghetti. Next, students can collect any colloquial expressions, as well as the expressions they use in their everyday interactions with their friends and families. Finally, they can write similes that better illustrate what they see, feel, or think. They may find it helpful to

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use the similes in the book as examples but to use their own comparisons.

Understanding Characterization Jake Boone is a central character in the story. Have the students rewrite from Jake's point of view a chapter in the story in which Jake and Zinny are interacting. The students should include Jake's thoughts and feelings that accompany his outward actions. The chapters could be read aloud in class, and students can comment on how the change in the point of view reveals additional insight into Jake's personality.