

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Cold Mountain

by

Charles Frazier

Book Information

Charles Frazier, Cold Mountain
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Interest Level: UG

A confederate soldier wounded and disillusioned in the fighting at Petersburg decides to walk back to his home.

Award: ABY Children's Award/Honor Book; Nat'l Bk. Critic Circle Award/Honor; National Book Award/ Honors; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Adventure, Travel; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Romance, Romance (All)

Main Characters

Ada the woman Inman loves, who faces an equal test of character as she learns to survive independently

Inman the protagonist, a Confederate deserter on an odyssey to return to Cold Mountain

Monroe Ada's father, a minister whose death exposed her essential helplessness

Ruby a self-taught survivor who becomes Ada's partner, teacher and friend

Stobrod Ruby's wastrel father, who also deserts from the doomed Confederate cause

Teague the novel's villain, a brutal leader of a Home Guard band that tracks and routinely executes men fleeing the war

Vocabulary

auger tool for boring holes in wood

cabriolet a light, two-wheeled carriage drawn by a single horse

feral savage, undomesticated

haversack bag for carrying belongings, with a single strap that is slung over one shoulder

piedmont land lying at the base of a mountain

wayfaring traveling in a wandering manner, especially on foot

Synopsis

The novel is set in the Civil War South of 1864. After years of fighting, Inman deserts from the hospital in which he has been convalescing. His destination is Cold Mountain, which represents both his shaken faith in, and the strange truths of, his notions of home. He dreams of a reunion with Ada, and fears it, for their love remained a theoretical thing between them even when they parted.

The action proceeds on parallel tracks. Episodes of Inman's odyssey alternate with the tale of Ada's survival "at home." Always independent of mind, Ada learns after her benign father, Monroe, dies that she has been kept a child unable to fend for herself in the world of nature. Her salvation comes in the form of Ruby, a woman raised motherless as Ada, but who grew up wild and can read the signs of nature. Together, they bond into a partnership and friendship, struggling to transform Monroe's idyllic decor into a self-sustaining farm.

Inman's journey is made dangerous by the Home Guard, bands of bounty hunters who track deserters. With the South's war lost, but not finished, desertions have become common. Teague, the leader of a Home Guard band that roams near Cold Mountain looking for "outliers," is the book's villain. He kills without conscience and looms as Inman's ultimate fate.

The others Inman encounters include Veasey, a fool of a preacher with frank and earthly appetites; Junior, a scoundrel who betrays Inman; the "goatwoman," a sage and mountain dweller who gives him balm; and Sara, a young widow whose vulnerabilities foreshadow the reunion with Ada.

That reunion occurs in a Cherokee ghost camp on Cold Mountain. Inman and Ada consummate both their love and their faith in a shared future, while Ruby nurses the wounds Stobrod received in a

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brutal encounter with Teague. The brevity of the lovers' fulfillment, however, is extreme. Inman is killed by the Home Guard the day they break camp.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Literary Analysis

How does the author's prose serve his characters' states of mind?

Frazier's perspective might be aptly described as "sympathetic omniscience." Inman and Ada ruminate on their circumstances or memories through prose that straddles objectivity and their private thoughts. Frazier's diction, rife with colloquial constructions and terms, tints the reader's sense of sympathy and emphasizes both the sense of the past and the individuality of the characters. He often begins dialogue in an unattributed sentence emerging from a character's thoughts. It is as if conversations were spawned like vegetation from memory. The overriding effect makes the reader feel contemporary to the flickering candles of the characters' retrospections.

Literary Analysis

How did the scenes between Inman and the old woman he called "the heroine of the goat bells" help define Inman's character?

Their dialogues were a rare occasion when Inman spoke overtly of what was in his heart. Like him, the goatwoman was a person who would leave an intolerable situation and live by her own lights. Inman left the schoolhouse and the war on that basis, and she left her husband the same way. Both are essentially kind, and both are essentially honest. Inman is a wayfarer headed for home, while the goatwoman has lived in her wagon for twenty-six years, ready to wander again the moment the impulse finds her. When Junior's betrayal came with the statement, "There's no balm in Gilead," Inman's stay with the goatwoman affords him both literal and spiritual balm. Most significantly, her solitude is weighed in its goodness against the desire that drives Inman back to Ada. Lacking the old woman's sense of God, Inman proceeds to seek some truth in love.

Inferential Comprehension

Who was the bigger fool, Veasey or Odell?

The point is debatable. Veasey is certainly played for laughs, with his brandishing of a firearm among violent men and his disasterous performance as a preacher. By comparison, Odell was nothing but earnest in his love for a slave woman and the loss of her when his father sold Lucinda to an anonymous master. Both men refused to conform to social convention, and both suffered for it. One could well argue against their literary roles in the novel, however, and claim that Veasey's foolishness is very self-aware, but Odell's is blind. In the whorehouse, for one example, Veasey knows the dangers he courts when he gives way to his own illicit desires. Odell, even as he wanders in search of his Lucinda, shows little cognizance of the taboos in which he is socially engulfed.

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Inferential Comprehension

Were Inman and Ada well suited for one another?
Why or why not?

How they fit together is the warp and woof of the novel. The plot parallels the war's changes to their two characters, pitting those changes against their separate memories of life before. Each of them has a hunger to find something that makes survival worthwhile. Inman knows how to survive, which Ada learns by turning from her naive sophistication to "the craft of subsistence." Through Monroe, Ada had long been accustomed to pondering ultimate questions, which Inman's odyssey forces him to face. In the end, both are truth tellers with a low tolerance for fools who have a passion for life, which the brutality of the war and survival had tested and not extinguished. The intensity of their reunion proved their compatibility was more than hypothetical. They embraced not only each other's ideal selves, but their damaged ones as well. That willingness to make something of lives that were terribly diminished in their ideal hopes was the strongest basis for believing their bond would have held.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The novel touches on many aspects of the Civil War tangentially, which students might further study. One topic is Robert E. Lee. Inman conceives of him as nearly a false idol and holds Lee's military judgment in poor esteem. Ample evidence and analysis exists in the historical record to support or counter Inman's view. The role of the Home Guard in the war's dying months could also bear a fact-checking. The Petersburg siege in which Inman was wounded would be a worthy subject. Even the hospital where Inman recovers in the novel's opening pages suggests significant topics. The delivery of medical care during the war, from the practice of surgery to the role of its hospitals, constitutes one of its most important stories.

Comparing and Contrasting As a discussion or writing topic, invite students to analyze the novel's depiction of love between Inman and Ada. Other

fictional couples could prove useful as guides. Hemingway's novels offer many modern versions of the "war couple," but even Victorian novels such as *JANE EYRE* would be useful for comparison's sake. Perhaps the guiding question should be the following: Are Ada and Inman modern lovers transposed into the past, or conventional figures of their time and genre? Or using another approach: Would a feminist have portrayed the love between Ada and Inman in terms different from this author's?

Extending Meaning In the flow of Inman's odyssey and the force of his personality, it is easy to assume his desertion from his army was both sensible and moral. You may want to ask students to step back and examine the principles for which and by which he deserted. Was he right to set off on his own from the war? Were there reasons that made his case a special one, or would any man be justified in deserting how and when Inman did? Was Inman's death in some sense an appropriate dramatic punishment for his decision, or a gratuitous exclamation point to the theme of the war's savagery? If Teague and his Home Guard had been portrayed less as villains, how might this theme in the novel have been altered?

Making Predictions Ask students to imagine the revisions the novel would have required if the author had changed Ruby's character in a single significant way. If Ruby had been an African American, what adjustments in plot, theme, and characterizations might have been logically necessitated? Assume that she and Ada were still fated to fall into a working partnership in which Ruby remained a reader of nature's signs and a well of wisdom about survival.