

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Downriver by Will Hobbs

Book Information

Will Hobbs, Downriver
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Interest Level: UG

Fifteen-year-old Jessie and the other rebellious teenage members of a wilderness survival school team abandon their adult leader, hijack his boats and try to run the dangerous white water at the bottom of the Grand Canyon.

Topics: Adventure, Discovery/Exploration; Natural Environments, Rivers/Lakes/Ponds; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - High School (Theme: Tough Decisions); Transportation/Vehicles, Ships/Boats; U.S. States/Regions, Colorado

Main Characters

Adam a rambunctious teenage boy who likes to make jokes and act like a Ninja

Al the tough but understanding guide who runs Discovery Unlimited

Freddy a quiet, strong young man who loves nature

Heather a nervous teenage girl who quickly abandons the group when they break the rules

Jessie the narrator of the story; a fifteen-year-old girl who is learning to think for herself

Pug a young man who enjoys intimidating others; he attempts to force the group to follow Troy's leadership

Rita a teenager from New York who does not like to be pushed around; she has a criminal history

Star a thin, frail homeless girl who believes in Tarot cards and channeling positive thoughts

Troy the charismatic leader of the group; he loses his temper when his authority is questioned

Vocabulary

bewildered confused; puzzled

gorge a narrow canyon, often with water running through the bottom of it

notorious famous for being bad or dangerous

paralyzed unable to move

sentiments feelings that are expressed as opinions

somberly seriously; with a solemn manner

Synopsis

Jessie's father has sent her to a wilderness therapy group to gain some maturity. Unfortunately, Jessie is spending most of her time resenting her father and his decision to remarry and move the family. After nearly falling during a mountain climb, Jessie's enthusiasm for the program is further diminished. However, she does like the company of the charismatic Troy, and she feels a kinship with Rita and Star. She is also intrigued by the quiet Freddy and amused by the clownish antics of Adam.

After the failed mountain climb, the group wants to go rafting in the Grand Canyon. Al, the program director, insists he cannot acquire a permit for the trip. Instead, he plans a trip for the San Juan River. Along the way to the San Juan, Al leaves the van to make some arrangements. Troy seizes this opportunity to persuade the group to join him in an illicit trip to the Grand Canyon. They drive off and leave Al behind.

At first the group is having fun. They do not mind following Troy's directions, and the rapids are exciting. However, Al eventually catches up with them and attempts to hand them over to the authorities. They escape, but Troy's power has been questioned. First he throws the essential river guide into the river when he feels the others are more interested in consulting it than in listening to him. Then he demands they run a dangerous rapid that frightens the others. Freddy and Jessie lead the rebellion against him, and he is forced to run the rapid with only Adam. The boat overturns, and

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Adam's shoulder is dislocated.

After the group fishes Troy and Adam out of the water, Freddy suggests they move to a different campsite. Troy refuses. Later that night, Star is almost drowned when a flash flood wipes out the campsite. Troy knocks Rita out of the boat with a paddle when she criticizes him. They find Star soon afterward, and the situation is diffused.

Troy's authority is finally destroyed when Freddy stands up to him while he is threatening Rita. Freddy easily defeats Pug, Troy's henchman, but later that night Freddy is stung by a scorpion. Certain that Troy is to blame, Jessie mobilizes the group, and they leave Pug and Troy behind. They are just about to shoot a dangerous rapid when they spot helicopters waiting to capture them. Since both Adam and Freddy need medical attention, Jessie surrenders the group. They are all given minor punishments for their rebellion, but the final members of the group have bonded for life. Jessie and Star even become sisters when Star is taken in by Jessie's family.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What had happened to Freddy's family?

Freddy's father was shot by the police because he picked up a rifle when they came to speak to him. His mother returned to her Hopi family, but Freddy was unable to adapt to the Hopi lifestyle.

Literary Analysis

Troy claims Al always has to be in control. Is this an accurate description of Al?

Al is actually very sympathetic to the group's need to rebel. With the exception of Troy and Pug, the group receives very little punishment for stealing his gear and running away from him. He even hires Adam to work for Discovery Unlimited. This shows that Al does not feel he has to control everyone. However, he does try to keep situations under control, as shown by his attempt to recapture the group after they escaped from him.

Inferential Comprehension

Why does Heather desert the group?

Even before the group's rebellion, Heather is referred to as the whistle blower, or the quitter. She does not like breaking rules or defying authority. Also, Heather fell into the river at Westwater, so the idea of rafting a dangerous river probably terrifies her.

Constructing Meaning

How does Troy persuade the group to go with him to the Grand Canyon?

First Troy points out that the San Juan, where they're headed, is a flat, boring river. Then he argues that they are all in the program because they are "hoods." He notes that it is silly for them to obey Al's wishes because Al cannot acquire a permit. He draws attention to the keys in the ignition and suggests they take advantage of this opportunity to live out their dream of running the Grand Canyon.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Al is appalled that the group is attempting to run the Grand Canyon without the aid of a river guide. Have the students look at books or videos about the rapids of the Grand Canyon. Then have them write a trip itinerary that includes and describes at least three rapids.

Understanding the Author's Craft This book is mainly told from Jessie's point of view. Have the

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students choose one of the events in this book and describe it from the point of view of one of the other characters.

Making Predictions The end of this story suggests that Jessie's group will someday travel the Grand Canyon again. Have the students write a short story about this reunion.

Recognizing Details Have students research the boats used to run rapids and the techniques used to steer them. Have them create a poster that uses diagrams to display their findings.