

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

A Gathering of Days

by
Joan W. Blos

Book Information

Joan W. Blos, A Gathering of Days
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When Catherine's mother dies in childbirth and her father decides to remarry, Catherine must face painful changes.

Award: American Book Award; National Book Award/ Honors; Newbery Medal

Topics: Family Life, Birth; Family Life, Death; Family Life, Stepfamilies; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

Main Characters

Asa Shipman Cassie's brother

Cassie Shipman Catherine's schoolmate and dear friend who dies during the time span of this journal

Catherine Hall the main character, a young girl living in New Hampshire who shares her life experiences in her journal

Charles Hall Catherine's father, a hard-working, and sometimes stubborn, man

Curtis also known as the phantom, a slave who asks Catherine for help and eventually escapes to Canada

Daniel Higham Mistress Higham's teenage son

Matty Hall Catherine's younger sister

Mistress Ann Higham Hall a woman from Boston whom Charles meets in a shop and later marries

Teacher Holt Catherine's teacher, falsely accused of helping the phantom slave

Uncle Jack Hall brother of Charles, a good-natured man with many stories to tell

Vocabulary

assay analysis to determine quality or property
capacious able to contain a great deal
chagrined embarrassed or humiliated
loquacious very talkative
refractory unmanageable or unwilling to submit
somnolent sleepy, tending to induce sleep

Synopsis

This is the story of Catherine Cabot Hall. She was given her journal by her father at the age of thirteen, and writes in it for more than a year. Almost everything imaginable is of interest to Catherine, as she records the changes in seasons as well as the changes in her life.

Early in the story, Catherine encounters a phantom in the woods. She often wonders about him. Then, she finds that her writing book for school is missing. Soon, it turns up with a message asking for help in its pages. Catherine and her friend, Asa Shipman, wonder about the identity of the phantom. She wonders whether she should help him because her father is opposed to aiding slaves and indentured servants. Eventually she and Cassie, her best friend, take a quilt and some food for the slave.

In school one day, Teacher Holt discusses a newspaper article that speaks out against slavery. Soon after, he is accused of helping the phantom and teaching improper materials.

Meanwhile, Catherine and her younger sister, Matty, face many issues involving the loss of their mother, Hannah, and her baby, Nathaniel. Their father takes good care of them, and he works hard to take goods to Boston to trade. Returning from a trip, he tells the girls that he will soon wed Mistress Ann Higham.

Catherine seems to have mixed feelings for Mistress Higham, but both she and Matty eventually warm to Mammann's kind ways. Her son, Daniel, also fits in well with the family and makes friends. Unfortunately, things take a turn for the worse when Cassie becomes ill and dies soon after. The death has a profound effect on Catherine and all those around her.

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Eventually, Catherine is invited by the Holts to help take care of their baby in exchange for food, shelter, and education. She will leave home for the first time. Much later in life, she will pass her journal on to her great-granddaughter.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

At first Catherine seemed confused about how to feel toward Mistress Higham. Why could she never be truly angry with her?

Answer should reflect that Mistress Higham was a demanding stepmother. She liked work to be done well and precisely. Catherine seemed to wonder if she could please her. Then, just as suddenly, Mistress Higham would take Catherine's side when Father said something, or she would give her some lovely cuffs and a collar.

Literary Analysis

How did Teacher Holt handle the problem at school?

Answer should reflect that he wrote a letter to the board and the community explaining that he did not help a slave. He promised to teach nothing but board-approved materials in class, but after class he would teach what he chose.

Inferential Comprehension

What about the phantom's note would indicate that he was a slave?

Answer should reflect that the words were misspelled, and there was no punctuation. Also, the words were in all capital letters. Masters did not want their slaves to be properly educated in those times.

Constructing Meaning

What are some of the ways in which the author shows Asa is a good person?

Answer should reflect that he tried to persuade Catherine to help the unknown phantom. Also, he endured beatings for pies he never stole, rather than expose the hungry slave. He was considerate, like a brother. And he had a sensitive side, as evident when he went to Catherine for help writing a poem for Sophy.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Very little is known about Curtis, the phantom slave. His note does indicate, however, that he could write and read. It is also known that he escaped to Canada. This is somewhat similar to Frederick Douglass's story. For him, education was his key to freedom. Have students research the lives of slaves, such as Frederick Douglass, who made their way to freedom. Also, students should explore the ways in which slaves were able to escape. Learning about the Underground Railroad would be helpful.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Several times the book mentions indentured servants. Even though Africans were commonly slaves during the time, white Europeans were sold as indentured servants. From the very first American settlements until the American Revolution in 1775, European immigrants were sold as indentured servants. Often the expenses of their voyages to America were so great, the people signed "indentures," or contracts, which legally bound them into servitude for a period of years. Have students research what it meant to be an indentured servant. Compare and contrast the life of an indentured servant to the life of a slave. Have students search for material on specific individuals who were indentured servants.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Teacher Holt brought a newspaper called *The Liberator* to read to the class on February 17, 1831, according to Catherine's diary. This newspaper was started

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by one of the Abolitionists' first great leaders, William Lloyd Garrison. He was well known for his famous Independence Day speech in Boston on July 4, 1829. Then in 1831, he began publishing *The Liberator*. For a project, have students research Garrison. Try to find his speech and read segments of it aloud in class. Also, have students try to locate the actual article which was read by Teacher Holt, and read it aloud in class as well.

Understanding the Author's Craft This story is a first person account told in diary form by a young New England girl. Have students keep a reading journal while they read this book. In it they can write about what they feel or think, or anything they may have questions about. Have them record their favorite parts and explain why they chose those parts. Encourage them to write about the things they did not like as well.