

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Great Railroad Race: The Diary of Libby West

by  
Kristiana Gregory

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### Book Information

Kristiana Gregory, The Great Railroad Race: The Diary of Libby West

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204 Pages

Book Level: 5.7

Interest Level: MG

As the daughter of a newspaper reporter, fourteen-year-old Libby keeps a diary account of the exciting events surrounding her during the building of the transcontinental railroad.

**Topics:** Historical Fiction, Historical Fiction (All); History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; People, Pioneers/Settlers; Series, Dear America

### Main Characters

Aunt Clara Uncle Henry's wife

Ellie Rowe Libby's best friend

Joe West Libby's brother

Julia West (Mother) Libby's mother

Libby West a fourteen-year-old girl who is the main character and the person who writes the diary

Mrs. Buffington the owner of a boarding house in Ogden, Utah, where the Rowes, the Wests, and Pete stay

Mrs. Rowe Ellie's mother; the best friend of Mrs. West

Pete a friend of the West family who later becomes Libby's husband

Sterling West (Father) Libby's father

Uncle Henry and Aunt Clara relatives with whom the Wests stay in Salt Lake City

### Vocabulary

**marmalade** a clear, sweetened jelly containing pieces of fruit and fruit rind

**mortar** a mixture used in masonry to join brick, stones, or other building materials

**silhouette** a solid-black outline of an object

**tipi** a cone-shaped Native American tent usually made of poles and animal skins

**trestle** a braced frame supporting a railroad over a river or ravine

**trundle** a low bed that can be stored under a taller bed

### Synopsis

*The Great Railroad Race* is a fictional diary account of the life of fourteen-year-old Libby West from May 2, 1868 to May 11, 1869. Libby and her family follow the builders of the transcontinental railroad as her father writes newspaper articles reporting the progress of this historic undertaking. A railroad company from California, Central Pacific, and one from Nebraska, Union Pacific, are engaged in a contest known as the "the Great Race." They have started building their lines at opposite ends and are racing to meet somewhere in the desert. The story reveals the dangers and hardships suffered by both the builders of the railroad and the West family and their friends as they trail the tracklayers.

As the story opens in Denver, we learn that Libby's father, Sterling, a Civil War veteran of the Union Army, has bought a printing press and other equipment without the knowledge of Julia, her mother. Father is currently working as a reporter for the *Rocky Mountain News*, but he is disgruntled about being given mundane writing assignments. As a result, Father and Pete, the man who saved Father's life during the war, are planning to follow the Union Pacific railroad workers west, writing and printing their own newspaper as they travel. When mother finds the press in the barn and learns that he intends to leave his family behind for their safety, she is outraged. She had endured the separation from him during the war and has vowed never to be separated from him again.

Father eventually agrees to bring his family with him and, on May 17, they all set out on the journey, first traveling to Cheyenne and then to Laramie. Mother, Libby, and Libby's seven-year-old brother, Joe, move into the Laramie Hotel while Father and Pete go on to Fort Sanders to set up their press. Several days later, Libby meets Ellie, a girl with whom she becomes best friends. Ellie and her mother

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accompany the family for the rest of the trip, as Ellie's father is also traveling with the railroad as a surveyor. Mother plans to take the family to join Father at Fort Sanders, but before she can, she becomes bedridden with a serious illness. Mother's condition quickly deteriorates, but Libby is able to nurse her mother back to health. The family then travels to Fort Sanders to be with Father and Pete.

One night at the end of July, Libby and Ellie narrowly escape a dangerous encounter with some rough men when they sneak out to see one of the temporary railroad towns. They learn firsthand why these tent villages have earned the nickname "Hell on Wheels," and they wisely avoid further contact with the towns for the remainder of their journey. A few days later, Pete shaves off his beard and Libby discovers that Pete is only four years older than she, rather than her father's age. Libby soon begins feeling a romantic attraction to him.

In early October, father becomes ill from his war wounds, so Pete and the family head to Salt Lake City, where they arrive a month later to live with Uncle Henry and Aunt Clara until he recuperates. Meanwhile, the railroad crews continue to work, but by Christmas they are battling the fierce winter weather. Finally, at the beginning of February, Father is rested, and the West family travels to join the railroad crew at a camp near Ogden, Utah. There Pete and Libby's affection grows, and he gives her a kiss.

In mid-February, the two railroad companies have passed each other because they have not agreed on a meeting point. They have found it advantageous to stall as long as possible so the government will continue to pay them for their work. Ulysses S. Grant takes office as the new President on March 6 and immediately demands that the companies determine a meeting place. On April 11, word reaches the family that an agreement has been made to join tracks at Promontory Summit, Utah. The family arrives at the historic meeting point on May 1 to record news of the great event. The spectators anxiously await the completion of the track and the meeting of the railroad officials.

Several complications delay the celebration, but on May 11, 1869, the transcontinental railroad is completed and is called the greatest event in American history.

The epilogue of the story relates that Libby and Pete marry just after Libby's seventeenth birthday. They have two sons, one of whom dies, and four daughters. Pete continues to work as a newspaperman, and Libby becomes a published author of four books. In 1918 they are stricken by the Spanish influenza epidemic and die within one day of each other.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

If Mother could foresee the difficulties she and her children would face on their journey, would she still insist on going?

*Many students will probably say that she still would go because she values having her family together even more than being safe. Other students may disagree, saying that if Mother really could foresee the hardships they would face, she would have remained behind, for the sake of protecting her children if not herself.*

### Literary Analysis

How do Libby's feelings about Pete change throughout the story?

*Libby is initially disgusted by Pete's poor hygiene and manners. She also thinks he is much older than he really is. But once she realizes he is close to her age and he is a very kind, thoughtful person, she begins to see him differently.*

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### Inferential Comprehension

The U.S. government gave the railroads money and land grants for each mile of track laid. We find out from our reading that this was partially the reason why the railroads did not quickly agree upon a meeting place. The longer they took, the more money they received. Have the students discuss if money is or is not the best motivating factor for progress.

*Money can be a great motivator because it gives people a form of power. Because of this appeal, it can prompt people to work very hard and efficiently to maximize profits. However, it can also induce people to become corrupt, which decreases productivity.*

### Constructing Meaning

The railroad became the most important mode of transportation in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. What caused the railroad to lose its primary status after this period?

*The invention of the automobile and the resulting construction of roads had the greatest impact on the railroads. Trucks and cars have provided greater flexibility and convenience in transportation by allowing people and goods to travel to more remote locations. This encouraged a further expansion of commerce and population that resulted in a decreased dependence on trains. Even today, though, trains still provide an economical and efficient way to transport large quantities of goods between large commercial centers.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** As mentioned in the book, the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 was probably the greatest event in American history up to that time because it united the East and West coasts by allowing a great movement of people and a massive increase in commerce. Have the students research the transcontinental railroad and draw a map of the continental United States showing the transcontinental railroad route. Have them record

significant cities and topographical features along the route.

**Extending Meaning** Many common, everyday objects used by people in the nineteenth century are significantly different from those used today. Have students choose three ordinary objects mentioned in the diary. Have the students show to the class, the objects, if possible, or an illustration of the object, explain each one, tell how it was used, and explain the importance to the health, safety, and welfare of the characters.

**Recognizing Details** Thousands of workers were needed to build the transcontinental railroad. The work was physically demanding and required strong men. Have students write a help-wanted ad for workers on the transcontinental railroad project. Have students include skills needed, wages paid, and include anything they feel is important to the ad.

**Responding to Literature** Many Easterners dreamed of a prosperous life out West. Their dreams were often unrealistic, however, and many underestimated the difficulties they would face. Have students write a letter to a friend back East who is thinking about joining the West family on their journey. Have the students give advice as to why or why not their friend should come. Include the hardships and dangers encountered by the tracklayers.