

## Jip: His Story

by

Katherine Paterson

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**Book Information**Katherine Paterson, Jip: His Story

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178 Pages

Book Level: 5.3

Interest Level: MG

While living on a Vermont poor farm during 1855 and 1856, Jip learns his identity and that of his mother and comes to understand how he arrived at this place.

**Award:** ABA Children's Book Council; ALA Notable/Best Books; Booklist Editors' Choice; Canadian Library Association Honour; Misc./Other; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book; Publishers Weekly Best Book; Scott O'Dell Award; SLJ Best Book; State Award

**Topics:** Family Life, Growing Up; History, Slavery; Mysteries, Secrets; People, African American; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Respect All Voices: Respect; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; U.S. States/Regions, Vermont

**Main Characters**

Jip an orphan, thought to be a gypsy, who resides at a poor farm

Lucy Wilkens a girl about Jip's age who eventually becomes his friend

Luke Stevens Teacher's friend; a Quaker from a family of abolitionists

Mr. and Mrs. Lyman the couple who run the poor farm

Mr. Flint overseer of the poor farm

Mrs. Stevens Luke Stevens's mother

Mrs. Wilkens a widow forced to move to the poor farm with her three children

Put an old man, thought to be a lunatic, who is kept in a cage at the poor farm

Sheldon Jip's friend; a simpleton who also lives at the poor farm

Teacher a kind, educated woman who befriends Jip

the slave master a man whose looks disturb Jip

the stranger a strange man who makes Jip uncomfortable

Toddy Wilkens a young boy about four years old

**Vocabulary**

**bondage** slavery

**dilemma** a problem, or an unpleasant choice

**infinitesimal** very small or tiny

**malingering** taking it easy, not working

**revelation** discovery or disclosure

**sinister** threatening, evil

**Synopsis**

Jip is a sweet, kind boy to whom animals and children respond. He has been told he was found on the road when he was about two years old, probably left there by a family of gypsies. He resides at a poor farm, where he is the most competent of all its residents. He works the fields, tends to the animals, and cares for the sick and simple people who are his surrogate family. When an alleged lunatic is brought to the farm, it is Jip who loosens his bindings and soothes the frightened man. Jip realizes Put, the lunatic, is a wise, kind gentleman, and learns much from him. When another family comes to live at the farm, Jip makes two more friends. Lucy and Jip attend school, and Jip meets a teacher who encourages him to keep learning. When a mysterious stranger begins asking questions about Jip, his life is forever changed. Through Teacher, Jip meets the Stevenses, a family of Quaker abolitionists, who reveal the truth about Jip's past. With their help, Jip attempts to escape several different forms of bondage, but not without his beloved Put. Jip's story climaxes with his capture, Put's death and a new beginning filled with hope and freedom.

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## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

What can you tell about Mrs. Stevens when she says, "The Scriptures tell us that we must be 'wise as serpents and gentle as doves'"? What does that passage mean?

*Mrs. Stevens and her Quaker family were abolitionists who had been working with the Underground Railroad to assist runaway slaves with their escape. She was telling Jip that they must do whatever possible, by whatever means to do "God's work."*

### Literary Analysis

How did going to school change Jip?

*He met Teacher, who ultimately helped release him from bondage. He had a new appreciation for learning, and began a new relationship with Put, who assumed the role of teacher to his student.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Why did Jip feel he couldn't leave without Put?

*Put was like family to him; they both needed each other. Each made the other a better person. He felt Put would die without him. He felt responsible for Put.*

### Constructing Meaning

How was Jip shown to be a kind person?

*He removed Put's ropes when he came to the farm. He was patient with Toddy. He took Sheldon under his wing. He gave his penny to Lucy. He insisted Put come with him to Canada. He left town rather than have Teacher and Luke get into trouble.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** Jip's story takes place on a

poor farm in Vermont in the 1880s. Once a common sight, poor farms were replaced with orphanages, foster homes and, eventually, government programs. The setting's stark background is highlighted when a lunatic in a cage arrives at the farm. That a man is to be kept in a cage is not a shocking surprise to anyone in the story. Students can discuss or write about the contemporary equivalent to the poor farm. Since Jip's mother was an escaped slave, students could write about what Jip's life may have been like if she had stayed with the master on a southern plantation. Another writing activity might describe what a poor farm would be like if one existed in the 1990s.

**Understanding Literary Features** The theme of the story reinforces the value of friendship. Jip's kindness and goodness endeared him to many people, and he was rewarded with a relationship in which he gained a father figure. Students can contrast the relationship between Jip and Put with what they imagine the relationship would be between Jip and his biological father. Students could also write about the value of friendship, or how they have been rewarded by a relationship with a non-traditional friend.

**Understanding Characterization** Jip, a sweet, kind boy, was thought to be a gypsy. He was treated with the same regard as any other poor orphaned gypsy. When the truth is told, he discovers he is the son of an escaped slave. Further information reveals that his father was his mother's master. Students can discuss how other people reacted when they learned that Jip's mother was a slave, and compare it to Jip's reaction to the news. Students can also discuss the effect Jip and Put had on each other. How was each different after meeting the other? Ask students to think of other characters who were oppressed or had very little for which to be grateful, yet proved to be good and kind to others.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** At one point in the story while Jip works at the bleak poor farm and Put is still caged, Put tells Jip that they are not as unlucky as some people. Readers might

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see that as the ultimate in optimism until it is revealed that Jip "belongs" to a plantation owner down south. Suddenly the poor farm doesn't look quite as dreary. Students could write or discuss a time in their lives or someone else's where they thought things were bad until new information made their situation seem not so bad. They might also discuss the concept of "the lesser of two evils."