

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Journal of Joshua Loper: A Black Cowboy by Walter Dean Myers

Book Information

Walter Dean Myers, The Journal of Joshua Loper: A Black Cowboy

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Interest Level: MG

In 1871, Joshua Loper, a sixteen-year-old black cowboy, records in his journal his experiences while making his first cattle drive under an unsympathetic trail boss.

Award: Jefferson Cup Award/Honor; Misc./Other

Topics: English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 15, 90%; Historical Fiction, Historical Fiction (All); History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; People, African American; People, Cowboys; Series, My Name Is America

Main Characters

Captain Hunter the trail boss of Joshua's first cattle drive; a strict, no-nonsense, former Confederate soldier

Chubb McLauren the wrangler on the cattle drive

Doom a twenty-one-year-old black cowboy who has a poor attitude toward work

Isaiah the black cook on the trail

Jake, Miguel, Bert, Wade Mason, and Bill Steele the other cowboys on the cattle drive

James Hickok (Wild Bill) the marshal of Abilene, Kansas, who tries to clean up the rough reputation of the cattle town

Joshua Loper the main character of the story; a sixteen-year-old, literate black man who keeps a journal of his experiences on his first cattle drive from Texas to Kansas

Kissee Loper (Mama) Joshua's faith-filled and devoted mother

Liam a cowpuncher who joins the drive after Bert leaves

Lobo Joshua's horse on his second drive

Mr. Muhlen the owner of the Slash M Ranch; a good and fair employer

Nehemiah Loper Joshua's father, who bought his mother's freedom but left home when Joshua was five to fight with the Union Army in the Civil War

Pretty Joshua's favorite horse on his first trail drive

Timmy O'Hara a seventeen-year-old Irish cowboy; Joshua's best friend

Vocabulary

calomel medicine used to evacuate the intestinal tract

consumption tuberculosis

hobble to use a rope or strap on an animal's legs to restrict its movement

remuda the herd of horses from which a rider chooses his mount

scrip money a piece of paper entitling the owner to purchase items at a given store

stampede a sudden rush of startled animals running in one direction

wrangler a cowboy who works with horses

Synopsis

Joshua Loper and his mother live on Mr. Muhlen's Slash M Ranch in southern Texas. Mr. Muhlen had been Mama's master until Nehemiah Loper, a free black man, was allowed to buy her freedom and marry her. Nehemiah left to fight for the North in the war when Joshua was five. When he returned and could not find work in Texas, he left again to look for work in Ohio, promising to send for his family when he could support them. Joshua is now sixteen. He has always dreamed of being a cowboy, and he has finally come of age.

Mr. Muhlen has just hired a new man, Captain Hunter, to be the trail boss for the next cattle drive. Over two thousand steers must be taken up the trail to Abilene, Kansas, by mid July. By his behavior, the Captain makes it clear he does not like blacks and does not want a group of them on the trail ride. Mr. Muhlen defends Joshua and mentions his shooting skills. Isaiah, the cook, and Doom, both black men, are needed on the drive, too.

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After branding the herd, the group begins the journey in early May. Joshua brings a notebook and pencil along to write about his adventure. Joshua and Doom are assigned to ride drag, bringing up the rear. Joshua learns the daily routine -- get up and begin driving the cattle at dawn, rest at noon, move them again, water and settle the herd for the night, and take a turn at night watch. The first night, Joshua experiences a stampede and learns how to stop it.

Captain Hunter carefully watches Doom and Joshua and speaks harshly to them when they do the slightest thing wrong. Doom talks back, but Joshua vents his feelings at night when he is up on Pretty, his own horse, whom he considers a friend. The other men on the drive, most of whom fought for the rebels, talk a lot about the war. Isaiah speaks of his slave days.

The trail is hard, and Joshua is very tired. The seasoned cowhands and Isaiah sometimes take advantage of Joshua's naiveté and play jokes on him. The trail contains its dangers, however, and the Captain calls on Joshua's sharpshooting skills whenever trouble seems possible. After Bert falls asleep on night watch and is relegated to riding drag, Joshua moves up to the swing position, where he becomes responsible for doing a lot of the turning as well as making sure no strays wander from the herd.

People along the trail begin demanding payment or compensation to let the herd pass or drink water. The Captain is a hard bargainer and intimidates and threatens to kill the people who stand in his way. When they cross into Indian Territory, rustlers attack them and get away with fifty steers. Timmy, Joshua's best friend on the drive, rescues Jake, who is nearly trampled in the stampede the rustlers start.

The Captain takes Joshua with him to retrieve the stolen cattle, and for the first time, Joshua has to shoot at men. Not wanting to kill them, he aims to nick them, and the steers are reclaimed.

The harshness of the trail now begins to take its toll. Bert leaves the drive, so the group is a man short. A new cowboy, Liam, joins but is killed in another stampede. The Indians along the way are doing poorly and have little to eat. Cattle are given to them so the herd will be permitted to travel through the Indian lands.

Pretty becomes ill, bleeding from his nostrils. When Pretty's health deteriorates further and he has to struggle to get up, Joshua has to shoot him. The men are tired and disheartened, and tempers become short. Joshua decides the life of a cowboy is not for him.

They finally cross into Kansas, and as they approach Abilene, their spirits rise. Mr. Muhlen meets them outside the city, and the cowboys hear he got a good price for the herd. The men talk of the good time they will have in Abilene. Once they get there, the group squanders their money quickly. Joshua is glad he let Mr. Muhlen hold some of his salary to give to his mother. Mr. Muhlen offers them more money if they bring another herd up this year. The Captain has come to respect Joshua's skills and wants him on the next drive. Joshua forgets his reticence about being a cowboy and agrees to join the next drive. He returns to Texas just long enough to see his mother and get another horse. He then sets out on the trail again.

Open-Ended Questions

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

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Initial Understanding

How does Joshua stay in the good graces of Captain Hunter?

Joshua is able to exercise some self-control and avoid trouble by keeping quiet. He has an outlet for his thoughts and feelings that others in his group do not have -- his journal. Joshua is also an able learner and hard worker. The captain appreciates his shooting skills. Since Joshua does not challenge Captain Hunter, the Captain does not feel threatened by him and is able to see that he is as good a man as Mr. Muhlen had said.

Literary Analysis

Even though the book only covers a period of a few months, how does the author show this is a time of tremendous change in United States history?

The author depicts a cattle drive in which the cowpunchers come from different backgrounds. In his journal entries, Joshua highlights various characters and relates their life stories. In these moments, the reader can tell that the country is recovering from a major upheaval. People need to play by new rules. Those keeping slaves need to give them their freedom. People from all walks of life need to find a means of supporting themselves and their families. Society is very mobile, and people who in the past might not have worked together, now have to. Tempers sometimes flare, and misunderstandings occur. The West is fairly open, and it allows former slaves to experience a sense of freedom they never had before. The Indian territories are continually being encroached upon, and the railroad is bringing new opportunities to once desolate areas.

Inferential Comprehension

Joshua comments about Liam's age. What can the reader imply from this?

Joshua says Liam looks old, about "thirty or even older." Nowadays, thirty is not considered old. In 1871, however, without the benefits of modern medicines and with the harsh life many people lived, thirty was old -- especially if someone was doing a lot of outdoor physical labor. It may also point to the relative youth of the majority of western cowboys. Have students consider that many cowboys were older teenagers rather than men of thirty and forty as depicted in the movies.

Constructing Meaning

Timmy jokingly tells Joshua that there are three things a boy has to do to become a man: "You have to shoot straight, lie with a straight face, and kiss a beautiful woman." What rites of passage exist in society today?

Rites of passage occur at the group, community, religious, and national levels. For a child, starting school is a sign of passage, as is graduation. For those involved in a faith community, there are often rituals, such as baptism or communion, surrounding the acceptance of the tenets of belief as an adult member of the group. Some cultures have particular rituals that mark the onset of adulthood. Obvious rites of passage in today's society include receiving a driver's license, being able to vote, and being eligible to join the armed forces.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story takes place in the states of Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. This parallels the headings of the journal, the exception being Oklahoma, which is called Indian Territory. Have the students research the history of Oklahoma as it pertains to the Indians. Tribes were forcibly moved into the area beginning in 1830. Include in the research the tribes that were relocated and how the treaties were broken to allow white settlers into the area at a later date. Historic maps contain a great deal of information

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on the shifting of borders and movement of populations. The students may find both interesting and useful information in them to add to their report.

Comparing and Contrasting After reading the book, the students may wish to watch a typical Hollywood western movie such as *Chisholm*. To promote class discussion, have them compare what they learned about cattle drives in the book to what is shown on the screen. Which parts are realistic and which are exaggerated? Does the cast reflect the racial balance the book describes? What are other similarities and differences?

Recognizing Details Have the students put their artistic skills to work. The book contains detailed descriptions of both common occurrences and significant events. Using these descriptions, have the students choose a scene in the cattle drive to sketch. Examples include crossing a river, loading steers onto a boxcar, or fighting rustlers. Display the sketches in the classroom.

Understanding Characterization Captain Hunter is a private individual who does not share much conversation with his men. As a way of explaining his thoughts and feelings, have the students pick three dates from Joshua's journal that describe problems occurring on the drive. The students can then write a journal entry about the same events from the Captain's perspective. They should keep in mind that he is older than Joshua, has certain hurts and prejudices, and has more responsibility as a trail boss.