

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Key to the Indian

by

Lynne Reid Banks

Book Information

Lynne Reid Banks, The Key to the Indian
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In this fifth volume of <I>The Indian in the Cupboard</I> series, Omri and his father try to go back 200 years to the time of their friend, Little Bear, whose tribe is in grave danger.

Topics: Adventure, Danger; Adventure, Rescue/Save; People, Native American; Science Fiction, Time Travel; Series, Indian in the Cupboard

Main Characters

Adiel Omri's older brother who is away at school

Boone and Ruby Lou Patrick's "little people," whom he brings for an adventure while Omri is gone

Bright Stars and Tall Bear Omri's "little people"; Little Bear's wife and son

Father (Lionel) Omri's father, who counsels Little Bear about the tribe's future

Gillon Omri's older brother who is unwittingly sent to India by the magic key

Jessica Charlotte Omri's great-great-aunt, who puts her magic into the car key

Little Bear one of Omri's "little people"; an Iroquois chief who asks Omri and his father for help

Mother (Jane Charlotte) Omri's mother, who silently understands the magic and Omri's need to help the little people

Old Woman the Eldest Clan Mother of Little Bear's tribe

Omri the main character of the story; an English boy who tries to help Little Bear

Patrick Omri's best friend, who shares the secret but often uses it unwisely

Vocabulary

condoled expressed sympathy or sorrow

coracle a small round boat made of a frame covered with a tarpaulin or other waterproof material

grievance the formal expression of a complaint

gustoweh a headdress worn by members of Little Bear's Iroquois tribe, the Mohawks

palisade a fence of stakes with pointed tops used for defense

Synopsis

In October, Omri's father, Lionel, surprises the family by planning a camping trip. Omri suspects this trip is not real but is a ruse that will permit him and his father to visit Little Bear. Just two days before, Father had learned the secret of Omri's cupboard and had heard Little Bear ask for help with the tribe's problems involving the English. Father had also realized that the license plate on the family's car has the special letters LB, indicating it should be used as their time machine. After Omri hears his father's plan for getting to Little Bear's time, he is disappointed when he realizes the magic key will not fit in the car's ignition. He enlists Jessica Charlotte's help in molding a new magic key. While she works on the key, Little Bear is brought back to life. Little Bear agrees to have his wife, Bright Stars, make corn doll bodies for Omri and his father to inhabit and gives them his wampum belt, assuring that they will appear in the correct time and place.

The next day, after a minor bicycle accident on the way to school, Omri is at home when his father discovers that the new key Jessica made is too small to use in the car. They must postpone their trip until they can come up with a new plan. During the next two weeks, Omri's father reads everything he can about the history of Indians on the east coast of America and their treatment by the British. The weekend for the camping trip arrives, and Omri's mother helps load up the car with camping gear from her grandfather Matt's days in India. When Father turns the ignition key, he, Omri, and Gillon are unexpectedly transported to different places. Since Omri and Gillon are leaning against their great-grandfather's equipment, they find themselves

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in India inhabiting the bodies of marionettes. After a harrowing experience of being stolen by two young children and bounced around a street bazaar, the boys are returned to their own time when their mother removes the car key. Omri discovers that Father has just returned from Little Bear's time, but the corn doll that Bright Stars had made had no face. As a result, Father was blind and terribly frightened while there.

After their frightening trips, Omri and Father realize that the normal-sized car key is now magic probably because Jessica Charlotte had been holding it inside the cupboard. They did not need a new key to get to Little Bear's time to help him as they had first thought. Omri and his father spend the next few days making plans to visit Little Bear together. They only need to find someone to turn the ignition key. Omri writes to Patrick, his old school friend, and invites him to come for a long weekend. Omri hopes Patrick will be willing to turn the key and be content to stay behind. However, Patrick is upset about being left behind, and he tells Omri that he plans on seeing his own little people, Boone and Ruby Lou, while Omri is gone. The plan is set, with Omri, his father, and Patrick pretending to go camping but only going two miles from home. As Omri and his father sit in the car waiting for Patrick to turn the key, Omri realizes his father is just as frightened as he is about the upcoming adventure.

Omri finds he is a little person and in the house of Little Bear and Bright Stars. He wakes up Little Bear, who discovers Omri's father next to Tall Bear, Little Bear and Bright Stars' year-old son. At dawn, Bright Stars performs a ritual cleansing and dressing of Omri and his father. As Little Bear explains the imminent dangers for the tribe caused by the broken promises of the English king and the uprisings by settlers and other Indian tribes, a dog grabs Omri and takes him to another part of the longhouse. A very old Indian woman finds Omri, but Little Bear persuades her to return Omri to him. Little Bear tells Omri that the old woman is the Eldest Clan Mother, a respected member of the tribe. Then Father explains there are three options for Little Bear, but Father recommends the option that would mean

moving the tribe to the north to join other Mohawk tribes near the Saint Lawrence River. Little Bear agrees they must move soon because winter is approaching. He schedules the ceremony of departure for that night.

During the ceremony, settlers attack the Indian settlement, and Omri and his father realize the stockade surrounding the longhouse is on fire. Knowing there is only one exit, Omri and his father save Tall Bear by attracting the toddler's attention and drawing him out of the smoke-filled area. When the settlers break into the longhouse, Clan Mother grabs Omri and his father. She advances toward the white men, holding out the "little people" to try to frighten the settlers. One of the settlers shoots Clan Mother, and Omri and his father run for safety. Noticing that the women and children are trapped inside the stockade, the warriors who have been fighting outside chop a hole in the fence, permitting those inside to escape. Unable to get Little Bear's attention, Omri and his father are captured by a settler. The settler is shot with an arrow before he can kill Omri and his father. Realizing the tribe is leaving immediately, Omri and his father decide to stay at the remains of the stockade, and Little Bear gives them one of his moccasins for warmth. After the Indians leave, Omri and his father huddle together inside the shoe waiting for Patrick to turn the key.

Opening their eyes in the car, Omri sees Patrick upset and scared. Patrick explains that after bringing Boone and Ruby Lou back to life, he left them in a boat in the bathtub only to later discover an empty tub marked with cat paw prints. Hardly speaking to Mother, the trio rush to the bathroom for clues. Father decides Boone and Ruby Lou must have gone down the drain into the septic tank in back of the house. Patrick runs outside and reaches into the stinking hole to pull up two extremely angry "little people." As Omri and Patrick prepare a soothing bubble bath for Boone and Ruby Lou, Patrick explains that he brought them back to life because he was angry at Omri for leaving him out of the adventure. Omri puts Little Bear, Bright Stars, Tall Bear, and Jessica Charlotte's figurines in the

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cashbox for good.

The next Sunday, Mother brings Little Bear's wampum belt to Omri and tells him she knew what was going on because she also has part of the gift of understanding the magic. Omri and his father send the belt back to Little Bear through the cupboard.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Omri's father have mixed feelings about visiting Little Bear's time?

Omri's father is excited about his time travel. He is approaching the adventure with great anticipation as well as amazement about the magic he so recently discovered. On the other hand, he tells Omri that he is afraid because he does not know what to expect. He has considered the possibility that he may be in danger while in a different time period, or that something may happen that could prevent him from returning to his own time. He is also concerned because he does not want to influence history in a way he should not.

Literary Analysis

Patrick intends to play with the cupboard, the key, and all the "little people" while Omri is visiting Little Bear. Why does Patrick change his mind?

Patrick does put the Matron in the cupboard, but she is very busy in her time period and angrily demands to be sent back. Next, Patrick brings Fickits, and they talk a long time. Patrick tells him of being left behind from the adventure in Little Bear's time and that he plans to put Little Bear in the cupboard to get back at Omri. Fickits talks Patrick out of doing that, saying Patrick should think about comradeship and team spirit and the possibility that Little Bear's sudden leaving could create more problems or danger. Once Patrick has the time to consider the advice from Fickits, he realizes that he should not retaliate as he had originally planned.

Inferential Comprehension

Omri and his father look forward to visiting Little Bear and the Iroquois village. What is the difference in the way each prepares for the upcoming trip?

Since Omri has time traveled before, he does not seem very concerned about making any plans other than to wonder about their travel vehicle, since the cupboard cannot hold two people. Once it is realized that the car is to be the time machine, Omri does not do anything further to prepare. In contrast, Omri's father studies both Jessica Charlotte's notebook to learn about the magic of time travel as well as history books relating to Little Bear's time period so he can attempt to offer advice without changing history. Omri's father also plans for items that may be needed for a comfortable trip in another time. He arranges for sleeping bags, food, and some books to be in proximity of either Omri or himself so they can be touched and time traveled with them. He tries to anticipate their needs as well as Little Bear's needs. Omri's father shows his maturity by doing far more than Omri to anticipate problems or ways to help Little Bear.

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Constructing Meaning

Omri is surprised when he learns his mother knows the secret of the key and the gift. Why does she at first choose to keep her knowledge a secret?

Omri's mother wants to have him experience the gift only a few in the family have inherited. She probably feels it is important for Omri to learn how to deal responsibly with the magic. Once Omri's father learns of the magic, it is a way to draw Omri and his father together, since Lionel had not previously believed in magic or ghosts. Lionel also is closer to his wife after his experience with the magic, since he realizes that experiences she had related to him were true.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The author describes the longhouse and stockade in Little Bear's village. Using the description in the book as well as outside research, have the students build replicas or draw pictures of the longhouse and stockade, noting where families live, where the fire starts, and where the women and children are when they become trapped.

Making Predictions Now that Omri's family's car is able to transport people to other times, have students brainstorm ideas for a story involving Omri and his family. Students should write a one-page synopsis for an adventure involving the car.

Recognizing Details Bright Stars is very good at basket weaving and uses baskets in many ways in the Indian longhouse. Have a local craftsperson demonstrate the art of basket weaving, and have students attempt to learn this craft.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Have students work together to research the history of the Iroquois people in America and Canada after the Revolutionary War. They should indicate on a large map of North America the direction and time line of the travel of the Iroquois and other Indian tribe migration and resettlement.