

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Let the Circle Be Unbroken

by
Mildred D. Taylor

Book Information

Mildred D. Taylor, Let the Circle Be Unbroken
Quiz Number: 237
Dial/Penguin, 1981
ISBN 0-8037-4748-9; LCCN
394 Pages
Book Level: 5.7
Interest Level: MG

Set in Mississippi during the 1930s, this inspiring story of a loving, close-knit black family confronted with racial injustice contributes to a deeper understanding of what it means to be black today.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Coretta Scott King Award/Honors; Jane Addams Book Award/Honor Books; National Book Award/Honors

Topics: Community Life, Prejudice; History, Depression Era America; People, African American; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, Elementary School Library Collection; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies

Main Characters

Big Ma Logan David's mother, who helps maintain the household and offers her perspective and insight into family issues.

Bud Rankin Mary's cousin, who has married a white woman in New York and fathered a daughter, Suzella

Cassie Logan the eleven-year-old narrator, who relates the story of her family in the segregated South of 1935

David Logan, (Papa) the father of the Logan family, who owns the land they farm in rural Mississippi

Hammer Logan David's brother, known for his temper, who spends much of his time working in the Chicago area

Mary Logan, (Mama) the wife of David Logan, who tutors students and maintains the family

Mr. Granger the exploitive and domineering owner of six thousand acres upon which most of the community earns its living

Mr. Jamison the white lawyer who defends T.J. and later helps to find Stacey and Moe

Mr. Morrison the tall and extremely strong sixty-three-year-old friend of the Logan family

Mrs. Lee Annie Lees an elderly neighbor who has been a sharecropper on Granger land for over forty years; she attempts to register to vote

Stacey Logan the fourteen-year-old brother to Cassie, who comes of age in this story by going off to work in the cane fields but barely escapes with his life

Suzella Rankin the very attractive teenage daughter of cousin Bud, who comes to spend the summer with the Logans

T.J. Avery one of Stacey's friends who had become involved with two white boys and participated in a robbery during which a storekeeper was killed

Wordell Lees Cassie's quiet and misunderstood friend

Vocabulary

cane sugar cane; the labor intensive crop from which sugar is refined

scounds abbreviation for scoundrel

sharecropper tenant farmer, especially in the United States South. Tenants are provided land, living quarters, credit for seed, supplies, etc. in exchange for a share of the crop.

Synopsis

The Logans are a black family living in Mississippi on a farm they own. This story takes place in 1935 and is narrated by Cassie Logan, who is about eleven years old. She has a thirteen-year-old brother, Stacey, and two younger brothers. They work the farm with the help of Uncle Hammer, who visits from Chicago, and Mr. Morrison, a seven foot sixty-three-year-old friend with impressive strength. The household is led by David (Papa) and Mary (Mama) with support from David and Hammer's mother, Big Ma.

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The primary concern of the family and black community as the story begins is the trial of T.J. Avery. T.J. is a close friend of Stacey's who helped two white boys, RW and Melvin Simms, break into the Barnett store, and watched horrified as the Simms brothers robbed the store and killed the owner. T.J. alone is accused of the murder. Mr. Jamison, a sympathetic white lawyer, appears to have successfully defended T.J., only to have him convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to hang.

While most of the black community feels that casual relationships between black and white people lead to trouble, Uncle Hammer is totally intolerant. He is particularly angry about white men using their position of power to seduce black women. In contrast, relationships between black men and white women are grounds for lynching, and mixed marriages are illegal in Mississippi. When Mary's cousin, Bud Rankin, visits and announces that he has married a white woman, conflict ensues. Cousin Bud later brings his light-skinned and very pretty daughter, Suzella, to live with the Logans for the summer.

While Stacey is casually courting Jacey Peters, she becomes pregnant by Stuart Walker, the son of a white plantation owner. This event demonstrates Hammer's concern and further alienates Stacey from white people. When Stuart Walker first encounters Suzella, he believes she is white and Suzella does not correct him. When he finds out he has been fooled, he is humiliated and attempts to exact revenge by humiliating cousin Bud and Suzella.

Meanwhile, Papa leaves to work on the railroad to supplement the cotton income so that property taxes can be paid. In order to help, Stacey disobeys Mama and runs away with Moe Turner to work in the cane fields. When he does not return and no one can find him, conflict arises between Mama and Papa.

In another quarter, discontent is rising as plantation

owners abuse government crop reduction programs at the expense of their sharecropping tenants and day laborers. Union activists struggle to organize these workers into an integrated union to confront the plantation owners.

Coincidentally, the Logans are in town to get news from Mr. Jamison about where Stacey might be. An elderly black neighbor, Mrs. Lee Annie Lees, is in town trying to register to vote as the disgruntled and displaced farmers arrive to confront Mr. Granger. Granger exploits racial prejudice and Mrs. Lee Annie's attempt to register to divide the crowd and, with the help of Sheriff Dobbs, breaks up the confrontation. Granger then expels Mrs. Lee Annie and the Ellises from his land after forty years of sharecropping.

In the final scenes, the Logans follow up on Mr. Jamison's lead and find Stacey and Moe emaciated and sick in a jail near Baton Rouge. Arrested on suspicion of robbery, they had been found innocent, but had not been released. The Logans bring them home as the story ends.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

At several points in the story, Cassie is introduced to situations and information that could later influence her to become active in the civil rights movement. Identify some that foreshadow the above possibility.

Students may suggest the following answers: Mrs. Lee Annie asks Cassie to read the Mississippi Constitution; Cassie's parents decide she should witness Mrs. Lee Annie's attempt to register to vote; Cassie encounters the segregated water fountain and bathrooms at the courthouse; Cassie witnesses Bud Rankin's humiliation; Cassie contemplates the differences between the white world and black world in the context of Suzella's color. Cassie thinks she would like to vote before she is 64.

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Literary Analysis

What are some of the examples of the primary issues Mildred Taylor emphasizes in this novel?

Racism and injustice are central issues of this novel as evidenced by numerous events. For example, though T.J. is granted a trial, the outcome is predetermined, because only white people could serve on the jury and the judge treated white and black witnesses differently. Also, Stacey and Moe were held in jail in spite of the absence of charges.

Inferential Comprehension

How are social interactions different among the black and white characters? Give examples.

Black individuals never address white individuals by their first names alone unless previous permission was granted. This is made most clear when T.J. is testifying in court, but is demonstrated consistently throughout the story. White men feel free to have sexual relations with black women, as in the case of Stuart Walker and Jacey Peters. Black men, on the other hand, could be lynched for approaching white women, and sexual contact is illegal. These influences in social interactions are also apparent when Stuart Walker humiliates Bud Rankin for being Suzella's father, and earlier when Hammer discovers Rankin has a white wife.

Constructing Meaning

Which character do you relate most to and why?

For some readers, the answer might be Cassie because of her strength and loyalty. Other readers might choose Stacey for his seeming defiant nature in trying to help his family. Some may choose Mrs. Lee Annie Lees for her determination and fortitude in learning the Constitution and attempting to vote.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Within this story events occur and situations are described that foreshadow the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's. Examples are Mama's

boycott; the integrated union; Mrs. Lee Annie's attempt to register; the segregated public schools, public facilities, and armed forces. Ask the students to examine the state of any of these issues in the South in 1935 and follow events and activities that resulted in changes since then.

Making Inferences Suzella's mother is mentioned several times in this novel, but she never appears in the story. For a project, have students write a scene in which Suzella's mother comes to visit her at the Logan home. How would she act? What would she say? How would she interact with the other characters in the story? Use descriptions and create dialogue.

Describing Actions or Events Mrs. Lee Annie Lees describes her father's experience with voting during reconstruction and how he was intimidated by the "night men." Have the students trace legislation regarding voting rights for minorities and women from the time of the Civil War to the present. How were voting rights compromised both legally and illegally during that period? What forces restricted voting rights for minorities in Mississippi in 1935, the year in which this story takes place?

Responding to Literature The courtroom scene is a pivotal moment in which Mr. Jamison attempts to defend T. J. Have students read the scene carefully, then prepare to reenact it in class. The teacher will be the director and the students will act out the characters and the jury in the making of the "film version" of the novel. The outcome does not necessarily have to reflect the book's outcome; instead have the "jury" decide based on the lawyers' case and the persuasiveness of the witnesses' testimonies.