

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Little House in the Big Woods by Laura Ingalls Wilder

Book Information

Laura Ingalls Wilder, Little House in the Big Woods
Quiz Number: 179
HarperCollins Publishers, Inc, 1953
ISBN 0-06-440001-8; LCCN
238 Pages
Book Level: 5.3
Interest Level: MG

The Ingalls family is snug in their Wisconsin house in spite of blizzards, wolves, and the lonely forest.

Award: Newbery Honor; SLJ Best Book

Topics: People, Pioneers/Settlers; Power Lessons AR, Grade 5; Series, Little House; U.S. States/Regions, Wisconsin

Main Characters

Baby Carrie Laura's baby sister

Laura Wilder the principal character in the story, a young girl who sometimes finds it difficult to act like a young lady

Ma Laura's mother, the perfect pioneer wife who can make clothes and process the food harvested and butchered to feed her family though the rough Wisconsin winters

Mary Laura's older and more perfect sister, who finds it no problem to stay clean and to be mannerly

Pa Laura's father, a good provider and loving parent to his girls

Vocabulary

curd the smooth, thickened part of sour milk used to make cheese

johnny-cake a bread made from cornmeal

maple sugar sugar made from boiling down maple syrup

trundle bed a small bed that fits under a larger one

Synopsis

Laura and her family live in a log cabin that her Pa built in the Big Woods of Wisconsin. The story is set

during the late 1800s and tells of the author's memories about her childhood. Pa is busy every day either hunting, trapping or farming. He provides food for his family. In the evenings, he plays his fiddle and tells stories to Laura and her older sister Mary. During the day the girls help their Ma with her work. She is a strong pioneer wife who could make cheese, cure meat, salt fish, and make clothes. She is a model of strength and good grace for her daughters.

The story describes one year when Laura is very young. There are many adventures, some involving bears or cougars. The preparations for winter are described in detail and give the reader an appreciation for how much work was involved in feeding and clothing a family. There are several stories about Pa as a boy and his father as a young boy. These stories and others illustrate the importance of discipline during these frontier times.

The Ingallses have a joyous Christmas, a dance during the Sugar Snow and a trip to the town of Pepin. Laura has a tough time because she compares herself to her mannerly, golden-haired, older sister. She is an active, brown-haired, little girl who often finds it difficult to follow the rules.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How did the author show that providing food for a family during the late 1800s was a full time job?

The correct answer will tell about Pa's daily work either farming, hunting or trapping and/or Ma's careful processing surplus food to store for winter.

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Literary Analysis

Why did Pa tell stories about his father and himself misbehaving as a child?

He used the stories to show that every child has to learn the hard way sometimes and to demonstrate the importance of children obeying their parents.

Constructing Meaning

How did you learn that Ma was not from the Big Woods?

When Pa's parents invite the family to a dance, Ma says she will wear her special dress. The dress is described as a delaine. The description of the dress revealed that it was made by a dressmaker when Ma was young and lived in the East.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story is set in the Big Woods of Wisconsin during the late 1800s. The story centers around the Ingalls family, and there are few minor characters in the story that are not members of the extended Ingalls family. The author provided detailed descriptions of the town of Pepin during one visit there. The homes in the town were compared to the Ingallses' log cabin. Students can be asked to list the similarities and differences in the homes. The author also provided detailed descriptions for the making of cheese, and the processing of the hog that was butchered for winter. Every scrap of the animal was used to feed the family, and nothing was wasted. Encourage the students to compare their life today with that of the Ingalls family. They can research how cheese is made today and compare it with the steps Ma went through to make her cheese.

Understanding Literary Features The main themes for *Little House in the Big Woods* are the hard work of the pioneers and the strong love of a family. Ask the students to identify other situations with similar themes of survival such as the Pilgrims living in the New World or people living in underdeveloped (Third World) countries today. A feast could be held for the students to

sample the foods described in the story, such as head cheese, johnny-cake (cornbread), maple sugar, molasses candy, cheese or many others. Have them make the list and volunteer to bring in the items.

Understanding Characterization The part of the book about naughty Charley and the bees had many thought provoking themes running through it. It is a "Boy Who Cried Wolf" type of story. Some questions would be: Why did Pa think the boy deserved to be stung by the bees? Would Charley have been stung if his father had disciplined him for misbehaving? Why did Pa call Charley a liar? How was this a valuable lesson for Mary and Laura?

Understanding the Author's Craft Much of the story was revealed through dialogue, usually from Pa talking to Laura. The descriptions of the settings and activities for each season were vivid. Ask the students to give their impressions of a winter in Wisconsin. Have a discussion on what kind of father Pa was to Laura. Ask how Laura felt about her home, her chores, or her family. The feelings come through in the dialogue and the descriptions.