

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder

Book Information

Laura Ingalls Wilder, Little House on the Prairie

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HarperTrophy, 1971

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Book Level: 4.9

Interest Level: MG

Laura and her family journey by covered wagon into Indian territory, and start a farm.

Topics: Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Series, Little House

Main Characters

Baby Carrie Laura's younger sister

Caroline Ingalls (Ma) Laura's mother

Charles Ingalls (Pa) Laura's father, a pioneer

Laura Ingalls the principal character; the story is told from her perspective

Mary Ingalls Laura's oldest sister

Mr. and Mrs. Scott the Ingallses' neighbors in Indian Territory

Mr. Edwards a bachelor and also the Ingallses' neighbor

Vocabulary

ague a fever marked by recurring sweating and chills

ford to cross a river or a creek

mustang a small, hardy type of horse on the western plains

pannikin a small pan or cup

papoose a young Indian child

puncheon a split log with one face smoothed

skids a structure used to support logs while the cabin walls were being built

Synopsis

Set in the days of the pioneers, the novel tells the story of the Ingalls family's move from Wisconsin to the prairie frontier. After a journey by covered wagon, which includes a dangerous creek crossing, the family arrives in unsettled territory. Pa chooses a place to build their house and start their farm. Several chapters detail the actual construction of the cabin.

Through the eyes of the Ingallses' daughter, Laura, the landscape and wildlife of the prairie are regarded. Neighbors appear, and they share one another's labors.

Many dangers are encountered. While helping Pa dig a well, Mr. Scott nearly dies because of an underground stream of natural gas. Most of the settlers contract malaria. The Ingallses' house almost burns when the chimney sticks catch fire. But the greatest danger comes when Indians hold a war council to decide whether to attack the settlers.

Soldat du Chene, an Osage chief, arrives at the war council and convinces his people to stand against the other tribes' inclination to attack. The Indians ride away most dramatically, as the Osage tribe proudly passes in a long line past the Ingallses' little house.

While they do not attack, the Indians have complained to Washington that their territorial treaties have been violated. The government orders soldiers to remove the settlers from the territory. The family again packs their covered wagon and moves on, uncertain of the destination.

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

Why did Pa build the little house in Indian Territory?

He and Ma did not know where the settlers' land ended and the Indians' land began. In the days before instant media, telegraphs, telephones, radios, etc., news traveled slowly. The government had already forced the Indians to move west several times so settlers could take their lands over, and Pa had heard the government would soon do so again. The decision from Washington to enforce a treaty by removing settlers, as we know now, was strictly temporary. Pa just arrived a few years early. "It's a great country," he tells Ma as they are leaving the territory. "But there will be wild Indians and wolves here for many a long day."

Literary Analysis

Some books are written as if one of the characters were telling the story. In this book, Laura does not tell the story, but the novel still seems to be "her story." How does the writer make us feel it is Laura's story?

Almost all of the events that take place happen near the wagon or the house, where Laura could see them. When Pa goes to town, we see Ma, Laura and her sisters wait for his return, but we do not see Pa actually on the road by himself. When the Indians have their "jamboree" and war councils, we see Laura listening and watching Pa's reactions, but not the activity down by the creek. It's as if the book were written with Laura's eyes and ears, though not her voice.

Inferential Comprehension

How is Laura different from her sister Mary?

Mary seems to be "good" without a second thought. She obeys Pa's order to keep Jack on his chain without questioning whether setting the dog free might help "save" Ma from the Indian visitors. Laura also obeys, but she thinks first about whether she should. Laura has many secretly "naughty" ideas and feelings that Mary doesn't. She asks questions about "grown-up things," like the Indians, that Mary doesn't ask. Laura is the child who can react to danger. She throws the burning log back into the fireplace and pulls her sisters to safety. Mary was so frightened by the flame under her skirt, she couldn't force herself to move.

Constructing Meaning

Why did Laura want to keep the Indian baby?

She could not say the reason for herself, but her plea for Pa to "get me that little Indian baby" was full of both love and cruelty. When Pa explains that the Indian woman wants to keep her baby, Laura begins to cry -- which is always a shameful reaction in the Ingalls family. Her parents hardly know what to say or think about Laura's outburst. "Its eyes are so black," is all she can say. It seems likely that the child in Laura (if not the wild spirit in her) sees some future in the baby's Indian eyes that she wants to make her own.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Several historical issues are glimpsed in the novel that could be researched or discussed. What were the demographics and dates of the waves of pioneer expansion? How did the federal government attempt to solve "the Indian problem"? The book portrays the Osage tribe as amenable to compromise and influenced by whites, particularly the French. What was their actual history? The Wilders leave because the government chooses to temporarily honor treaties involving what became Oklahoma. When did that fleeting sense of honor end? Inventions could be yet another

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topic. Ma observes how slowly news traveled from Washington, making the family's decisions to move necessarily more risky. The roles of the postal service, telegraph, pony express and railroads would give perspective to how and when communications systems altered the country.

Drawing Conclusions The novel's objective perspective persistently leaves the drawing of conclusions about characters' feelings and thoughts to the reader. We occasionally know that Laura is hoarding a "secret, naughty thought," and her dialogues with Pa sometimes broach the fears she feels. Children reading the book are likely to "see through" the prose and feel they do know Laura's mind. As a writing exercise, ask them to write a letter or a diary entry in which Laura tells her feelings or reactions to events more directly. A letter to her aunt about how she likes the prairie would be one cue. A diary entry about that moment she was compelled to cry out for the Indian baby would be another.

Extending Meaning Laura's relationship to her parents is portrayed as both ideal, in a certain sense, and tense, with conflicts that seem certain to emerge in the future. Ask students to evaluate the Ingallses' parenting. Are they good parents? Would students feel positively about them if the Ingallses were their own parents? Do their rules differ from the ways in which modern parents treat children? If so, why might the differences have evolved?

Responding to Literature Pioneers have been a familiar source of both movie and television treatments, including Michael Landon's long-running series based loosely on Wilder's fiction. From memory or from viewing an example together, ask students to identify differences between "Hollywood" pioneers and the Ingalls family. Categories for comparison can range from the sets and Wilder's details of cabin construction, to the nature of "community" relations, or the portrayal of Indians. It is easy to laugh at Hollywood's anachronisms, but what cultural reasons are behind their inability or indifference to showing life as it really was?