

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

M.C. Higgins, the Great

by

Virginia Hamilton

Book Information

Virginia Hamilton, M.C. Higgins, the Great

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Thirteen-year-old M.C. hopes his mother will be offered a recording contract so his family can leave their home before a sliding slag heap destroys it.

Award: National Book Award/ Honors; Newbery Medal; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Community Life, Poverty; Family Life, Misc./Other; People, African American; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+

Main Characters

Banina Higgins M.C.'s mother; she has a beautiful voice and uses it to bind the family together in love

Ben Killburn M.C.'s best friend, a boy with six fingers and toes; he and M.C. have a clandestine relationship because of M.C.'s family's negative feelings toward the Killburns

James K. Lewis (the dude) a traveler who tries to document the musical heritage of regions; he records Banina's voice

Jones Higgins M.C.'s strong-willed and opinionated father, who is determined to stay on the mountain

Lurhetta Outlaw a teenage girl who travels the country alone and teaches M.C. to accept the differences in people

Macie Pearl, Lennie Pool, and Harper Higgins M.C.'s younger siblings

Mayo Cornelius Higgins (M.C.) the principal character of the story, a thirteen-year-old boy who struggles to save his family from an impending disaster

Sarah Higgins Jones's great-grandmother, who fled North to escape slavery; the mountain on which the Higgins family lives is named after her

Viola Killburn Ben's kind mother, who has the gift of healing

Vocabulary

blighted affected by a plant disease that results in the wilting and dying of plant tissues

dude a man with a fancy demeanor and clothes

furtively secretly, in a hidden way

gallery a roofed porch

sullen with silent resentment; gloomy

Synopsis

In the early morning heat and mist in the hills of southern Ohio, M.C. Higgins, a thirteen-year-old boy, steps off his porch and heads for the woods to check his rabbit traps. As he descends Sarah's Mountain, he meets his friend Ben Killburn, whose family is shunned by the neighbors as being "witchy," or having supernatural characteristics. The boys spend time together secretly, as usual. On the way home, M.C. encounters a strange girl who ignores him. When he arrives home, he climbs a forty-foot pole equipped with a bicycle seat on top, and he swings out in an arc to view the surrounding countryside. He likes the solitude at the top of the pole, and while he is perched at the top watching his younger siblings swim at a nearby lake, he thinks of Sarah, his great-great-grandmother, who escaped to freedom in these hills with her baby.

While M.C. is still swinging on his pole, he notices a man walking and waves him up the mountain. M.C. has been expecting this "dude." The dude is James K. Lewis, who has come to the area to tape record the folk songs of the local people. M.C.'s mother, Banina, has a beautiful voice, and M.C. hopes that once her voice is heard, she will be awarded a recording contract that will provide the means for the whole family to leave the mountain. Although M.C. loves the mountain, he feels his family is in peril. Directly above his house lies a spoil heap from strip mining. The spoil heap has been slowly moving down the mountain, and M.C. fears it will engulf their home. He feels he must do something since his father, Jones, ignores the danger.

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Banina is not at home but working in the nearby town of Harenton, so the dude promises to come back at nightfall when she will be there. When Jones comes for supper, M.C. shares his worries about the spoil. His father tells him not to worry and then leaves for town with the children to meet Banina on her way home. M.C. notices a glint down the hillside and tries to wave at the person causing the glint by signaling from the pole. When Ben arrives, he and M.C. go down the mountain to find the stranger. It is the girl M.C. met in the morning. M.C. playfully kisses her, and she flees in anger. When M.C.'s family approaches from town, Ben sneaks off. The Higginses return home to find the dude waiting for them. The dude records Banina and leaves hastily when his mention of the spoil heap annoys Jones.

Banina and M.C. go swimming early the next morning and come across the strange girl's tent. Banina leaves for work, and M.C. stays near the tent until the girl emerges. He is attracted to her and shows off by swimming through an underwater tunnel. He pulls her along on another pass through. After they barely escape drowning, he invites her to his home so that she can recover from her exhaustion. Jones is there and begins to cook lunch for the children. They learn her name is Lurhetta Outlaw. She travels alone during the summers to see the country. Jones acts charming until three men from the Killburn clan arrive selling ice. Lurhetta is shocked by the rude way Jones treats them.

After eating, M.C. and Lurhetta leave to check a trap that, according to Ben, has a rabbit in it. Ben meets them on the path, and they go down to a ravine near Ben's home. Thirsty, Lurhetta asks for water, and Ben invites her to his clan's compound for a drink. M.C. reluctantly follows, worried about the witchiness of the place. Once there, M.C. remembers many happy times spent among the Killburns. M.C. is torn between his feelings for Lurhetta, Ben, and his own family. He leaves Lurhetta with Ben and returns to his own house, expecting her to return to his house for dinner that evening.

Twilight arrives, and the dude returns to the Higgins house carrying a copy of Banina's tape for the Higginses to keep. Banina comes home from work to rabbit stew, but Lurhetta never arrives. When the dude gets ready to leave, M.C. realizes that he never had any intention of getting a recording contract for Banina, which means they will not have the money to leave the mountain.

In the early morning, M.C. goes down to the lake to visit Lurhetta's camp but finds her tent gone and only her knife remaining where her tent once stood. He imagines hearing the knife talk to him in Lurhetta's voice, and it beckons him to follow. When he passes the ravine, Ben shows up, and together they walk toward the Higginses house. M.C. climbs his pole but then descends and begins digging into the dirt with Lurhetta's knife, forming a wall to block the spoil heap from destroying the house. Jones arrives with the children, and the children begin helping M.C. M.C. ignores Jones, even though Jones tries to help. Jones is taken aback when Ben emerges from hiding to help with the wall. Jones's stubbornness eventually melts, and he brings Sarah's gravestone to embed in the wall. The children work diligently, racing against the clouds that are amassing.

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 is Jones so rough with M.C.?

Parents have different ways of teaching things they think their children need to learn. Jones must have encountered a number of circumstances in his life that called for physical agility, strength, and problem solving. He believes that physical and mental toughness helped him cope with difficult situations, and he wants to prepare M.C. for similar challenges. He lets M.C. solve problems for himself, such as when he let him find his own way up a mountain. He punishes him for not thinking things through, such as when he first swims the Ohio, and he play fights with him to make sure M.C. can defend himself.

Literary Analysis

How does the author make Sarah a living part of the narrative?

The author weaves Sarah's presence into the plot in a number of ways. The mountain on which the Higgins family lives is named after her, so her name is often mentioned. M.C. recounts the story of her flight with her baby. M.C. believes he is attuned to her and can feel her struggles. When Sarah's gravestone is added to the wall, her strength is added to the fortification that will keep the Higgins family on the mountain. This further symbolizes Sarah's permanence and living presence in the family drama.

Inferential Comprehension

The story seems to hint that M.C.'s relationship with Ben had been different at one point. What was it probably like then?

M.C. says his relationship with Ben is like a bad habit. It seems that Ben and M.C. had a very close relationship at one point, which is all brought back in M.C.'s memory when he crosses the bridge and enters the Killburn compound. He is surrounded by memories of warmth and acceptance. M.C. must have been a frequent visitor to the compound at one point. He probably did not have any barriers towards them until his father and mother imposed them. His relationship with Ben would have been out in the open. M.C.'s ability now to know Ben's thoughts and movements shows the closeness of the relationship they must have had when they were younger.

Constructing Meaning

The pole is a refuge for M.C. to go to when he needs to sort out his feelings. Where do you go for refuge when you need time alone to think about things? Why did you choose this place?

A student's refuge might be an object or a place. Some people seek heights to gain perspective, while others go to a place of striking beauty in nature, such as a forest or a waterfall. Solace may also be sought in a room with something comforting from childhood such as a stuffed animal. Students should share what their refuge is and why it gives them comfort.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Cause and Effect The hills where the Higgins family live have been marred by strip mining. Assign students to research strip mining to learn how coal or other valuable mineral deposits are found and recovered. Have them investigate the environmental impact of strip mining on the plants, animals, water, and air quality of a region. They can then suggest ways to help an area that has been strip mined to heal the scars left by the mining. The students should create three posters of their findings on the

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process, environmental impact, and recovery efforts.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Many slaves crossed the Ohio River in their flight to freedom in the North prior to the end of the Civil War. Have the students learn about this body of water and the ways in which this mighty river was crossed. They should be able to explain the dangers the slaves faced in crossing the river as well as any problems that might have occurred once they reached the northern shore. Ask students to write a synopsis of their findings.

Comparing and Contrasting When M.C. climbs his pole, he is able to take in a wide view of the surrounding area. He watches his siblings swimming in the lake, sees when someone is approaching, and even has a view of the town two miles away. It might be fun for the students to go to a high point where they live and gain a new perspective. Students can go to the top floor or rooftop of a building or to the top of a hill or observation tower. Have them bring along a notebook and write down all the details they observe from this perspective. Ask them to share these observations with the class.

Recognizing Details The web on Kill's Mound and the bridge that crosses the ravine are both constructed of woven vines. Students may like to learn the art of lashing and making something useful in the process. As a class project, collect small pieces of wood and construct a model structure such as a rope bridge or teepee. Suggestions for other projects may be found in a scout handbook, a nature craft book, or a survival manual.