

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Mississippi Bridge by Mildred D. Taylor

## Book Information

Mildred D. Taylor, Mississippi Bridge  
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During a heavy rainstorm in 1930s rural Mississippi, a ten-year-old white boy sees a bus driver order all the black passengers off a crowded bus to make room for late-arriving white passengers and then set off across the raging Rosa Lee Creek.

**Award:** Christopher Award

**Topics:** Community Life, Prejudice; People, African American; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Cherish Freedom; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; U.S. States/Regions, Mississippi

## Main Characters

Caroline Logan (Big Ma) the grandmother of the Logan children; she is forced to give her seat on the bus to the white Amos family

Charlie Simms (Pa) Jeremy's father, who is embittered by the Depression; he resents the opportunities for land ownership and cash jobs that black men are sometimes given

Grace-Anne Miz Hattie's granddaughter, a sweet four-year-old girl with golden curls and bright eyes

Jeremy Simms a ten-year-old white boy who feels compassion toward black people who are treated unjustly by the people in his family and community

John Wallace the owner of the general store, who favors his white customers

Josias Williams a black bachelor who needs to travel to get a "cash money" lumbering job

Lillian Jean, R.W., and Melvin Simms Jeremy's siblings

Miz Georgia the woman to whom the Logan children are bringing milk

Miz Hattie McElroy Jeremy's kind former schoolteacher, who is traveling to see her granddaughter's mother

Rudine Johnson a young black woman who is traveling with her mother; she is ridiculed by John Wallace

Stacey, Cassie, Christopher-John, and Little Man Logan children ranging in age from ten to four from a land-owning black family; they carry themselves with pride

the Henry Amoses white travelers who arrive late for the weekly bus

Uncle Moses Thompson an old black man who works for Miz Hattie

## Vocabulary

**backlip** to answer in a rude way

**boxed** hit with the hand or fist

**haints** a Southern version of the word "haunts"; ghosts or other supernatural creatures

**sharecroppers** farmers who rent land by giving a share of their crops to the landowner

**slur** an insulting or negative comment, generally about race, gender, or religion

**tenants** people who rent land using money for payment

## Synopsis

During a heavy rainstorm, a ten-year-old white boy, Jeremy Simms, sits on the porch of the Wallace general store in a small rural Mississippi community; bored, he stares at the crossroads. His father, Charlie Simms, and older brothers are inside, visiting with other men as they pass time until the rains cease and their crops can be planted. The men discuss the hard times they have experienced since the Depression of 1929.

Jeremy sees a young African American woman, Rudine Johnson, and Rudine's mother approach out of the fog with their suitcases. The women enter the store and Rudine's attention is drawn to a pretty hat. Jeremy hears Mr. Wallace, the storeowner, laugh as he denies Rudine's request to try on the hat, reminding her that she must buy it first. Hearing

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Rudine admit that she is not able to buy the hat, Mr. Wallace laughs again as he disparagingly uses a racial epithet in front of the assembled men.

An older white woman, Hattie McElroy, and her four-year-old granddaughter, Grace-Anne, then enter the store. Jeremy likes Miz Hattie, his former teacher, because she and her granddaughter are "quality folks." When Miz Hattie admires the same hat that caught Rudine's attention, the storekeeper urges the white woman to try it on, complimenting her on her schoolgirl appearance. Rudine and her mother look on silently.

Josias Williams next arrives at the store. Jeremy considers the young black man a friend and learns that Josias has been offered a cash-paying job if he can quickly get to the Natchez Trace where his cousin is working. When Josias shares this information with the men inside the store, Jeremy's father frightens and intimidates Josias, causing him to recant his story that he can find cash-paying work when white men are unemployed. Josias leaves the store, and his expression turns from fear to anger as he waits for the bus on the porch. Miz Hattie, Grace-Anne, Rudine, and Rudine's mother also leave the store to await the bus. They stand separately, blacks on one side of the porch and whites on the other.

The Logans, African American neighbors of Jeremy's family, arrive next. The four children -- Stacey, Cassie, Christopher-John, and Little Man -- are accompanied by their grandmother, Big Ma. Jeremy knows that his father, who is a tenant farmer, resents the land-owning Logan family. Jeremy talks to the oldest of the children, Stacey, but Stacey's responses to Jeremy are curt. The Logans join the other black people on the porch.

When the bus arrives, Miz Hattie and Grace-Anne board first. As the African Americans enter the bus, they walk to the back. After helping Big Ma onto the bus, the Logan children are admonished by their grandmother to leave immediately, then deliver their milk to Miz Georgia's, and finally return home to help their mother. Listening to their grandmother, the

Logan children start on the road to the fog-enshrouded bridge over the Rosa Lee Creek. Jeremy wants to talk to the Logan children, so he runs after them. He encounters the white Henry Amos family and wonders if they, too, intend to travel on the bus.

Jeremy catches the Logan children shortly before they reach the rickety wooden bridge that supposedly had been built before the Civil War. The thick fog makes it nearly impossible to see the bridge, and the children face the crossing with mixed feelings. The children discuss the various dangers of crossing the bridge in the fog, pointing out that visibility is almost nonexistent. Stacey, anxious to get across and deliver the milk, finally manages to persuade his siblings to continue on the bridge.

Jeremy returns to the store and witnesses the black passengers being evicted from the bus so that the tardy Amos family can board. While Big Ma, Rudine, Rudine's mother, and other angry black passengers disembark, Josias remains, pleading that he be allowed to travel to his important destination. Unmoved, the driver ejects him, throwing his bundle and fare after him. Understanding the inequity in the situation, Jeremy apologizes to Josias, only to be struck by his father for being compassionate to a black man. Although he assures his father that he understands that black Americans are not equal to white Americans, Jeremy rejects this philosophy and races toward the bridge after Josias.

The speeding bus forces Jeremy to leap to the side of the road as it blindly approaches the dangerous bridge. Jeremy witnesses the bus spinning, zigzagging on the rotten bridge planks, and plunging into the churning waters of the Rosa Lee. Josias returns and sends Jeremy back to the store to get help, while he slides into the river to rescue passengers from the sinking bus.

Charlie Simms, arriving at the bridge with the men from the store, sends Jeremy to ring the church bell to summon help. Before he can obey his father, Jeremy sees the Logan children and reassures them that Big Ma is not on the bus. He then sees Josias

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laying the lifeless body of Grace-Anne on the riverbank next to that of Miz Hattie. When he asks Josias why this has happened, Josias sends him on his way, saying that the Lord works "in mighty mysterious ways." Crying, Jeremy runs in the rain to ring the bell, trying to understand why some people are spared and others are not. He later returns to help Josias.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

In what ways does fear motivate characters in the story to act as they do?

*Fear keeps Jeremy from openly disagreeing with his father's mistreatment of Josias and causes him to wait before following Josias. Jeremy is struck by his father for apologizing to Josias for the bus driver's behavior toward the black man. In order to escape further punishment, the boy lies and implies his agreement that blacks should occupy an inferior place in society. Fear also motivates the black people in the story. Josias accepts public humiliation from Jeremy's father and the bus driver because he probably fears punishment by white bystanders or the authorities. Rudine accepts John Wallace's prejudiced behavior toward her, possibly because she fears legal reprisal if she were to try on the hat without buying it. Big Ma also understands the laws of the time and fears legal intervention if she refuses to leave the bus.*

### Literary Analysis

What signs of hope for the healing of racial division does the author give in this story?

*The signs of hope are mostly seen in the characters of Jeremy and Josias. Jeremy sees no reason why black people should not be his friends, and he wishes to establish relationships with them. He is hurt when they are wary. Josias, in spite of the injustices he has experienced, works to rescue the passengers who ignored him just moments before when the bus driver threw him off the bus. These two characters represent the hope that someday racial division will end.*

### Inferential Comprehension

In this story, Jeremy frequently claims that he does not understand. He does not understand why his father considers black people inferior to white people. He understands "nothing about the day" of the bus accident. As he rings the church bell, he tries to make sense of the events that occurred that day. In what ways might Jeremy explain this tragedy to himself?

*Although Jeremy considers that the day's events might be a punishment from God, he cannot reconcile this explanation with the deaths of Miz Hattie and Grace-Anne, since they had never hurt anyone and, therefore, did not deserve punishment. He reflects on the fact that the black people were spared, in essence because of prejudice, while the white passengers and bus driver were not. It is possible that he might consider this "poetic justice," since the black people were injured earlier by prejudicial treatment and racial slurs. He may also conclude that some events are purely accidental, with no blame being assigned to any party.*

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## Constructing Meaning

How does Charlie Simms show he has leadership abilities?

*Charlie's leadership skills are evident in his response to Jeremy's report of the bus accident. He mobilizes the people in the store, assigning each of them a task to assist with the rescue. He also sends Jeremy to ring the church bell to summon additional help. Although Charlie appears to be a social leader as well, it is generally in a negative sense. His blatant harassment of Josias in the store leads his sons, R.W. and Melvin, to laugh at the black man's discomfort and make critical comments about blacks. Likewise, the other white men in the store clearly support Charlie's attitudes and behavior.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Although slavery was abolished during the Civil War, many Southern states passed a series of regulations called Jim Crow laws, which were designed to deny black Americans the same privileges as white Americans. Have students research these laws. Students should compile a list of laws or rules black people were expected to obey in areas like use of public transportation, access to public buildings, voting rights, marriage laws, education, etc. Also have them determine when these laws were recognized as unjust and overturned.

**Recognizing Setting** The men in the story gather at the store to talk about the difficulties that the Depression of 1929 created for them. Familiarize students with the Great Depression by using a video or other reliable source of information. Have the students review *Mississippi Bridge* and list details about the characters and the community that the author uses to illustrate economic hardship.

**Responding to Literature** Unfortunately, accidents like the one in *Mississippi Bridge* can happen. Most communities have emergency response personnel to deal with these situations. Often a group of firefighters, police officers, and

paramedics form a team to deal with a situation that may arise. As part of their training, these teams sometimes practice by staging a mock vehicle accident, a chemical spill, or a flood situation. Ask a local emergency response team to explain to the students about how they are trained to respond to a large-scale emergency. If a mock drill is scheduled, perhaps the class could be allowed to view the drill from a distance or participate as victims in the drill.

**Identifying Persuasive Language** Jeremy has strong feelings about many things that happen in this story. He is troubled by the unjust treatment of blacks in his community. He also grieves over the loss of Miz Hattie, Grace-Anne, and others who died in the bus accident. Ask students to put themselves in Jeremy's place. As Jeremy, each student should write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, persuading people in the town to reconsider their racist attitudes because of what happened that day.