

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Montana 1948

by

### Larry Watson

### Book Information

Larry Watson, Montana 1948  
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A young boy in Montana comes to understand his family over a cataclysmic summer.

**Topics:** Emotions, Courage; Emotions, Love; Family Life, Misc./Other; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks; Seasons/Weather, Summer; U.S. States/Regions, Montana

### Main Characters

Daisy McAuley Len's wife, and a friend of Gail Hayden

Dale Paris the foreman at Julian Hayden's ranch, who heads the attempt to free Frank Hayden from the basement

David Hayden the only child of Gail and Wes Hayden, who is trying to understand the events of his twelfth summer

Dr. Frank Hayden the older brother of Wes; a doctor in Bentrock whose actions toward Indian women cause many problems

Gail Hayden David's mother, who works at the courthouse

Gloria Hayden Frank's wife

Julian Hayden David's grandfather and patriarch of the wealthy Hayden family

Len McAuley the deputy sheriff and next-door neighbor to the Haydens

Marie Little Soldier the Sioux housekeeper for the Hayden family, who is in her early twenties

Wesley Hayden (Wes) David's father, the sheriff of Mercer County

### Vocabulary

**chasm** a deep break or gap between things  
**fealty** loyalty, such as the pledge that was given to a feudal lord during the Middle Ages  
**inept** unfit, awkward, or clumsy  
**lurid** shocking or sensational  
**unmalleable** not able to be shaped or altered by outside influences

### Synopsis

David Hayden recalls the events that happened to his family in Bentrock, Montana, during mid-August of 1948 when he was twelve years old. The family is living in Mercer County, a place of small ranches adjacent to a Sioux reservation. David's grandfather, the patriarch of the wealthy Hayden family and sheriff until his retirement, had used his influence to pass this elected position to his younger son, Wes, who is David's father. Wes is not the stereotype of a Western lawman, and David's mother, Gail, wishes he would continue his law practice in a larger city, but family loyalty brings them back to Bentrock. Across the street from their home is the courthouse, which houses the jail in the lower level, and the office where Gail works as secretary.

Marie Little Soldier, a Sioux woman in her early twenties, is the housekeeper for the Haydens. David discovers Marie sick in bed and then informs his mother when she comes home for lunch. Checking on Marie, Gail realizes she is seriously ill. Against Marie's wishes, she calls Dr. Frank Hayden, Wes's brother, to come to the house. Marie puts up a terrible fuss about not wanting Dr. Hayden to examine her unless Gail is present.

After Frank leaves, David's parents tell him they need to talk in private but rather than going away, David hides beside the porch to eavesdrop. He overhears his mother telling his father that Marie has accused Frank of sexually assaulting her and many other young Indian girls. She pleads with her husband to take action against him.

The following Sunday, the family goes to Grandpa and Grandma Haydens' huge ranch. Listening in on his father and Grandpa's conversation, David

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realizes that Grandpa has known of Frank's behavior towards Indian women but, due to personal prejudices, has overlooked it as a minor problem. After dinner, David goes out horse riding. On his way back to the ranch, he sees his father and Frank talking but is too far away to hear them. In the car going home, Wes tells Gail that Frank has agreed to change his behavior, but Gail asks what will be done about the damage he has already caused. Wes sides with his brother and tells her that he will not be the one to do anything about it.

The next day, David sees the hearse outside the house and learns that Marie is dead. Although everyone knows she was getting better, Frank says Marie died from pneumonia. Going next door, David talks to Len McAuley, the deputy sheriff, who tells him that he has learned to look the other way in some situations but that he saw something earlier that day. David is not sure what Len means, but that night David tells his parents that he saw Frank crossing their backyard and going down the railroad tracks several hours before Marie's body was discovered and that he thinks Len saw this also. David senses that his uncle murdered Marie.

Three days later, David is puzzled when his father and Frank come home in the afternoon and go into the basement, with only his father coming back upstairs. When Gail arrives home, Wes tells them that he has arrested Frank, but to prevent further embarrassment to the family, he has locked him in the laundry room in the basement. That night, Grandpa and Grandma arrive after talking to Gloria, Frank's wife, and angrily confront Wes. Grandpa accuses him of jealousy over Frank's heroism in World War II, but Wes tells them this involves murder, as well as sexual assault.

The next day David notices a truck circling their house. As four ranch hands emerge from the truck with the intention of freeing Frank from the basement, Gail loads the shotgun and sends David across the street to look for his father. Unable to find him, David hears a gunshot and returns home to find his mother has fired a warning shot out the window. As the men approach the outside basement

door, Len emerges from the hedge with a pistol aimed at them. Without a shot, they leave, but Gail is visibly shaken. When Wes arrives, Gail tells him to let Frank go, but Wes reveals that Frank has confessed and, as a lawman, he must take him to trial. He plans to transfer Frank to the jail the next day.

That night the family awakens to the sound of breaking glass in the basement, where Frank is destroying all the home-canned vegetables in the root cellar. The next morning, Wes discovers Frank's dead body in the basement with his wrists slit. David naively feels that Frank's suicide has solved all the family's problems by preventing a trial and the resulting public embarrassment. At the funeral, however, he realizes that the suicide has not brought closure but rather a permanent rift between his grandparents and his family.

By December, Wes drops out of the upcoming sheriff's election, and the family moves to North Dakota. Years later, unwilling to follow in any legal profession, David becomes a history teacher. When his wife mentions the tragic events of that summer in Montana to his father, David sees and feels the violent emotions those events still evoke.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Why is everyone so sure that Frank would be acquitted of all charges?

*Grandpa Hayden says that people will not believe the word of Indians against that of the well-respected and wealthy Hayden family. Also, Len mentions that Grandpa Hayden had control over people for things he did while he was sheriff, and this would limit the willingness of jurors to go against the Hayden name. Wes further points out that without concrete proof that Marie was murdered, that charge would definitely not get a conviction.*

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#### Literary Analysis

Why does David shoot the magpie?

*The tension of the events surrounding the allegations against his uncle causes David to feel like he wants to explode. Also, his parents and others he once trusted are making him feel childish by not telling him the truth. He has to eavesdrop to get information. By shooting the magpie, David releases the pent up nervous tension. He has taken his frustrations out on the bird.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Why, if acquittal is almost certain, does Frank commit suicide?

*Students may answer that Frank does not wish to embarrass the family with a trial or cause undue stress on his mother. Some students may feel that Frank knows he is guilty and cannot deal with his guilt any longer. Suicide may have been the ultimate escape so that Frank would not have to face his family, his clients and acquaintances, or his accusers from the reservation.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Len tells David, "You know what your granddad said it means to be a peace officer in Montana? He said it means knowing when to look and when to look away.... Your dad hasn't quite got the hang of it. Not just yet." What does he mean?

*Wes wants to uphold justice in the town even if it means making people angry. Len believes that sometimes the law has to overlook minor offenses or even major offenses if they will end up hurting too many people. Len knows how many problems Grandpa Hayden can create for Wes and wants to see his family spared those problems.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** David describes the Fort Warren Indian Reservation as the worst land in the county. Have students research the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which

created reservations and ask them to find out what they were like in the late 1940's. Assign students to write a report about jobs, education, living conditions, and other aspects of Native American life during this time.

**Making Predictions** If Frank had faced a sexual assault or murder trial, what might the outcome have been? Divide the class into two groups -- the prosecution and the defense. Using information found in the book, have students prepare their case for or against Frank and then vote on how they feel the trial would have ended, taking into consideration the influence Julian Hayden has on the community.

**Describing Actions or Events** In groups, have students create a front page for the *Mercer County Gazette* dealing with events from the story. It should include at least one main article accompanied by a picture and a few smaller articles with pictures. Students may be creative by drawing the pictures or using cutouts. Articles should follow journalistic format and focus on objective reporting. Stories could deal with the arrest of Frank, the shooting at Hayden house, Marie's obituary, Wes's reelection campaign, etc.

**Responding to Literature** Have students read Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* and write a paper on the similarities in the attitudes toward African-Americans by the people of Maycomb, Alabama, and those towards Native Americans by people in Mercer County, Montana.