

Mr. Tucket
by
Gary Paulsen

Book Information

Gary Paulsen, Mr. Tucket
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A young boy is captured on the Oregon Trail by Pawnee Indians.

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Family Life, Growing Up; History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; People, Native American; People, Pioneers/Settlers; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 6-8 (Theme: Surviving); Series, Tucket Adventures; Westerns, Westerns (All)

Main Characters

Braid a cold-hearted Pawnee warrior who wishes to free the Pawnee lands of white settlers

Francis Alphonse Tucket the main character of the story; a fourteen-year-old boy who is separated from his family on their journey west; he learns the ways of mountain men and Indians from his experiences with Mr. Grimes

Ike and Max two boys about Francis's age in the train of wagons heading west

Jake Barnes Jim Bridger's partner

Jim Bridger a fur trader who is a living legend; a friend of Mr. Grimes

Mr. Jason Grimes the man who rescues Francis from Pawnee captivity and teaches him the things necessary to stay alive until he can be reunited with his family

Rebecca Tucket Francis's younger sister, whose fate is unknown

Spot Johnnie the owner of a trading post along a Western trail; he is a friend of Mr. Grimes

Standing Bear the leader of the Sioux village that Mr. Grimes and Francis visit

Vocabulary

case-hardened iron or steel that is toughened by a process of adding carbon at high-temperatures and then quickly cooling it

culls items rejected because of inferior quality; seconds

hobble to restrict a horse's movement by tying its legs together

mulish stubborn

procured acquired or obtained

savvy to comprehend or understand

travois a conveyance for carrying goods pulled by a horse, made by placing a frame between two long poles

Synopsis

The Tucket family is part of a wagon train headed toward Oregon from Missouri. When Francis Tucket turns fourteen, his parents surprise him by giving him a rifle. While practicing shooting buffalo chips, Francis is captured by a hunting band of Pawnee Indians and brought to their camp. An old woman claims him as her property and leads him around on a rope. Francis is teased and tormented by the Indian children, and three Indian boys fight him at once. This fight is broken up by Braid, a cold-hearted war leader. Braid taunts Francis that his family will not come for him, and Francis knows Braid is telling the truth when Braid returns from a raid one day and drops Francis's sister's doll at his feet. The Pawnee soon move to their winter grounds near the Black Hills. It is here that a one-armed white man named Mr. Jason Grimes rides into camp one day and meets Francis.

Mr. Grimes is a trapper who trades firearms and ammunition with the various Indian tribes in the area. Mr. Grimes frees Francis during the night and explains an escape plan using a mare Mr. Grimes has taken from the Pawnee corral. Francis follows the plan but falls off the mare when he comes to a creek. Luckily, Braid, who has formed a search party, follows the tracks of the mare, which has gone in a different direction than Francis. Francis travels up the creek walking in the water for many miles. Mr. Grimes finds him farther upstream. In conversation over dinner, Francis learns that Braid

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had injured Mr. Grimes long ago in a fight, and Mr. Grimes later lost his arm because of an infection. Mr. Grimes bears no grudge against Braid, however.

Mr. Grimes teaches Francis the essentials of survival -- shooting accurately, reloading quickly, and keeping a loaded rifle close at all times. Francis also learns that Mr. Grimes has a strange sense of humor. This becomes obvious when they enter a Sioux encampment that Braid had visited when searching for Francis. The Sioux believe Francis to be very clever and strong to escape and outwit Braid. Mr. Grimes says nothing to challenge their opinions and arranges with the chief, Standing Bear, to have Francis wrestle a youth of the tribe. Francis barely wins and is given a horse and new buckskins as a prize.

After leaving the Sioux camp and traveling for a time, they come to Spot Johnnie's trading post, where they spend a few days. They learn that Braid is inciting the entire Pawnee nation to war in an attempt to clear the land of all white settlers. The Pawnees have been raiding wagon trains, and Francis learns his folks have traveled through the area. After spending several days in contests and stocking up on supplies, Francis and Mr. Grimes start out again. Seeing a wagon train, Francis is tempted to join them but decides to spend the winter with Mr. Grimes.

Two days away from Spot Johnnie's they enter a canyon and make their way to their winter camp near a series of beaver ponds. While Francis builds a house, Mr. Grimes scouts the ponds for beavers. Their time then turns to making bait traps and constructing hoops for drying pelts. They are interrupted by a visit from Jim Bridger and his partner Jake Barnes. After visiting, they trap and skin beavers. On an idle day, Francis is riding in the meadow on his horse when he is attacked by a band of Crow Indians. He barely escapes, and he and Mr. Grimes decide it is time to leave the camp with the still damp pelts when one of the Crows goes for help.

As they leave the canyon they are hit by a blizzard,

and the Crows are unable to follow. They ride until they approach Spot Johnnie's, where they notice an unusual amount of smoke. Spot Johnnie's buildings are all burning, and there are many dead Pawnees on the ground. A wagon train is not too far away, and Mr. Grimes and Francis learn that the Pawnees raided it as well as the trading post. The unnecessary killing of Spot Johnnie and his family angers Mr. Grimes, and he goes after Braid to seek vengeance. Asking the farmers of the wagon train to watch Francis so that he will not follow, Mr. Grimes rides to find Braid.

Francis escapes from the farmers at night and reaches the Pawnees just as Braid and Mr. Grimes are facing each other. They both shoot and both fall. Mr. Grimes is wounded, but Braid is dead. Mr. Grimes goes over to Braid's body with a skinning knife while Francis looks on in horror. Francis realizes he will not be able to live by the rules of the mountain man. He joins the wagon train headed to Oregon without looking back at Mr. Grimes.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Francis start crying while refusing to go on in the snowstorm?

There are probably a number of reasons for his crying. They may be tears of fear, as he is running from the Crow Indians and will likely be killed if caught. They may be tears of relief that Mr. Grimes has agreed to stop, for Francis loves his mare. She is all he has that he can call his own, and she is devoted to him. His tears may be the tears of all he has held in over the months since his separation from his family -- the tears of homesickness, of exhaustion, of living a strange and dangerous life, of uncertainty about the future.

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Literary Analysis

How does the author use humor in the story?

Mr. Tucket could very well have been written with a serious tone. The events that occur are serious -- captivity, struggle for survival, Indian-settler problems, etc. Humor, however, especially through the character of Mr. Grimes, helps not only to relieve tension, but also to put a fresh perspective on problems. His ability to make up stories and defend them with a straight face sometimes puts Francis in situations he neither asks for nor understands. Examples of these situations include the wrestling match with a Sioux boy, the antelope hunt, and the first visit to Spot Johnnie's. Mr. Grimes seems to be aware that he himself needs to let off steam once in a while if he is to survive in his lifestyle.

Inferential Comprehension

How does Francis grow up during his time with Mr. Grimes?

Francis not only learns to shoot, wrestle, and trap when he is with Mr. Grimes, but he also learns to think like a man. He realizes the essential qualities of preparedness, caution, patience, and honesty. These are qualities that will ensure his survival both in the mountains and in the future wherever he makes a new life for himself.

Constructing Meaning

Certain skills are necessary for Francis to learn in order to survive. What skills do you think are necessary in order for a person to succeed in the twenty-first century?

Opinions of the students will vary. However, it seems that the ability to read and write would be essential to survival. The ability to work well with peers and communicate effectively would also be helpful. Computer skills are part of most workplaces, from farms to offices on Wall Street. Knowledge of a foreign language or understanding of different cultures is important as our world shrinks because of fast modes of transportation and communication. Math skills have been and still are important, for they are used in all aspects of people's lives, such as finances, cooking, agriculture, and construction.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Details When making an overland trip, no detail is too small. Food, ammunition, fuel, and weather must be constantly monitored. The computer game *Oregon Trail* simulates what the westward journey was like for the pioneers. Obtain a copy of this game and have the students play it twice. The first time they could play to become familiar with the obstacles and a second time to see if they can avoid the mistakes they made on their first journey.

Understanding Characterization When Mr. Grimes compares Francis to Jim Bridger, Francis blushes. Later Francis is able to meet Mr. Bridger when he comes into their winter camp looking for some hospitality. Just who is Jim Bridger? Have the students do some research on his life and write a short biography about him.

Extending Meaning Mr. Grimes is a naturalist as well as a trapper. He knows the reproductive cycle and mating habits of the beaver and uses that knowledge both to preserve the beaver population and to trap beaver for his own livelihood. Many trappers and hunters, though, were not as respectful as Mr. Grimes. The students may wish to study a species of plant or

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animal that was nearly wiped out by man. Have them learn the efforts that were made in order to preserve the species from extinction. With the knowledge they gain, they may wish to write their legislators to support laws that protect species by regulating hunting rights or preserving habitats.

Responding to Literature Mr. Grimes lost his arm after it had gotten infected after a fight. He had to learn to adapt to life using only one arm. People nowadays face similar situations when, either through illness or an accident, they lose the use of a limb or some physical ability they once possessed. Students can be asked to simulate such a situation and try to cope for a day with a handicap. They can choose not to use an arm or a leg, or one of their senses, such as sight, hearing, or speech. What adaptations do they have to make in order to accommodate this handicap? How do others treat them with the handicap? Have a class discussion about their experiences.