

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Old Yeller

by

### Fred Gipson

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### Book Information

Fred Gipson, Old Yeller  
Quiz Number: 66  
Harper & Row, 1999  
ISBN 0-06-011545-9; LCCN  
158 Pages  
Book Level: 5.0  
Interest Level: MG

This is the heartwarming story of a boy and his dog and their many adventures in the Texas wilderness.

**Award:** Newbery Honor; State Award; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

**Topics:** Animals, Dogs; Family Life, Growing Up; Family Life, Misc./Other; People, Pioneers/Settlers; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Take Charge; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

### Main Characters

Bud Searcy Lisbeth's grandfather, who is supposed to look after things while the men are gone, but who isn't as helpful as he claims to be

Burn Sanderson Old Yeller's rightful owner, who trades his dog for a home-cooked meal

Lisbeth Bud Searcy's granddaughter, who helps the Coates family while Travis is recuperating

Little Arliss Travis's little brother, who is always getting into mischief

Mr. Coates Travis's father, who leaves his older son in charge while he's gone

Mrs. Coates Travis's mother, who does her best to keep her sons well and out of trouble while her husband is away

Old Yeller the stray yellow dog who wins Travis's heart with his courage and loyalty

Travis Coates a young boy who grows to love a stray yellow dog that helps him care for and protect his family while his father is away

### Vocabulary

**hydrophobia** rabies  
**javelinas** wild hogs  
**marrow** the substance inside bones  
**roan** red-colored  
**rogue** scoundrel  
**shiftless** lazy  
**varmints** wild animals that are considered pests

### Synopsis

First impressions can sometimes be misleading. That is the case for Travis Coates and an ugly, beat-up yellow dog who one day wanders onto his family's farm on the Texas frontier.

Travis sees the dog, then notices that a side of meat formerly hanging next to the house is missing and immediately knows who the culprit is. Travis has no use for a meat thief, especially one who shows no signs of guilt.

Fortunately for Travis, his little brother, Arliss, falls in love with the big "yeller" dog, and together they get into all kinds of noisy trouble. It is one such occasion that leads to Travis's change of heart concerning Old Yeller.

Little Arliss comes between a mother bear and her cub, and Old Yeller holds her off while Arliss is whisked to safety. This display of courage convinces Travis that Old Yeller is a dog he'd like for his own.

From then on, Travis and Old Yeller are constant companions, working together to take care of the farm and family. In the process, they manage to get into a few close calls.

In the end, it is one of these close calls that leads to Yeller's demise. The dog has a run-in with a wolf, mad with hydrophobia. Because Yeller is wounded by the infected wolf, Mrs. Coates convinces Travis that Yeller must be shot to save the family from the disease. Shooting his beloved companion proves to be the defining moment for Travis, since he truly shows his manhood by doing such a difficult thing.

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Travis mourns the loss of his friend, but comes around in the end when he realizes one of Yeller's pups is as mischievous as his father was.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

Bud Searcy claims that he and Lisbeth are alike since they both pitch in when people are in trouble. Is this true? Support your answer.

*Not really. Lisbeth is a good helper and does her work without complaints. Her grandfather is fond of visiting folks and eating a meal with them, but when it comes time to help, he is long gone.*

#### Literary Analysis

Burn Sanderson makes a deal with Arliss and trades Old Yeller for one good home-cooked meal. Why does he really let the Coateses keep Old Yeller? What does this show about Burn Sanderson?

*He realizes that with Mr. Coates away, Travis and his family need Old Yeller much more than he does. He also realizes how attached the two boys have become to Yeller. By letting them keep the dog, he shows he is a caring, compassionate man. He also shows this by warning Travis about the hydrophobia epidemic.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Compare and contrast how pets of today and yesteryear are regarded and treated.

*Animals in the past were considered valuable for the amount of work they could do for their owners. Pets today are considered members of the family and are not usually expected to function as a worker serving the family.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Through some quirk of fate, you have been transported to Travis's time period and he to yours. Which one of you would have a harder time adjusting to your new lifestyle? Give reasons for your answer.

*Someone going back in history would probably have an easier time because they'd have the benefit of knowing some of the events that happened then. However, one could also argue that the conveniences of modern times would make it easier for a person traveling forward in time.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Travis, the main character in this story, is only fourteen years old, and yet, he is expected to care for his mother, little brother, and homestead just like a man. Do you think children that age can or should be given responsibilities like Travis's in today's world? Have a class discussion and see how many students agree with one another on the point.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The family in this story was affected in a significant way by the disease hydrophobia. The lives of many early settlers were similarly affected. Research this disease and tell your classmates in a short oral report what is being done in today's world to safeguard against it.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The log cabin is symbolic of the frontier life as depicted in this story. Settlers such as the Coates family spent many backbreaking hours cutting timber for and constructing their cabin. Make a miniature log cabin and furnish it with items that a real log cabin may have had inside. Do some research, if necessary. Then show your completed cabin to your class and explain its features and how they were used.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** This story is written in the language common to the Texas frontier of the 1860s. The following is a list of some phrases from the story. Tell what these

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phrases mean in today's society: "worn down to a nub" -- used every bit of energy; "couldn't hit another lick" -- couldn't take another swing; "played clear out" -- exhausted or beat; "in a coon's age" -- a long period of time; "rowdy romp" -- free-for-all. Then write some phrases people of the future might need to have interpreted from today's language.