

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Pink and Say

by
Patricia Polacco

Book Information

Patricia Polacco, Pink and Say
Quiz Number: 8685
G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994
ISBN 0-399-22671-0; LCCN
41 Pages
Book Level: 3.8
Interest Level: MG

Sheldon Curtis describes his meeting with Pinkus Aylee, a black soldier, and their capture by Southern troops during the Civil War.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Irma and James Black Award/Honors; Jefferson Cup Award/Honor; Publishers Weekly Best Book; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Countries/Regions, United States; Historical Fiction, Historical Fiction (All); History, Misc./Other; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; People, African American; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies; Wars, American Civil War

Main Characters

Moe Moe Bay Pink's mother, a former slave who cares for the boys at her home

Pinkus Aylee (Pink) a Union soldier boy who brings Say to his home to recuperate

Sheldon Russell Curtis (Say) a Union soldier boy who is injured while running from battle

two soldiers Confederates who find Pink and Say and take them to a Confederate prison

Vocabulary

deserter someone who abandons his military duty
dysentery a medical ailment which causes diarrhea

inconsolable unable to be soothed or consoled
muskets firearms; guns
stockade a place to hold prisoners or those who break the law
vittles a meal or food

Synopsis

Sheldon Curtis (Say) is a fifteen-year-old Union soldier lying in a field with injuries sustained from a bullet wound to his leg. Soon he is rescued by a black lad who is also a Union soldier close to Say's age. Pinkus Aylee (Pink) manages to take the injured Say to his mother's house, where Say later awakens to the comforts of Moe Moe Bay, Pink's mother. Moe Moe Bay has been alone. Her husband is off fighting in the war, and all the others have run away.

Pink later warns Say that they must leave because Moe Moe Bay is in danger if she is found hiding troopers. They will have to find a Union troop and return to the war, though Say does not want to return. The two boys bond over the next ten days and share many things as Say recovers from his wound.

Pink also tells Say that he can read, and he later reads to him from the Bible. Say cannot read, but finds pride in the time that he shook Abraham Lincoln's hand.

The boys decide they will leave the following day, and Moe Moe Bay laments her "babies." Pink tells his mother that he has to return to the war because the "sickness," which is slavery, will never end if the war is not won. That night, Say cannot sleep. He confides in Moe Moe Bay that he is a deserter and a "coward" because he ran from his unit, and that is how he was shot. Say admits he is scared to die. Moe Moe Bay reassures him that he is not a coward and that he will live to be an old man.

The next morning, as the boys are preparing to leave, they hear marauders outside. Moe Moe Bay sends them to the cellar to hide. The marauders ransack the house and shoot Moe Moe Bay. Pink

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feels responsible for the death of his mother because they put her in danger by staying there. The boys bury her under a willow tree and then head out to find their Union troops.

Shortly after the boys set out on their journey, they are seized by two soldiers who suspect they are Union members. They take Pink and Say to Andersonville, which Pink has heard is one of the worst Confederate prison camps. The two friends are dragged in different directions, as Pink reaches to touch Say's hand one last time.

The afterword reveals that Say was released from Andersonville some months later, weighing only 78 pounds. Say returned home, recovered, and then settled in Michigan and married. He had seven children, became a grandfather and a great-grandfather. But Pinkus never returned home. He was hanged within hours of his arrival at Andersonville, and his body was thrown into a lime pit.

The author tells how she learned this true story: Sheldon Russell Curtis told his story to his daughter, Rosa, who then passed on the story to the next generation of family members who, in turn, continue to retell the story. Eventually, Patricia Polacco is told the story by her father, and she wrote it down for all to read. Her request is that each person who reads this story will say the name of Pinkus Aylee out loud so that he is never forgotten.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

When Say asks Pink why he has the same last name as his master, Pink replies, "Boy, when you owned, you ain't got no name of your own." What does he mean by this?

Pink is referring to the practice that a slave takes his master's name, and he is also reflecting on the life of a slave in general. To a master, a slave is property, not a human being or equal. A person's rights and dignity are stripped away from him when he is owned by another person. A person's name represents the person himself, and not having one's own name means that a person is not free to choose or do as he likes.

Literary Analysis

The war being fought in *Pink and Say* is never actually identified as the Civil War, but it is the one that is taking place. What clues are in the book that reveal the story is set during the Civil War?

There are several clues, including the references to Confederate and Union soldiers, the issue of slavery and the war being fought for that reason, the Andersonville prison in Georgia, and Abraham Lincoln, who was president of the United States during the Civil War.

Inferential Comprehension

After being taken to Andersonville, Pink is hanged, but Say is not. What is the likely reason for this?

The most likely answer has to do with the color of Pink's skin. Both young men are prisoners, yet only the black soldier is killed. They are in a Southern Confederate camp during the Civil War, when many Southerners still view blacks as property. Pink is disposed of as if his life had no value, whereas Say is locked up as a criminal.

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Constructing Meaning

After Moe Moe Bay's death, Pink cries, "We put you in their way by stayin' here." Are Pink and Say responsible for Moe Moe Bay's death?

Answers will vary. Some will think the boys are responsible because they knowingly place Moe Moe Bay in danger by staying with her. It is very dangerous for her to harbor troopers. Others will say the boys are not at fault because Moe Moe Bay very much wants them to be there, and she knows what the risks are. In addition, it is not revealed that the marauders suspect troopers are being hidden; it seems the marauders are there to steal goods, not to find the boys.

accessories.

Recognizing Details The infamous Confederate prison at Andersonville, Georgia, is the place where Pink and Say are taken. The brutal conditions of the prison are briefly mentioned. Many of the men died there because of disease and/or starvation. There are some other Civil War prison camps too, such as Point Lookout in Maryland. Students should learn about some of the other camps. Where were they located? What were they like? How were the men treated?

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Pink says that it is very dangerous for slaves to know how to read, though Pink knows how to read because his master taught him. Frederick Douglass, too, was a slave who knew how to read. In his autobiography, readers can discover why slave owners did not want their slaves to read and can learn how reading and education were the keys to Douglass's freedom. Read selected sections of Douglass's biography to the students.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Pink explains that his unit was not allowed firearms at first because they were black. The role African-Americans played in the Civil War is emphasized in the movie *Glory*. Find age-appropriate excerpts of the video to show students and allow students to discuss the scenes afterward.

Recognizing Details When Pink and Say are spotted by the two soldiers after leaving Pink's former home, the two men notice Say's uniform. Pink and Say are members of the Union, so their uniforms are different from the uniforms of the Confederacy. Have students research to find out how the uniforms of Union and Confederate soldiers looked. Also, what additional items did the soldiers carry with them? Students can draw pictures of both soldiers with their uniforms and