

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Riding Freedom

by
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Book Information

Pam Muñoz Ryan, Riding Freedom

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Charlotte (Charley) Parkhurst runs away from an orphanage, poses as a boy, moves to California, and fools everyone by her appearance.

Award: Misc./Other

Topics: Adventure, Life Changes; Adventure, Runaway; Biographies/Autobiographies, Biographies/Autobiographies (All); Family Life, Orphans; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 4-6; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Women's Studies, Women's Studies (All)

Main Characters

Charlotte Parkhurst (Charley) an orphan who disguises herself as a boy and man; she becomes a reputable coach driver and the first woman to vote in California

Ebenezer Balch the owner of the stable where Charlotte learns to drive a six-horse team

Hayward an orphaned boy who becomes Charlotte's lifelong friend

James Birch and Frank Stevens two of Ebenezer's stable hands who move to California to start their own coach line; they invite Charlotte to come work for them

Margaret a widow in California who needs to move because she cannot pay her mortgage

Mr. Millshark the cruel owner and manager of the orphanage

Mrs. Boyle the cook at the orphanage, who treats Charlotte poorly

Vern the stable hand at the orphanage; he inspires Charlotte by telling her of his escape from slavery

Vocabulary

bullion gold bars

feral wild, untamed

livery a horse stable

mortgage a loan for buying a house or property

precarious dangerous

widow a woman whose husband has died

Synopsis

Born in the mid-1800s, twelve-year-old Charlotte Parkhurst is the only girl in a Massachusetts orphanage. Her parents were killed in a wagon crash when she was two years old. Charlotte loves working in the stables and rides horses better than any of the boys, but her job is to help Mrs. Boyle, the cook. Vern, the stable hand, lets her race Freedom, a horse named for Vern's escape from slavery in the South. But Mr. Millshark, who runs the orphanage, bans Charlotte from the stables when she beats the boys in a race. Charlotte is devastated that she cannot be near the horses anymore, so she decides to run away from the orphanage to reach her dream of someday owning her own ranch.

That same night, with the help of Vern and her orphan-friend Hayward, Charlotte cuts her hair, dresses like a boy, and escapes to the stagecoach stop. After riding for hours, she finds herself in Massachusetts. Feeling alone and frightened, Charlotte sneaks into a horse stable and hides in the loft. At night, she secretly cleans the stables and sleeps in the loft. After two nights doing this, she is discovered by the owner, Ebenezer Balch. She tells him her name is Charley. Thinking she is a boy and liking her work, he lets "Charley" stay and even teaches her to drive a six-team stagecoach. She avoids Mr. Millshark, who has come searching for her, but in the process, Ebenezer discovers she is a girl. He is so impressed by her ability, however, he continues to let her work and never reveals her secret.

After driving horses for six years, Charlotte has earned a good reputation. She no longer fears being

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caught by Mr. Millshark, but she still fears being discovered as a girl. Customers would never ride with a woman driver. When Ebenezer moves his thriving stage coach business to Providence, Rhode Island, Charlotte goes with him as his best driver.

One day, two of Ebenezer's former stable hands persuade Charlotte to travel to California, the land of gold and riches. They promise to give her a driving job at their new coach line. They tell her she will make enough money to buy the ranch of her dreams. She leaves Ebenezer but invites him to start a livery in California after she is settled.

When Charlotte arrives in busy Sacramento, she sees women handing out handbills calling for voting rights for women. On her first day of work she is badly injured when a horse kicks her in the head. One month later, blind and unable to work, she feels her dream slipping away. She remembers Vern's encouragement when she left the orphanage, and Charlotte decides to learn to drive with one eye. On her test run she saves the passengers' lives during a bad storm. She becomes well known as the driver that saved lives. Her job as a one-eyed driver is secure.

After several years, Charlotte achieves her lifelong dream. She purchases a 25-acre ranch and invites her old friend Hayward to join her. Ebenezer also comes West to start the livery on her property. By now, Charlotte is a well-respected citizen. Disguised as a man, she votes in the presidential election, making her the first female to vote in California and probably in the United States.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

The reader knows that Ebenezer realizes his new stable hand "Charley" is a girl, but Ebenezer never confronts Charlotte with that accusation. When do you think Ebenezer realizes that Charlotte is a girl? Why does he never confront her with that fact?

When Mr. Millshark comes looking for a runaway girl that is an excellent stable hand, Ebenezer realizes that "Charley" arrived at his stable about the same time the girl ran away. At first he does not confront her with his realization because he has no one else that can help him in his stable and he does not want to lose her. As the years pass and Charlotte becomes a highly respected driver, Ebenezer still does not want to lose her. In addition, he has probably grown to like and respect her so much that he does not want to destroy the life that she had made for herself as a man.

Literary Analysis

Vern has a strong influence on Charlotte when she is living at the orphanage. He gives her words of encouragement and helps her flee from the orphanage. What do you think happened in Vern's life that shaped his personality and his views? Why does he help her escape?

Vern had been a plantation slave in Virginia. As a slave, he may have been treated cruelly and unfairly. He ran away so that he could be free. His success led him to believe that Charlotte, too, could flee from the near-slavery conditions of the orphanage to her own freedom. He wants to help her because many people had helped him when he escaped from slavery.

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Inferential Comprehension

When Charlotte registers to vote, the townspeople think she is a man. They respect her political views and positions, but Hayward cannot understand what she is proving if no one knows she is a woman. If Charlotte had revealed she was a woman, how do you think the townspeople would have reacted? Would they still have respected her views and positions? Do you think they would have had her arrested for voting illegally?

After respecting Charlotte so strongly, some of the townspeople probably would have realized that women are just as capable of voting as men. Because of deeply ingrained beliefs and cultural attitudes, it is also likely that the majority of men would have lost respect for her and opposed her. It is possible that they would even have demanded that she be arrested, since it is probable they would have felt angry that they had been deceived for so long.

Constructing Meaning

After Charlotte runs away from the orphanage, her whole life is shaped by her disguise as a boy and later as a man. She does not tell anyone that she is a woman. What does this prove to the reader? Why could she not live in the same manner if she revealed her secret?

As a girl, Charlotte could not travel unescorted or get a job. Passing as a boy, she could do both. Later, Charlotte is respected because people see her as a man. As a woman, Charlotte would not have been able to be a driver nor would she have been able to vote. People's view of her was influenced by her gender rather than by her actions and abilities.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors When Charlotte arrives in California, people are beginning to challenge the assumption that women should not vote. Have the students do research on voting rights for women in the United States including dates, noted supporters,

methods of campaigning, and early states that began to legalize voting rights for women. Ask them to write a short report on their research.

Comparing and Contrasting In the story, girls and women are not treated as full citizens. Today, women have become important as workers, voters, and consumers. Have the students interview adults to learn how the status of women has changed during their lifetime. Then have the students work in groups to share their information and prepare a presentation to the class. They can either present what they have learned in the format of an oral report or do a skit with "then" and "now" scenes.

Extending Meaning When Charlotte casts her ballot in the presidential elections, she is breaking the law, though some states were working toward legalizing voting rights for women. Have the students hold an election for best song or best candy bar using only two top choices. Use different colors of paper for boys and girls. After the students tally the ballots, have them separate the two colors and re-tabulate the results to determine how different the results would be if one gender had not participated in the election. Ask them how they would feel if they were not allowed to vote based purely on their gender.

Recognizing Setting When Charlotte travels from Rhode Island to Sacramento, she travels by land to Atlanta, by boat to Panama, by mule through Panama, by ship to San Francisco, and then by riverboat to Sacramento. The journey takes her a month. Give the students a map of North and South America and have them mark her route with colored pencil or marker. With a different color, have them mark the route or routes that could be taken today and the possible modes of travel and time required. They can then mount their maps on a poster with a written summary of what travel was like during the westward expansion.