

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Run Away Home

by

### Patricia C. McKissack

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### Book Information

Patricia C. McKissack, Run Away Home  
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160 Pages  
Book Level: 4.9  
Interest Level: MG

In 1886 in Alabama, an eleven-year-old African-American girl and her family befriend and give refuge to a runaway Apache boy.

**Award:** Smithsonian's Notable Book

**Topics:** Adventure, Rescue/Save; Adventure, Runaway; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; People, African American; People, Native American; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Work it Out: Conflicts; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies

### Main Characters

Booker T. Washington the historic founder of the Tuskegee School

Geronimo the historic leader of the Apaches who acts as Sky's guardian at the beginning of the story

He Looks At The Sky (Sky) a fifteen-year-old Apache boy who comes to live with the Crossmans after escaping a transport train

Lath Jones a neighbor of the Crossman family who is fighting to protect his right to vote

Mama (Georgianne Crossman) Sarah Jane's mother, whose Seminole heritage gives her a perspective on life that contrasts with her husband's view

Mr. George Wratten the kindly Army interpreter who is in charge of the Apaches during their confinement

Mr. Tucker the unscrupulous store owner who uses his position to help the Knights oppress the African-American community

Papa (Lee Andrew Crossman) Sarah Jane's practical and proud father, whose prior experience as a slave makes him determined to stay in control of his farm

Sarah Jane Crossman the intelligent and sensitive twelve-year-old African-American girl who narrates the story

Sheriff Ray Johnson the white sheriff who pretends to be Papa's friend for political reasons

### Vocabulary

**debt** an amount, often of money, owed to someone that needs to be repaid

**exile** to be forced to stay away from a place

**quinine** a type of medicine used to help treat malaria

**sharecropper** a farmer who works someone else's land in return for a small part of the crop

**skillet** a heavy frying pan

**wickiup** an oval-shaped home covered with grasses or reeds made by the Apaches and other tribes of the southwestern United States

### Synopsis

Set in the South in the 1880's, *Run Away Home* tells the story of how an Apache boy becomes part of Sarah Jane Crossman's African-American family. The narrator is Sarah Jane, a twelve year-old girl who is the only child of ex-slave-turned-farmer Lee Andrew and his half-Seminole wife, Georgianne.

One spring evening, Sarah and her father encounter a train full of Apache Indians being shipped from a prison camp in Florida to Mount Vernon, Alabama. As Papa speaks with the soldiers, Sarah sees a young boy escape from the train. She decides not to tell anyone when Geronimo, the leader of the Apaches, uses his eyes to ask her to keep the boy's escape secret.

Later Sarah realizes that the boy, whose name is Sky, is hiding in the family's barn. Remembering Papa's tales of informants during slavery days, Sarah chooses to keep Sky's refuge a secret even after Mr. Wratten, a good-hearted and unusually

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respectful scout from the U.S. Army, comes looking for him. Eventually, Sarah's mother discovers Sky and Mr. Wratten returns to capture him. Sky has become ill with "swamp fever," and Mr. Wratten agrees to leave Sky with the family because he is too ill to survive the journey. Sky recovers, but the family prolongs contacting Mr. Wratten because they have grown attached to Sky.

In the meantime, the family struggles against the efforts of a white supremacist group called the Knights of the Southern Order of Manhood. The sheriff, who is secretly a member of this group, is trying to force Papa to become a sharecropper by making him sell his property to him. The sheriff almost succeeds when boll weevils destroy Papa's cotton crop, but then Papa hears about Booker T. Washington's need for master carpenters to build desks for the Tuskegee School. Papa teaches Sky how to build the desks and hires several members of the community to help him after he gets a contract from Washington.

While Papa is preparing to make the desks, he receives a horrifying visit from the Knights. Papa is unable to defend his home because African-Americans could not buy ammunition for their guns. Sarah's dog is killed and their house is about to be burned down when Sky saves the day by shooting arrows at the Knights. Suddenly Mr. Wratten arrives to speak with the family. The Knights run off and Mr. Wratten, who had been persuaded by a letter from Papa to allow Sky to stay, reconsiders whether this is a good environment for Sky. He agrees to leave Sky, on a trial basis only, and then accompanies Papa to town where they confront the Knights. Mr. Wratten warns the Knights that their activities are illegal, but the Knights make it clear they will continue to do everything in their power to disenfranchise the black community.

Despite the efforts of Mr. Wratten, it seems that Papa will have to give up the desk project since many of his assistants have backed out because they are frightened of the Knights. Sarah stands up in church and gives a speech, which inspires many

of them to return, but there are still not enough people to finish the job in time. Sky saves the day by bringing a group of Apaches from the reservation to help. The two communities work together harmoniously to complete the desks. When the work is done, the Apaches return to the reservation, and Papa gives an angry sheriff the money he owes him. The story ends on a happy note: Sky is allowed to stay with the family, Papa receives an order for more desks, and Sarah gets another dog.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Sky has lost everything dear to him in the war between his people and the U.S. Army. How does this affect his actions throughout the novel?

*In the beginning, Sky does not trust anyone. He keeps to himself and is angry when Sarah tries to find out about his people. After many months he forms an attachment to the Crossmans and wishes to stay with them. When his home and loved ones are threatened by the Knights, he is willing to do anything to save his home. First he fights off the Knights, and then he brings his own people to help save the Crossmans.*

### Literary Analysis

Sarah Jane talks about how different her parents are, but they seem to have a very loving relationship. When Papa disagrees with Mama, he often goes to the barn and comes back agreeing with her. Why does he do this?

*Papa is an ex-slave who has a very religious and practical view of life. He loves his wife and daughter, and he wants them to be happy. But he is also very proud and does not like for others to tell him what to do. When he goes to the barn to look at the Bible, he is usually looking for a reason to agree with his wife. This way he can pretend that he is following God's word instead of obeying his wife, and he is still able to do what will make her happy.*

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#### Inferential Comprehension

Although the story has a happy ending, there are some clues that the Knights are not going to let the Crossmans live in peace. Have the students consider what may happen in the following years to both the family and the community.

*The family will probably have to continue fighting the Knights, but they have a powerful ally in George Wratten, who will probably see to it that the Knights are not able to make any more overt attacks on the Crossmans. The community will probably be less fortunate; many of them will likely be forced to become sharecroppers, and they will almost certainly lose their voting rights.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Booker T. Washington tells the church members, "I am not saying we should not continue to struggle for justice, but we need to move more slowly, let the idea of equality become more acceptable to those in power. We need to better ourselves, and be more patient. Stop complaining about rights." Why do you think Booker T. Washington says this? Why is it so upsetting to Mama, but not to Papa?

*Groups like the Knights are hurting a lot of people. Washington is trying to find a way for the black community to become stronger before they fight for things like the right to vote or hold a political office. He believes that if whites are provided a time of transition to get used to the idea of black equality and if the black community has time to "prove" itself to the white community, there would be less violence. Mama is angry because her parents successfully fought for their freedom and were willing to pay any price for their freedom. Papa agrees with Washington because he was raised as a slave and believes it is important to protect his family and himself while he fights for his rights.*

of the Apaches so that they can gain some understanding of why Sky seems so frightened and angry at the beginning of the story. Have them build a diorama of a traditional Apache home like the one Sky may have had before he lost his home and family.

**Recognizing Details** Many Native American tribes recorded their history using picture writing. They drew pictures of important events in order to keep them from being forgotten. These pictures were simple, but the artists took great care to include all important details. Have the students pick an event in this book and record it by drawing a series of two or three pictures. Have them show what happened by using as much detail as possible.

**Comparing and Contrasting** Sky and Sarah have very different ways of making decisions: Sky tends to think quietly about what to do, while Sarah tends to react openly to her feelings. These two techniques reveal a great deal about the personalities of the characters. In order to understand the characters better, have the students consider how they make their decisions and write some examples of decisions they have made this way. Then have them write about what they might have done differently if they used another method of making decisions.

**Identifying Persuasive Language** The power of public speech plays a significant role in this story. Booker T. Washington advises the community about how to make themselves stronger and Sarah Jane talks the church into standing behind her father. Have the students write either a speech persuading the government to let Sky's people go back to their homeland, or a speech defending the right of the African-American people to vote. Have them perform their speeches for the class.

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Sky has lived a very different life from the Crossman family. Have the students research the lifestyles