

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Sarah, Plain and Tall

by

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Book Information

Patricia MacLachlan, Sarah, Plain and Tall
Quiz Number: 137
HarperTrophy, 1987
ISBN 0-06-440205-3; LCCN
58 Pages
Book Level: 3.4
Interest Level: MG

In this loving story of a motherless family, a tall, plain woman comes to stay with them.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Christopher Award; Golden Kite Award/Honor Book; Newbery Medal; Scott O'Dell Award; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Family Life, Moving to a New Area; Family Life, Stepfamilies; History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; People, Pioneers/Settlers; Power Lessons AR, Grade 3; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Just Connect: Relationships; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Series, Sarah, Plain and Tall

Main Characters

Anna Witting Jacob's daughter; she narrates the story

Caleb Witting Jacob's son; his mother died shortly after he was born

Jacob Witting the widower who places an ad to find a wife and mother for his family

Matthew and Maggie the Wittings' neighbors

Sarah Wheaton the self-described "plain and tall" woman from Maine who answers an ad placed by a widower seeking a wife and mother for his family

Vocabulary

dunes hills of sand

pitchfork a tool used to throw hay

prairie spacious area of rolling, grassy land

squalls sudden, powerful, and short-lasting storms

windmill a machine powered by the wind most often used to pump water from a well

Synopsis

Anna Witting, a young girl growing up on the prairie, narrates this story. As the story begins, her younger brother Caleb wants to hear about the day he was born. This saddens Anna because their mother died the day after Caleb was born. Papa soon comes home for supper and announces that he had placed an advertisement for a wife, and Sarah Wheaton, a woman from Maine, has responded. Sarah's brother William is getting married, and she feels it is time to move out of the house.

Caleb, Papa, and Anna all write to Sarah, and she writes back to each of them. She also sends a book about sea birds to Anna. She will come to live with the Wittings for a month on a trial basis. During that time she will decide whether or not to marry Papa. In spring, Sarah arrives by train. She has brought her cat and gifts from the sea for the children. The children love her, but they realize she misses the sea and fear she will leave them to return to Maine.

Sarah loves the animals at the Wittings' farm and busies herself and the children by picking flowers, singing songs, and drawing pictures. The days grow longer and Sarah teaches Anna and Caleb how to swim in the cow pond.

One day, Matthew and Maggie, the Wittings' neighbors, come over to help plow a new field for corn. Maggie, like Sarah, is from another state and came to her new home when she replied to an ad for a wife. Maggie gives Sarah some plants to make a garden. Both women miss their homes, but Maggie tells Sarah, "There is always things to miss, no matter where you are."

The next day terrible clouds fill the sky. She quickly helps Papa fix the roof, and then they and the animals take shelter in the barn. The family grows closer as they spend the night together in the barn.

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The following day, the storm is over and Sarah and Papa plow and replant the field damaged by hailstones. Then Papa teaches Sarah how to drive the wagon. Shortly after, Sarah dons her yellow bonnet and heads to town on her own. Caleb and Anna cry because they think she wants to leave them. The Wittings eat supper, and the two children anxiously hope for her return as the sun goes down. Moments later, Caleb sees a yellow bonnet amidst the dust. Sarah has returned, and she brings with her a gift for all of them to share -- three colored pencils, which are the colors of the sea; Sarah decides to stay.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

The children are very pleased with Sarah. When they meet her, they hope they will be perfect for her and that she will stay with them. What are some other possible reactions the children could have had to Sarah?

The children could have been hostile to Sarah. They could have resented her and feared that she would try to take their mother's place. They could have even been jealous and worried that she would try to take their place in their father's heart. Or they might have rejected her because of her unfamiliarity with life on the farm and for her strong will and stubborn independence.

Literary Analysis

Sarah states that she is "not mild mannered." What does it mean to be "mild mannered," and what are some examples in the book that show Sarah is not this?

Mild mannered describes a personality that is timid and passive. Sarah, however, is independent and bold. She is not afraid to ask for what she wants or even to demand something. When it is suggested that her cat should live outside, Sarah explains that the cat will be fine in the house. She also holds her ground with Papa until he agrees to teach her how to ride. She takes on a man's role in wearing overalls, repairing a roof, and plowing a field.

Inferential Comprehension

Sarah writes to Jacob Witting, "I have always loved to live by the sea, but at this time I feel a move is necessary." What do you suppose she means by a move being "necessary"?

In her letter, Sarah mentions that she has been living with an older brother who is about to marry. She also mentions that his fiancée is "young and energetic." Sarah likely feels she will be a burden to her brother and his new wife. She probably also wants to give the newly married couple their privacy. Sarah believes that moving to a family who really needs her is the best thing for her at this time.

Constructing Meaning

What does the sea seem to represent for Sarah?

The sea has a very calming and peaceful effect on Sarah because it brings a comfort that comes with familiarity and home. Since the sea represents home to her, she draws it and thinks about it wistfully.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Sarah's world seems to revolve around the sea. She has books about it, she collects shells, and she speaks about it and remembers it often. Have students share their thoughts or experiences with the sea. Which seas have they visited? What was the best thing about

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the sea? How did the sea make them feel? For students who have never seen the sea, ask them to imagine what it might be like. Which sea would they most like to visit? Have the students draw ocean scenes using blue, green, and gray pencils or paints.

to move.

Understanding Characterization Anna and Caleb's mother died before this story began. They have been without a mother for several years. But they talk about her, and they mention how much she loved to sing. Have students write a few paragraphs in which they imagine Mrs. Witting. What did she look like? What kind of personality did she have? What hobbies did she have? Where was she originally from? Have students write one-page descriptions of Mrs. Witting and ask for volunteers to share them with the class.

Recognizing Details Sarah brings her collection of shells when she goes to the Wittings' house. She identifies some of the various shells she brings with her: a scallop, a sea clam, an oyster, and a conch shell. Have students find pictures of these and other shells in books. What do the shells look like? What is the purpose of a shell? Where are these shells found? Have students show pictures to the class. And, if possible, encourage students to bring some of their own shells from home to share with the class. Students can then share with their classmates where they retrieved their shells and why they like them.

Responding to Literature Both Sarah and Maggie have moved far from home to become brides. Sarah misses the sea, and Maggie misses the rolling hills of Tennessee. Maggie explains, "There is always something to miss, no matter where you are." Hold a classroom discussion in which you ask your students if they had moved from another state or country. Then ask them the following questions. Do they miss their old home? How long has it been since they have been there? What do they miss about their home? Do they like the new place where they currently live? Ask students who have not moved what they would miss about their present home if they had