

Shane
by
Jack Schaefer

Book Information

Jack Schaefer, Shane
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A mysterious drifting gunman helps the homesteaders break the power of the Wyoming cattlemen.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

Topics: People, Strangers; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks; U.S. States/Regions, Wyoming; Westerns, Westerns (All)

Main Characters

Bob Starrett Joe Starrett's young son, who idolizes and tries to understand Shane

Chris one of Fletcher's young ranch hands who is sent to fight Shane

Ernie Wright, Henry Shipstead, Lew Johnson, Frank Torrey, Ed Howells homesteaders in the area

Joe Starrett a former ranch hand who has become a farmer and homesteads a piece of land

Luke Fletcher a local cattleman who wants to run the homesteaders out of the area

Marian Starrett Joe Starrett's wife, who came from New England

Morgan the foreman on Fletcher's ranch

Shane a well-dressed, mysterious man who helps Joe Starrett work his farm and fight Fletcher

Vocabulary

lithe graceful and flexible

melee a wild and confused fight involving a number of people

peevied irritated or deeply annoyed

sufferance permission to do something that is implied when nobody interferes with it

Synopsis

Joe Starrett lives with his wife, Marian, and son, Bob, on a homestead in Wyoming. He is trying to make a living as a farmer who raises his cattle on a small piece of land rather than as a rancher who grazes his animals on the open range. One day a strange, well-dressed man rides up to his farm and asks to use his water pump. When the man finishes watering his horse and washing himself up, Joe offers the man a meal. The man stays and introduces himself as Shane. Joe tries to ascertain Shane's life story, but the man reveals little personal information. Not deterred by this, Joe offers to bed him for the night. Joe shows Shane around his place the next day, and they work on the huge tree stump that Joe has been slowly trying to break up and remove. After a Herculean effort, the two manage to conquer the stump and remove it from the soil. This cooperative effort causes Joe to ask Shane to stay on and help him build up his farm before the neighboring rancher, Fletcher, moves his cattle in and tries to run Joe off the land. Shane accepts the offer, and together the two work the land and improve the farm.

While staying at the farm, Shane becomes a part of the Starrett family and earns the love and respect of Joe, Marian, and Bob. At the beginning of Shane's stay with the Starretts, Fletcher is away from his ranch. While Fletcher is away, his cowboys and hired hands are cordial. However, the situation becomes more tense when Fletcher returns to his ranch. As he has done before, Fletcher pressures the homesteaders to relinquish their land. His main target in this effort is Joe Starrett, who is seen as a leader in the community. He first sends two of his hands out to rough up Shane. This fails as the first man runs off and Shane refuses to fight the second man, who is a young cowboy named Chris. Chris eventually manages to goad Shane into fighting and is badly beaten.

Chris's defeat only heightens the battle for Fletcher. He does not retaliate immediately, but rather leaves

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his ranch for a time. He returns with a deadly gun fighter to help him. Before Joe and Shane can control the situation, the gun fighter, Stark Wilson, kills a neighboring homesteader, Ernie Wright. Fletcher then sets his sights on Joe. Fletcher appears on Joe's farm and offers to buy his farm and hire him as his foreman. He sets up a showdown by telling Joe to consider the offer and meet in town to respond to it. Joe knows the only thing he can do is meet Fletcher in town with his refusal, but before Joe can go, Shane decides he will settle the situation himself and knocks Joe unconscious. Shane then proceeds to town, where he kills both Wilson and Fletcher. Though he is wounded, Shane mounts his horse and leaves town. The threat from Fletcher is gone, and the homesteaders are able to farm their land in peace.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

It is unusual in the late 1800's for a man not to wear a gun in the West, but Shane does not wear his. What possible reasons might he have for this?

Shane might not want to give anyone a reason to challenge him. He also may want to avoid the temptation to use a gun unnecessarily. It is possible he believes the details of the fine gun would reveal too much about him and people may be able to identify him with his past.

Literary Analysis

Shane is a mysterious man. He does not give much information about his background. It is clear, though, that he seems to be running from something. What do you think he is fleeing?

He implies to Joe that he is not running from the law. He probably does have people after him, but it may be for a fight he had in the past. He tells Bob he is trying to escape the brand that he is a killer.

Inferential Comprehension

Joe Starrett clearly stands among his peers, the homesteaders. Explain what characteristics and/or actions make him different from the other farmers.

Joe often sends for catalogs in order to experiment with new seed and equipment. He is the farmer that the others came to for advice or protection. He seems to put much more thought into his decisions and actions and is more determined not to give in to Fletcher.

Constructing Meaning

At one point in the story, Shane enters Grafton's saloon and buys a soda pop for Chris. This action results in a fight between Chris and Shane. Who do you think is to blame for the fight?

One could argue that Shane is to blame since he provokes Chris, although a witness says Shane would have been happy to have a drink with Chris and not fight him. It could be argued that Chris is to blame since Shane makes no physical threat towards him. One could also say Fletcher is to blame since he initially sends Chris to fight Shane.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Joe and some of the other homesteaders had gained legal right to their properties by following the guidelines established in the Homestead Act of 1862. Research the act to see how Joe complied with its rules. Further research the timing of that act and try to determine what purpose the act served, why it was created, and what effect it had on the country. Have the students present their findings to the class.

Understanding the Author's Craft The author chose to tell this story from the point of view of Joe's young son, Bob. Bob does not always understand what is happening or why, but he certainly is biased toward his father's side in the conflict. Have the students consider how the story might be different if it is told from the point of view of someone on Fletcher's ranch. Then have them rewrite a scene from the point of view of Morgan,

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Chris, or another ranch hand.

Making Predictions When Shane rides up to the Starretts' farm, he reaches a fork in the road that would lead him either to the Starretts' or to Fletcher's. He chooses to go to the Starretts' farm, but the story would be different had he gone to Fletcher's place. Discuss how the plot could have changed, and have the students write a short story depicting what might have happened. Would Shane have helped Fletcher drive the homesteaders from their land, or would he have supported the Starretts anyway?

Responding to Literature Though it may seem like Ernie's death is the result of a murder, the characters lay out a scenario in which the death could be explained as self-defense. Set up a court in the classroom and hold a mock trial for Stark Wilson. Choose lawyers to represent both sides, appoint a judge and jury, and assign witnesses and courtroom observers. You could even get more students involved as court reporters and journalists.