

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Soup

by

Robert Newton Peck

Book Information

Robert Newton Peck, Soup
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Rural Vermont during the 1920s is the setting of this nostalgic account of episodes in the lives of young Rob Peck and his pal, Soup.

Topics: Humor/Funny, Funny; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; People, Friends; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; U.S. States/Regions, Vermont

Main Characters

Aunt Carrie Rob's aunt, who believes in thrashing Rob to discipline him
Eddy Tacker the school bully
Janice Riker an older girl who is better than Soup at torture games
Miss Boland the school nurse, who is upset when Rob makes a rude remark to her
Miss Kelly a wise, respected, one-room-schoolhouse teacher
Mr. Diskin an honest junkyard man
Mr. Haskin an old man whose shack window is broken by a pitched apple
Mrs. Biscardi the owner of the hen house into which Rob crashes
Mrs. Peck (Mama) Rob's mother, who balances discipline with kindness
Mrs. Stetson a scripture-quoting woman who scolds Rob for breaking the church window
Robert Peck (Rob) the narrator of the story; a third grade boy who relates some adventures he has shared with his best friend, Soup
Soup (Luther Wesley Vinson) a mischief-loving fourth grade boy who is Rob's best friend

Vocabulary

demean to reduce the value of someone or something
knickers a shortened word for knickerbockers; short baggy pants that are gathered by a band below the knee
moot arguable
profanity a disrespectful act; more commonly, a disrespectful word or phrase
stealth secrecy or sneakiness
thrashing a beating that resembles being hit with a whip

Synopsis

Robert Peck writes a humorous memoir of his childhood relationship with his friend, Luther Vinson, who is nicknamed Soup. The stories are set in rural Vermont in the 1920s when boys still wear knickers to school.

Rob faces his mother as she reads a note from his teacher, Miss Kelly, that says Rob made a rude remark to the school nurse, Miss Boland. Rob's no-nonsense Aunt Carrie says he deserves a thrashing. Rob tries to escape punishment by applying Soup's rules for getting out of trouble and weaving a tale that implicates Miss Kelly and Miss Boland. In the end, Rob admits that he purposely made the remark and receives a thrashing from Mama, although it is a light one.

Soup and Rob often get into trouble when they are together. One day the boys see how far they can throw apples by hurling them from the end of a stick. They aim for the bell of a faraway church, but Soup breaks its stained glass window instead. Soup runs, but Rob stops in his tracks, only to face the wrath of Bible-quoting Mrs. Stetson. When Rob denies that he broke the window and states that it is impossible to toss an apple that far, Mrs. Stetson does not believe him and grabs his stick to demonstrate. Her apple hits a flowerpot, which in turn breaks Mr. Haskin's shack window. When Mr. Haskin emerges angrily, Mrs. Stetson and Rob run to a garage, where they discover Soup has been hiding. Soup leaves, only to encounter Mr. Haskin, who gives him a thrashing. Rob believes justice is at work.

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One of Soup's favorite pastimes is to tie people up and "torture" them. Janice Riker is the only person who is better at torture than Soup. Rob relates that Janice previously attempted to place a hornet in Rob's britches; her attempt was unsuccessful because she unwisely kicked Soup's dog, Cubby, who bit her and distracted her from her plot. Rob reflects that he is similarly unwise when he attempts to "torture" Aunt Carrie by tying her to a tree. When he is unable to untie her and a storm breaks, he runs home for a knife to cut the rope. When Aunt Carrie's hands are freed, she forgets her ankles are still tied, and she falls into a mud puddle. Rob receives another thrashing!

On Saturdays, Soup and Rob look forward to the dime movies. This particular Saturday, the boys lack the necessary twenty cents, so they collect old tin foil to exchange for cash at Mr. Diskin's junkyard. Soup persuades Rob that they should cheat Mr. Diskin by weighting their ball of foil with a pebble. Rob reluctantly agrees. After Mr. Diskin weighs the foil, he returns with twenty cents and the boys' pebble. The boys accept the money but are ashamed.

In Soup's next scheme, Rob is supposed to roll down Dugan's Hill inside a rickety barrel. Rob is reluctant because he fears the loose nail in the barrel will ruin his sweater. Soup removes Rob's excuse when he hammers the nail farther into the barrel. Rob flies down the steep hill in the old barrel, but he feels every bump and gets slivers. At the bottom, Rob crashes into Mrs. Biscardi's hen house, sending the chickens flying. Mrs. Biscardi, speaking angrily in Italian, attempts to collect the chickens, so Rob flees. Although his sweater is ruined, Rob is proud that he has dared to roll down Dugan's Hill in a barrel.

On another day, the boys are supposed to be hoeing Soup's family garden, but they chat instead about their plans for the future. Rob, who admires the actor Chester Morris, tells about how he once attempted to look like the movie star by using his mother's comb and Aunt Carrie's hairbrush to style

his hair with Stay-Comb. Since the sticky substance clogged both the comb and the brush, Aunt Carrie once again thrashed Rob. Soup points out, however, that Rob does resemble his movie idol.

Confrontation with Eddy Tacker, the school bully, is inevitable when Rob accidentally spits water on Eddy. With Eddy chasing him, Rob runs from school and meets his mother, who is walking to meet Rob so she can take him shopping for new knickers. Rob punches Eddy in the nose; Eddy, in turn, falls into Rob and his mother. Rob nurses his sore hand, Eddie stanches the blood pouring from his nose, and Mrs. Peck considers her bloody dress over ice cream at the Pharmacy.

Rob finds shopping for knickers an ordeal, since Mama and the shopkeeper insist that he stand on a table to try on several pairs that are scratchy and too large for him. Discomfort becomes humiliation, however, when Rob's unofficial girlfriend enters the store. Rob quickly grabs the nearest garment, which is several sizes too large for him, assures his mother that the knickers are fine, and leaves the store wearing the baggy knickers. The only saving grace of the day, according to Rob, is that he has punched Eddy.

In the final anecdote, Soup returns from Burlington with a new pair of orange shoes. When Rob trips as he walks to school with Soup, he hurts himself and ruins one of his shoes. Discouraged, Rob cries and says he hates Soup because he always gets new things. Soup dries his tears and allows his best friend to wear his squeaky new orange shoes to school.

Open-Ended Questions

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

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Initial Understanding

When Mr. Haskin thrashes Soup, why does Rob think, "There really is a God"?

Rob earlier complains about Mrs. Stetson's religious zeal and her constant references to God and the Bible. In this statement, however, he acknowledges that there may be some truth to Mrs. Stetson's righteous indignation, since Soup does eventually receive punishment for his wrongdoing. Although Mr. Haskin incorrectly assumes that Soup broke his window, Soup did, in fact, run from the punishment he deserves for breaking the church window. Rob credits God with the fact that justice ultimately prevails.

Literary Analysis

Why did Robert Peck write this book as a series of ten stories?

By giving the reader ten "examples" of how Soup's presence is interwoven in the thoughts and situations of Rob's life, the author helps the reader develop a more rounded, in-depth appreciation of Soup and why Rob considers him such a good friend. Each of the stories gives insight into Soup's personality so readers can appreciate his complex nature. The reader learns that Soup is a smooth talker, feels guilt, runs away from punishment, does daring things, has a good sense of humor, and can be very tender. Stories also invite readers to draw their own conclusions about characters and events.

Inferential Comprehension

How does Mr. Diskin handle the situation with the boys effectively?

When Mr. Diskin hands the boys the pebble they used to raise the value of their tin foil, he shows Rob and Soup that he is aware they tried to cheat him. His silence conveys his disappointment and sadness far more effectively than Mrs. Stetson's angry shouts and Aunt Carrie's thrashings. If Mr. Diskin were to react angrily, it is possible that the boys would dismiss him by calling him an angry old man or by assigning ethnic stereotypes to him. The silence brings upon the boys the guilt that other adults have unsuccessfully tried to inflict. When the boys receive full payment for their foil despite their actions, they know that Mr. Diskin's reputation for kindness and understanding is justified.

Constructing Meaning

Rob thinks that "a lot that Soup said made a heap of sense. He must of been part horse." What does Rob mean?

Rob means that Soup has "horse-sense," or practical common sense. Soup teaches Rob to evade punishment by either not talking at all or, when caught, talking his way out of a difficult situation. Soup also seems to know how to do many things that Rob does not. He teaches Rob about smoking, rolling in barrels, and life in general. Rob treasures every piece of advice that he receives from Soup.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft Robert Peck uses first person point of view very effectively in this book by relating stories from his own childhood. Ask students to write an account of one of their most memorable experiences with a close friend. Students can share their stories by reading them aloud in class.

Comparing and Contrasting Soup and Rob's movie idols include Chester Morris, Tom Mix, Buck Jones, and Silver the horse. Movies are as popular as ever, and new movie idols emerge

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regularly. Ask the students to compare the idols of Soup and Rob's time with those the students admire today. They can learn more about Soup and Rob's favorite movie stars by renting old videos or doing library research. Students should compare the personalities of the stars, as well as the types of roles they play. Ask the students to make a chart of their comparisons and draw some conclusions about how movie idols have both stayed the same and changed over the years.

Responding to Literature Ask students to read the dedication of the book. Many students may be surprised to learn that Soup became a pastor when he grew up. Ask students to write about personality traits and skills that pastors need in order to help people in their churches. Then have them explain how Soup's personality traits and childhood experiences might have enabled him to develop these skills.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Rob and Soup live in a time when children do not have many planned activities outside of school. During the 1920s, children often invented their own pastimes, like apple whipping and racing to school. Students should research and list children's games and pastimes from this era. They may enjoy spending a class period trying some of the games that lend themselves to the school setting, like playing marbles, jumping rope, rolling down hills, etc. At the end of the period, ask students to compare these activities to their usual pastimes.