

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Titanic Crossing

by
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In 1912, thirteen-year-old Albert considers his younger sister a pest, but things change when they travel with their mother and uncle aboard the "Titanic" and are caught up in its tragic sinking.

Award: State Award

Topics: Disasters, Shipwrecks; Family Life, Brothers; Family Life, Sisters; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; Transportation/Vehicles, Ships/Boats

Main Characters

Albert Trask the thirteen-year-old boy who tries to assume his deceased father's role by helping his mother take care of his sister Virginia; he longs to go to art school and become an artist

Captain Smith the captain of the "Titanic," who runs the ship at full speed through an ice field

Colonel Heath a gentleman on the "Titanic" who is interested in Katherine but is sent away by Uncle Clay

Colonel John Jacob Astor and wife the pompous wealthy couple who snubs the Trasks and others when they attend the church service in first class

Emily Brewer a serious girl who befriends Albert during the voyage

Fifth Officer Lowe the officer who tells Albert that he is too old to board a lifeboat

George Sloan (Georgie) a talkative steward in the second-class compartment

Grandmother Trask Albert's paternal grandmother, who wants Katherine and the children to live at McLean with her; she wants Albert to become a lawyer

Katherine Trask (Mother) the progressive mother of Albert and Virginia; she struggles to maintain her independence after her mother-in-law threatens to eliminate her means of support

Mason Trask Albert's father, who died of appendicitis at the age of thirty-six; Albert tries to model his behavior after him

Mattie Lou Grandma Trask's cook, who offers to help Albert salvage Virginia's doll

Miss Harcher the tutor who teaches Albert and Virginia in London; Albert dislikes her, but Virginia is strongly attached to her

Mr. and Mrs. Dreyfus the honeymooners who come to the deck without proper shoes or coats when the "Titanic" is sinking

Mr. Harry Gordon the theatrical producer whom Katherine longs to meet

Mrs. Brewer the widow of a missionary, who is taking her children to America to seek medical help for her ailing son

Robert Brewer the youngest Brewer child, who is deathly ill

Sarah Brewer the sister of Emily and Robert, who makes friends with Virginia during the voyage; Sarah infects Virginia with scarlet fever

Uncle Claybourne Trask Albert's domineering uncle, who comes to London to coerce Katherine into returning to America

Virginia Trask (Ginny) Albert's six-year-old sister, who manipulates her mother by pretending to have appendicitis

Zora LaRue an actress friend of Katherine who is known to be a suffragette

Vocabulary

scarlet fever a serious sickness that causes a fever and red rash

scone a type of biscuit-like bread that is made with oatmeal or barley flour and baked on a griddle

stern the back of a ship

steward a person on a ship who takes care of passenger needs

Synopsis

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On Wednesday morning, April 10, 1912, thirteen-year-old Albert Trask, his widowed mother, Katherine, and his six-year-old sister, Virginia, are preparing to set sail on the "Titanic." They are leaving London and are returning to their home in Washington D.C., escorted by Albert's uncle Claybourne. Katherine's husband Mason died of appendicitis seven months before, leaving her and her children dependent on her wealthy mother-in-law, Grandmother Trask. Since Mason's death, Katherine has become a close friend of an actress and suffragette in London named Zora LaRue. Katherine has even taken an interest in becoming an actress herself.

Grandmother Trask, however, disapproves of her daughter-in-law's interest in acting because she believes it will hurt the social standing of the Trask family. Grandmother also wants to spend her remaining years with her grandchildren. So Grandmother has sent Uncle Clay to bring them back to the United States and threatens to cut off Katherine's annuity if she refuses to return with him. As a result, Katherine is angry because she fears that Grandmother Trask is manipulating her. She is also furious with Uncle Clay because he has arranged for them to travel second class on the "Titanic" instead of first class.

In the train station, Virginia, or "Ginny" as her family calls her, complains because Miss Harcher, her British tutor, is not coming with them. But after they set sail, Ginny makes friends with a girl her age, Sarah Brewer, whose kind, gentle manner begins to make Ginny less selfish and self-centered. The Brewers have had their own difficulties. Sarah's father contracted a disease and died while working as a missionary in Ceylon, and Sarah's two-year-old brother has contracted the same illness, prompting Mrs. Brewer to return to the United States to get medical help for him. Sarah's twelve-year-old sister, Emily, tries to cope with her father's death by reading two books that her father gave her.

On Friday morning, Albert hears Uncle Clay tell Mother that Grandmother Trask expects Mother and the children to live on Grandmother's property in

McLean, Virginia, rather than return to Washington. Albert is sent on an errand before he can find out Mother's response, but later, he finds his mother in the library. She has been crying, and she tells Albert that they will have to live in McLean because Grandmother will cut off her annuity if she refuses. She also says that Albert will either have a tutor or will have to attend a military boarding school. Albert is strongly opposed to both options and says his mother should forfeit the annuity and get a job. When she tells him that she has no way of earning an income to support them, he suggests that she become an actress. She says that she does not have the connections she needs to get an acting job. Albert vows to himself that he will think of some way for her to become an actress.

Albert does come up with an idea, and he arranges for the Trask and Brewer families to attend Sunday morning church services in first class, where he hopes to meet Harry Gordon, a famous theatrical producer. He plans to ask Mr. Gordon to help his mother find an acting job. Mr. Gordon is not at the service, however, and the stewards rush Albert and other second and third class passengers out of the first class area as soon as the service finishes.

That night, while Albert tries to find a way to talk to Mr. Gordon in the first class area, he sees the ship strike an iceberg. Though most passengers do not think the accident is serious, Albert suspects that the ship will sink. He returns to his cabin and finds that his mother and uncle are gone. His uncle has left a note for him explaining that his mother has gone to the third class area to talk to a friend from London and that he has gone to bring her back. Albert is terrified because he realizes that the third-class compartments have no lifeboats.

A steward tells Albert that the captain has ordered all passengers to the top deck to take part in a "drill," but Albert knows that it is more than a drill. He awakens Ginny and guides her to the top deck. To keep her from being frightened, he tells her that they are playing a game. Albert delays boarding a lifeboat with his sister because he wants to wait for his mother and uncle to arrive. He realizes, though,

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that the boats are filling up fast, so he decides he can no longer wait. After he helps his sister board, an officer stops him because he believes Albert is too old to be considered a child. Albert decides to act like a man and accept his fate bravely. Soon, though, a tall man urges him to board one of the few remaining lifeboats. Albert declines, insisting that he must be a man. The tall man commends Albert for his courage and gives him a card, inviting Albert to contact him if Albert survives. When Albert finds a spot on the deck with enough illumination to read the card, he finds that the man was Harry Gordon.

The ship's bow slips under the water, and the ship begins to sink even faster. Albert is swept overboard into the icy water, and a piece of debris hits him on the head. Just after a man on a nearby lifeboat pulls him from the water, Albert loses consciousness. He wakes up four hours later on the deck of the "Carpathia," where Emily Brewer informs him that Ginny and the entire Brewer family are alive but that Sarah has been diagnosed with scarlet fever. Emily also tells him that his mother and uncle are missing and presumed dead. Albert tenderly tells Ginny that his mother and uncle are now in heaven with Mr. Trask and that he will take care of her as long as she wants him to.

When Albert and Ginny return to the United States, they are taken to Grandmother Trask's house. Grandmother wants to replace Ginny's favorite doll, Elizabeth, with another because the doctor has ordered that all of Ginny's possessions be burned to avoid spreading scarlet fever. Albert boldly defies Grandmother so that Ginny will have at least her doll to comfort her. Although Grandmother seems indifferent to the children's needs, she finally relents. She then reveals that she has sent for Ginny's tutor, Miss Harcher, and has made arrangements for Albert to go to a school in Washington that will allow him to meet friends, play sports, and take the art classes he likes.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How does Albert feel about returning to America?

At first, Albert is happy to be leaving London. He misses Washington, D.C., dislikes his tutor, and hopes to attend art school. However, he begins to understand what the trip means to his family as he watches Uncle Clay bully his mother. He feels anxious about how his mother will protect herself from Grandmother Trask's control. When he finds out that his family is expected to return to McLean, he feels angry and cheated. He becomes desperate to do something to help his family maintain their autonomy, so he tries to find a way to give his mother the means to support the family without the annuity provided by Grandmother Trask.

Literary Analysis

What mood develops in the story once people realize the "Titanic" really is sinking?

The intense personal conflicts that the characters experience because of their desperate situation causes the reader to feel both proud and ashamed of human behavior. Albert's struggle to be brave and act like a man contrasts sharply with the behavior of men who try to force their way onto the lifeboats. The self-control of musicians who continue to play and people who quietly pray is vastly different from the panic that other people exhibit. The lifeboats also provide a setting for sharp contrasts between heroism and cowardice. One man wants to rescue Albert, but another is willing to let Albert drown rather than risk capsizing the boat. In general, though, the pride in heroic sacrifices people make in the story prevails over the shame of cowardice.

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Inferential Comprehension

How is Uncle Clay similar to Grandmother? How are they different?

Both Grandmother and Uncle Clay want to control Mother and the children. They also agree that Albert's education is important and that art may not be the best profession for Albert. They seem, however, to disagree on appropriate methods to accomplish their goals. While Grandmother seems to have a real affection for Albert and his sister, Uncle Clay regards the children as nuisances and wants Albert to attend a military boarding school. In addition, Grandmother is willing to listen to reasonable arguments, while Uncle Clay attempts to bully people into accepting his wishes. For example, Grandmother listens to Albert's arguments in favor of sparing Virginia's doll, but Uncle Clay scoffs at Mother's arguments about living in Washington, D.C. While it may seem that Uncle Clay helps Albert by lending him money to purchase Mother's tablecloth, Uncle Clay acquiesces only because the tablecloth allows Clay to manipulate Mother more easily.

Constructing Meaning

How does Albert persuade Grandmother to let Virginia keep her doll?

Albert's argument has several points. First, he argues that the doll is unlikely to infect anyone because people rarely come to visit and everyone else in the household has already been exposed to scarlet fever. Second, he appeals to Grandmother's compassion by saying that the doll is all that Virginia was able to save from the ship. Third, he asserts that Grandmother does not have the authority to make decisions for Virginia because Albert's father put Albert in charge before he died. Finally, he argues that there is a practical solution to the problem: Virginia must keep the doll away from other children who visit and must not take the doll away from home. He also points out that the doll can be sanitized. These arguments, combined with the fact that Albert's debating skills remind Grandmother of Albert's grandfather, convince Grandmother to allow Virginia to keep the doll.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors There are many factual accounts of what happened the night the "Titanic" sank. Have the students read some of these accounts and write a paragraph about the historical accuracy of this book. Have them use examples from the book and their research to support their arguments.

Understanding Sequence The sequence of events in the last few chapters of this book greatly affects the outcome of this story. For instance, if Mother had gone to visit her friend in third class a day earlier, she probably would have survived. If Albert had already gone to bed before the boat began to sink, he would have been in his pajamas and Officer Lowe probably would not have questioned his age. Have the students review the book, choose two or three events and, in writing, explain how the outcome would have been affected if the events had happened earlier or later.

Recognizing Setting The "Titanic" is famous not only for its sinking but also for its majestic design. Have students examine pictures and descriptions of the ship. Then have them work either independently or as a class to create their own representations of the "Titanic." Some students could choose to make models of individual interior rooms of the ship, such as the first-class dining saloon or the grand ballroom. Other students could draw a cross-section of the ship or build a model showing the exterior of the ship.

Extending Meaning Albert is happy to be returning to America, but he does not like seeing his mother manipulated by Uncle Clay and Grandmother. After Mother dies, Albert must deal with Grandmother by himself. Have students consider what this means for Albert and his sister. Will it be easier or harder for them to live with Grandmother without Mother? How might losing their parents have long-lasting results on Albert and Ginny?