

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## When the Legends Die

by  
Hal Borland

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### Book Information

Hal Borland, When the Legends Die  
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Book Level: 5.2  
Interest Level: UG

A modern Indian boy is left alone to live in the wilderness.

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

**Topics:** Family Life, Death; Natural Environments, Wilderness; People, Native American; Popular Groupings, College Bound

### Main Characters

Benny Grayback & Rowena Ellis teachers at the school

Bessie Black Bull the mother of the main character, who loves the old ways

Blue Elk a dishonest old Ute Indian who will do anything for money

George Black Bull the father of the main character, who flees into the mountains because he kills a man

Jim Thatcher the owner of a store in Pagosa

Jim Woodward the man who hires Tom to herd sheep when he returns to Pagosa

Luther Spotted Dog a schoolmate who teases and fights with Tom

Mary Redmond a nurse at a New York hospital, who reminds Tom of Rowena Ellis

Meo a former bronco rider who lives with Tom and Red

Neil Swanson a Dane in charge of the stables at the school, who flogs Tom

Red Dillon the man who teaches Tom how to ride broncos and sets up bets at the rodeos

Tom Black the principal character, who is taken from the mountains after his parents die

**breechclout / clout** a small piece of cloth worn over the loins

**bridle** the harness fitted about a horse's head, consisting of a headstall, bit, and reins, and used to restrain or guide the animal

**chaps** heavy leather trousers without a seat, worn over ordinary trousers by cowboys to protect their legs

**cinch** a strap encircling a horse's body to secure a saddle upon its back

**quirt** a riding whip with a short handle and a lash of braided rawhide

**sinew** a tendon

### Synopsis

Little Black Bull is a young Ute Indian who moves to Pagosa with his father George and his mother Bessie. The family plans to stay a few months so George can earn the sawmill's high wages promised by Blue Elk, but because of unjust practices by the sawmill, they owe money and are unable to leave. Each time they try to save money, it is stolen by Frank No Deer. After an argument, George kills Frank in self-defense. George flees to the wilderness in the mountains, and Bessie and the boy follow.

The family lives in the old ways of the Ute Indians. Eventually, George is killed by an avalanche and Bessie becomes sick and dies. The boy, who named himself Bear's Brother, lives as a breechclout Indian with a grizzly cub for a companion. When the preacher discovers Bear's Brother is alone, he pays Blue Elk to take him from the wilderness. Blue Elk tricks the boy into leaving his lodge. He takes him to a school, where he is called Thomas Black Bull.

Thomas has a difficult time with the students and teachers at school. When he flees to his lodge, he discovers Blue Elk has stolen his belongings and burned the lodge. The animals do not remember him, and the bear does not answer his call. Thomas decides the old times are over. He returns to the school and turns his back on the old Ute ways he once loved.

### Vocabulary

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When Red Dillon notices Thomas's riding skill, he arranges for Thomas to become a bronc twister. Now, Thomas is called Tom Black Bull. Red uses Tom by asking him to throw rounds so he can win money. When Tom becomes a young man, he refuses to follow Red's orders. He is called Tom Black and sometimes Killer Black or Devil Black because he tries to kill his painful memories and his hatred by punishing the horses during his ride. Tom is seriously injured when a horse falls on him during a ride.

After a lengthy hospital stay, Tom recuperates in Pagosa. A grizzly bear kills a sheep Tom is herding, and he tries to kill the grizzly to kill more of his past. Then he realizes the problem is within himself and not within the bear. He returns to the old ways to help him understand who he is. He decides he will never be a clout Indian again, and he will never return to the arena. He is Tom Black Bull, a Ute Indian who is proud of his Ute inheritance.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

After the incident with the bear, Tom bathed in the creek, and then he started up the mountain, naked and unarmed, and he fasted. Why did he do this?

*It was a penance journey. This journey purified Tom from the harm he had caused, and it helped him to understand who he was.*

#### Literary Analysis

When the agent at the school paid Blue Elk for taking the bear into the mountains, "Blue Elk put on his tattered hat. Then he turned and left, a tired and bruised old man who somehow, the agent couldn't figure out how, represented the pride and dignity of a whole race." How could Blue Elk have symbolized the pride and dignity of the Ute race?

*Answers may vary. The Ute heritage was very old. It had been used by the white settlers, and many Ute had given up their heritage and lifestyles for the more materialistic lifestyle of the whites.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

How were Tom and Meo alike? How were they different?

*Tom and Meo were alike because they were both bronc twisters used by Red to make money, and they both had grown up in the old ways. They were different because Tom stood up against Red in a way that Meo had not; Tom was angrier than Meo, and did not appreciate the old ways when he and Meo were together.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Why did the author title the book, *When the Legends Die*?

*As Tom became successful in the rodeo, many legends formed about who he was. While Tom did not believe those legends, the image he had of himself was not accurate. Tom had to "kill" the person he thought he was in order to discover who he really was.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Although he had never won the championship, Tom Black became a living legend, and fantastic stories were told about him. Read examples of folklore or tall tales about such characters as Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed. Discuss the use of exaggeration in these stories and compare them with the stories of Tom Black. The students could

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make up a character and write a tall tale of their own.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The main character was a member of the Ute tribe, a Native North American tribe that once inhabited central and western Colorado, eastern Utah, and northwestern New Mexico. In fact, the tribal name Ute is the basis for the name Utah. Beginning in the 1850s, the range of the Ute was limited by several treaties with the United States government. Study the history and lifestyle of the Ute tribe to make the story more meaningful for students. Focus on their culture, the type of land in which they lived, and the reasons their territory was limited. Although the book spans many years, the earliest events in the book occurred in 1910 when the main character was three years old. At that time, few Ute were living in the old ways. Based on your research of that time period, discuss the factors that may have caused the Ute to leave their old ways.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Bessie agreed to call the boy Thomas Black Bull when he was baptized. Still, she insisted the name was meaningless because he would choose his own name when he was old enough. When he was older, he named himself Bear's Brother because he left deer meat for a bear that was not afraid of him. Have the students choose descriptive names for themselves based on an experience, a hobby, an interest, or a personal trait. Ask them to write a paragraph explaining the choice.

**Understanding the Main Idea** In *When the Legends Die*, the main character went in search of himself until he found his own identity. It is fitting, therefore, that he had many names throughout the book. He was called the boy, Little Black Bull, Bear's Brother, Thomas Black Bull, Tom Black Bull, Tom Black, Killer Black or Devil Tom, he, and Tom Black Bull once again. (Please note: "He" is not a pronoun in this case. The author used "he" during the entire scene on the mountain when the main character did not understand who he was.) Discuss the importance of these names, including who gave him each name, the reason he was given the name, and

the part of the story each name represented. To make the comparison of information easier, include this information in a chart. How does the author's use of many names help emphasize the main idea of the story?