

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Where the Lilies Bloom

by  
Vera Cleaver

### Book Information

Vera Cleaver, Where the Lilies Bloom  
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210 Pages  
Book Level: 5.2  
Interest Level: MG

This is a tough and tender novel about an orphaned mountain family and the courageous fourteen-year-old, Mary Call, who keeps them together and alive. The coauthor is Bill Cleaver.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; National Book Award/ Honors; SLJ Best Book

**Topics:** Family Life, Growing Up; Family Life, Orphans; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Take a Stand: Leadership

### Main Characters

Alma and Gaither Graybeal school friends of Mary Call and Romey

Cosby Luther the deceased mother of the Luther children and wife of Roy Luther

Devola a simple-minded eighteen-year-old girl who is Mary Call's older sister

Ima Dean the youngest girl in the Luther family

Kiser Pease the owner of the land upon which the Luthers have sharecropped

Mary Call the principal character in the story, a fourteen-year-old girl who tries to honor the promises she made to her father before his death

Miss Breathitt the school principal

Miss Goldie Pease Kiser Pease's sister, who comes at his request to nurse him when he leaves the hospital

Mr. Connell a kindly, fair and generous storekeeper who encourages the Luther children when they say they plan to take up wildcrafting

Mrs. Connell the storekeeper's nosy and stingy wife

Romey a ten-year-old boy, the younger brother of Mary Call

Roy Luther the sickly father of Mary Call, Devola, Romey, and Ima Dean

### Vocabulary

**abattoir** a slaughterhouse

**acquiescent** to submit or comply silently or without protest

**four-in-hand** a long necktie tied in a slipknot with the ends left hanging

**gimlet** a small tool for boring holes, consisting of a shaft with a pointed screw at one end and a handle perpendicular to the shaft at the other

**ingrates** ungrateful people

**quietus** a period of retirement or inactivity

**sharecrop** to live as a tenant farmer that pays as rent a share of the crop that is grown

**troglodytes** prehistoric cave dwellers

### Synopsis

Mary Call is a fourteen-year-old girl who lives with her widowed father, Roy Luther, and three siblings in a sharecropper's home in Trial Valley of the Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina. Their landlord, Kiser Pease, hopes to marry Mary Call's eighteen-year-old sister, Devola. Roy Luther objects to the marriage because Devola is simple-minded and in need of protection. Roy Luther knows he is not well, and makes Mary Call promise three things before he dies: that she will always take pride in the Luther name, that she will keep the family together and not accept charity, and that she will keep Devola with her always and not let her marry Kiser Pease. The story tells of the hardships and triumphs this family faces while trying to be true to these promises.

Roy Luther soon experiences an attack that leaves him disabled in thought and speech. Romey, Mary Call's ten-year-old brother, notices that no smoke has been coming from Kiser's chimney, and when he and Mary Call investigate, they find Kiser near death and suffering from pneumonia. They save his life by giving him an onion bath, and as he regains consciousness, Mary Call asks him to sign a deed to the house and land on which they have been living

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as payment for saving his life. With signature in hand, the Luther children now realize they must survive on their own. They begin to wildcraft, collecting roots and herbs in the mountains and bringing them to Mr. Connell at the General Store. Although a kindly man, his wife is shrewd and tells the children about the county agencies for children like them.

A few days later, Roy Luther dies in his sleep. Mary Call tells Romey, but asks him not to tell Devola or Ima Dean, their little sister, until later. That evening, Mary Call and Romey bury Roy Luther up on Old Joshua in a grave Roy Luther dug for himself beforehand. He had requested that there be no funeral or undertaker.

The children's lives become dominated by hiding the fact that Roy Luther is dead. They lock Roy Luther's bedroom door and tell anyone that comes by that Roy Luther is sleeping. Kiser comes around a lot always wanting to talk about marrying Devola. The children are able to procure food, animals, a radio, and a cow from him while holding him at bay. They get a reprieve from his visits when he is run over by a truck and is hospitalized. Meanwhile, winter arrives with a vengeance, and the roof of the Luther house collapses. Miss Goldie Pease, Kiser's sister, pays a visit and informs Mary Call that the deed she holds is worthless and that the land really belongs to her. Goldie tells the Luthers to vacate in two weeks.

Mary Call is devastated. She proposes the family live in a cave until spring, when they can begin to build a house. The others express their doubts and fears. Mary Call takes to the hills to locate a cave, and when she returns, she finds Kiser sitting with Devola at the table. Devola tells her that Kiser paid Goldie for the house and the land, and that she plans to marry Kiser. Mary Call at first protests, but is overcome with an immense weariness. She faints and is taken to bed.

The story ends with Kiser and Devola getting married and moving into Kiser's house. Mary Call, Romey and Ima Dean stay on in the small house and live self-sufficiently, with Kiser as their guardian.

He is able to straighten things out with the county people so Roy Luther can be left where he is on Old Joshua.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

How did Mary Call feel toward Miss Breathitt? How do you know?

*Mary Call admired Miss Breathitt and looked up to her. She seemed enamored with her knowledge, and it inspired her to grow out of the ignorance that surrounded many of the mountain people. She also seemed mesmerized by Miss Breathitt's eyes.*

#### Literary Analysis

Where is the climax of *Where the Lilies Bloom*? Why is it the climax?

*The climax occurs when Mary Call returns from looking for a cave and finds Devola and Kiser talking at the table. She continues to resist their reasoning until she is too sick and is put to bed. This is the main turning point of the story, where the "hiding" is over for the Luther children and a new existence for the family begins.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

What could you conclude were the authors' attitudes toward children? Support your answer.

*The authors seem to view children as very capable and resourceful. Mary Call is able to think on her feet and outwit many adults. They are able to survive on their own for many months and are very enterprising when it comes to earning money. In spite of some times of anger, they support and care for one another.*

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### Constructing Meaning

To which character do you relate the most? Why?

*Answers will vary. Mary Call is strong willed and stubborn. She triumphs in the face of adversity. Romey is a questioner. He is hardworking, yet tender and can let his feelings out. Devola is loving and kind. She goes about her daily work with a song on her lips. Ima Dean is the baby and needs to be consoled with sugar and hugs when upset. Mr. Connell truly cares about the children and their welfare, whereas his wife is just interested in the dirt she can dig up on people, and in being judgmental. Kiser, though not the brightest person, undergoes a transformation from stingy to generous. Students may be able to see that people are capable of tremendous change.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Devola is a more complicated character than she appears. Although described by Mary Call as cloudy-headed, she is able to drive a car, keep the house neat and clean and is a tender and soothing caregiver. Have the students reflect on a time they might have misjudged someone. What did they discover about the person that made them realize they were wrong in their initial perceptions? Write about it.

**Recognizing Setting** The story takes place in the hills of Appalachian North Carolina. People of this area have often been considered among the poorest and least educated in our nation. Have the students do some research on the area. What is the main industry or means of employment for the people living there? Are the houses of the residents those you see depicted in the latest home magazines? Often, children will ask, why don't people just leave if things are so bad? This becomes an opportunity to discuss some sociological issues. Why does being poor and relatively uneducated tend to keep succeeding generations in the same place and cycle of poverty?

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The authors

take the time and effort to name many of the wildflowers and plants the children gather by name. Authors often have to research the things about which they write. Have the students look in a plant or wildflower book. Sketch the plants that have been listed in *Where the Lilies Bloom*. Tell what, if any, medicinal purposes they may have.

**Understanding Literary Features** One theme in this story is the strong bonds and responsibility toward family. In the time before widespread social welfare agencies existed, families experiencing hardship relied on themselves or the help from a relative after the death of a parent. Mary Call took on a tremendous responsibility at a young age. Literature is filled with examples of young children taking on adult roles in a time of crisis to keep their families together. Have the students find another example in literature where a child was forced to look after his or her siblings. Compare and contrast *Where the Lilies Bloom* with the story they have chosen. What crisis caused the child's role as caretaker? How did the child handle the situation? Did the child seek outside help? Identify the similarities and differences.