

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Across the Grain by Jean Ferris

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## Book Information

Jean Ferris, Across the Grain  
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216 Pages  
Book Level: 4.6  
Interest Level: UG

Will and his older sister Paige attempt to survive after their mother dies and leaves them on their own.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books

**Topics:** Adventure, Survival; Family Life, Death; Family Life, Sisters

## Main Characters

Mike Macey Will's classmate and fellow desert visitor; a bright, independent, and unconventional young woman who sees something special in Will and seeks out his friendship

Paige Griffin Will's older sister and his legal guardian, who has given all the responsibility to Will

Sam Webb a long-time desert dweller and deep, insightful man of few words who feels a deep affinity for the desert and shares his life and love of whittling with Will

Will Griffin a perceptive, hard-working and responsible high school senior who steps into the role of caretaker for himself and his flighty older sister after the death of their mother

## Vocabulary

**adobe** a building made of sun-dried brick  
**lintel** the horizontal crosspiece over a door or window, carrying the weight of the wall above it  
**soporific** tending to cause sleep  
**viga** a heavy beam or rafter across the ceiling in a house of the old Spanish type

## Synopsis

As the story opens, Will is dealing with yet another

problem caused by Paige's lack of responsibility: There's no food in the house. Will bemoans the fact that Paige will not even do her own laundry. What's worse is that now she is hatching another misguided scheme, this time involving a move to a small town in the Southern California desert. Although Will believes this move is absurd, he is required to follow her because Paige is his legal guardian.

Will arranges to rent out their coastal house at Imperial Beach and then enjoys a few free days near the ocean he loves. A day at the beach is capped off when Will notices a black dog romping joyfully in the surf. In the same spirit of abandon, Will joins the dog for a few moments of pure joy. The next day, he joins Paige in their two-bedroom trailer outside the town of Agua Seca. Paige has planned for the two of them to work in a diner called the Snakebite. Will works an exhausting schedule at the grill, but he meets at least one person here whom he likes immediately. Sam Webb is a plain-spoken man who invites Will over to his trailer and shares the magic of whittling with him. Sam also fills Will in about the mouthy and abrupt young woman he met at the diner, Mike Macey.

After spending some time with Mike, Will finds he respects her forthright personality, even though it pains him to be so honest about his feelings. He shares with Sam the idea that men can have strong emotions while feeling no particular need to express them.

The three become very close while working on the adobe house that Sam has designed. Will enjoys the work, the company, and the desert surroundings and begins to appreciate the ancient power of this stark landscape. The period of tranquility is disrupted when Sam breaks his leg on the construction site. The forced inactivity allows him time to think about the great tragedy in his life, the death of his son in Vietnam. After a bout with drinking and solitude, he allows Mike and Will to help him, and work on the house begins again.

As the adobe is completed, the time for the three friends to be together is running out. Mike will go to

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UCLA in the fall, and Will has plans to go back to Imperial Beach. An unexpected scholarship awarded by UCLA arrives in the mail, and Will is outraged to learn that Mike and Sam have procured the opportunity for him without his knowledge. At first, he knows he will not accept; who would take care of Paige? By the time the adobe is finished, he decides to go. Not even a last minute attempt by Paige to lure him to San Francisco deters him. He has decided to live his own life in his own way. As Sam told him earlier over a piece of carved wood, "You're asking for trouble if you try to go across your grain."

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

At the end of the story, Will gave Sam a carving of a black dog. Of all the animals Will had carved under Sam's supervision, why do you think he chose to give him this one?

*The image of the black dog is suggestive of the joy and freedom Will shared with the mysterious dog on Imperial Beach. The dog most likely is a symbol of Will's new-found freedom and independence, secured partially by the efforts of Sam himself.*

### Literary Analysis

What were some of the things, both tangible and intangible, that Will learned during his time in the desert?

*Will learned to carve, to whittle, and to construct adobes. From Sam and Mike, he also learned about friendship, the value of revealing one's feelings, and the necessity to lead one's own life.*

### Inferential Comprehension

As they all got to know each other, Will, Mike, and Sam agreed that there were definite differences in how men and women deal with expressing their feelings. Summarize these differences as presented in the book.

*Mike feels that a direct question about someone's feelings is logically the way to get the information you need. She tells Will, "When I'm being friends with somebody, I like to turn them inside out and know everything." Sam and Will, however, agree that "men just aren't comfortable plowing around in each other's heads." They suggest that men get to know each other by, for instance, whittling together. By the end of the book, Mike learns that there are times when it is best to be silent.*

### Constructing Meaning

With regard to the art of whittling, Sam once told Will, "One miscarve can ruin a whole piece, or you could go with the scar and make it into something else." Think of this statement with respect to Sam himself. What was the "scar" that might have ruined his life?

*The carving analogy could be made relative to the great tragedy of Sam's life, the loss of his son. It seems to very nearly ruin his life, but with the help of his young friends, he seems ready now to "make it into something else."*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** As a study in the craft of characterization, list all the major characters in this book on a blackboard or overhead projector. Ask the class for three to five adjectives to describe each character. The following are some examples: Will--responsible, funny, hard-working; Sam--serious, friendly, private; Mike--tough, creative, sincere; Paige--fickle, searching, vulnerable; Jay--fun-loving, shallow, kind; Truline--trusting, friendly, gullible; Cindy--pretty, manipulative, popular. Ask each student to decide which character they feel is most like themselves. Have

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students write a brief paragraph about how they are similar to and different from the character they chose.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** One of the major plot elements in this book is the construction of Sam's adobe house. As Will participates in both the menial labor and the skilled craftsmanship associated with the structure, he begins to understand the majesty of the desert. As an aid in understanding many of the specific terms used in the book relative to Southwestern architecture, have students research the adobe style using books, encyclopedias, or the Internet. Ask students to draw and label a typical Southwestern adobe, highlighting the unique building techniques and names given to the structural components.

**Understanding Dialogue** The playful, honest dialogue between Mike and Will reveals their characters and their basic way of interacting with others. Though Will admires Mike's directness, her insistence on a thorough discussion of his deepest feelings makes him uncomfortable. As an exercise in understanding the value of dialogue in revealing character, ask students to write a short segment of dialogue between Mike and Sam. Imagine adding a scene to the end of the book, when Will and Mike leave Sam's trailer after saying good-bye for the last time. Mike tries to extract Will's feelings from him at a time when Will wants nothing more than to ruminate in silence. Ask volunteers to read their dialogues to the class.

**Responding to Literature** Among the many things that Sam taught Will during their time together was the idea of the "soul's home landscape," the place where each person feels he or she is meant to be. To Sam, this was the desert; to Will, the ocean; to Paige, such a place had not yet been found. As a class discussion, ask students to consider whether they have ever felt a strange affinity for a place they have visited, seen, or read about. Ask volunteers to name their special place and what it is about it that seems to appeal to them.