

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Ballad of Lucy Whipple

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Book Information

Karen Cushman, The Ballad of Lucy Whipple

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Book Level: 5.8

Interest Level: MG

In 1849, twelve-year-old Lucy is distraught when her mother moves the family from Massachusetts to a small California mining town. Lucy helps run a rough boarding house and looks for comfort in books while trying to find a way to get "home".

Award: American Bookseller Pick of the List; Booklist Editors' Choice; John & Patricia Beatty Award; Misc./Other; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; State Award

Topics: Adventure, Life Changes; Family Life, Misc./Other; Family Life, Moving to a New Area; History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; Power Lessons AR, Grade 5; Power Lessons Vocabulary, Grades 7 & Up; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Know Yourself; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies; U.S. States/Regions, California

Main Characters

Butte Whipple Lucy's brother, who liked California and worked in the diggings for a time

Clyde Claymore a preacher who later marries Mama

Lizzie Flagg a girl who becomes Lucy's friend in Lucky Diggins

Lucy Whipple also called California; at first, she doesn't want to live in California, but later realizes it is home

Mama Whipple Lucy's mother, who is fulfilling one of her dreams by living in California

Vocabulary

blasphemous speaking about God or sacred things with abuse or contempt

cacophony harsh and clashing sound

desolate unhappy; forlorn

hankering a longing or yearning; craving

triumphal celebrating a victory

Synopsis

After Lucy's father dies, her mother takes the family to a mining town in California. Lucy does not want to be there and thinks of various plans to go back home to Massachusetts.

Lucy's mother has a job running a boarding house. Lucy comes to know the many miners who are tenants. After hearing the ballad of Rattlesnake Jake, Lucy is convinced that Mr. Coogan is Rattlesnake Jake. She convinces Butte to fetch the deputy because of this. As he is fetching the deputy, Mr. Coogan leaves town.

While berry picking, Lucy meets Joe, a runaway slave. Although Mama refuses to rent to Joe, she does allow Joe to sleep in the mule's old shed. Lucy gives Joe the present of a first and last name-Bernard Freeman.

Brother Clyde comes to town to save souls. After having no success converting anyone, he plans to go back to New Hampshire. Lucy hopes to convince Mama to let her go back with him. Her plans are dashed when Clyde rescues Butte from drowning and miners attend his prayer meeting.

Although Butte is rescued from drowning, he never quite recovers and he dies. Lucy fears she will also lose Mama and for a while goes everywhere with her.

After Mr. Flagg's body is found, Lizzie's mother is charged with murder. Mrs. Flagg is found not guilty

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after Lucy suggests that the bullet that hit Mr. Flagg in the back could have bounced all over before hitting him.

A fire in town destroys almost all of Lucky Diggins. Mama feels Butte is "really gone" after his things burn up in the fire.

Mama agrees to marry Clyde. They will move to the Sandwich Islands to work with heathens. Lucy plans to go back east with Belle. After her family leaves, Lucy realizes the East is no longer home and decides to stay in Lucky Diggins. There she finds her heart's desire and becomes a librarian.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

When Mama was leaving, she told Lucy, "mostly you're like me." What did she mean by this?

Neither of them was weak and dreamy. Both were strong and stubborn.

Literary Analysis

It was mentioned several times that Mr. Flagg beat his wife and children. Why do you suppose the author repeated this?

When he was killed, the reader wouldn't feel sorry for him. Readers would feel sorry for Mrs. Flagg, and understand why she might shoot him.

Inferential Comprehension

After the fire, Mama defended Bernard against Billy Parker. What might have happened if she had not defended him?

*Billy and his friends might have harmed Bernard.
Billy might have taken Bernard back to his master.
Billy might have run Bernard out of town.*

Constructing Meaning

After the fire, Lucy's family remembered Butte by blowing his whistle. What do you have that helps you remember a certain person or time?

Souvenirs, pictures, jewelry

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization In this story, Lucy hears the ballad of Rattlesnake Jake. In this ballad, Rattlesnake Jake's villainous deeds are told. It might be fun for the students to write a ballad about Lucy. Using the ballad on pages 50-53 as a guide, they could write of her adventures. Suggestions might include: when she came to California, when she became "lost," when she felt she chased off the real Rattlesnake Jake.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors At the end of this story, Lucy decides to stay on in Lucky Diggins. The author makes Lucky Diggins seem real in this story. It might be enjoyable for the students to draw a map of California and locate the site where the California gold rush started. They could also speculate about where Lucky Diggins would have been located. They could do this by using the geographical clues in the story.

Making Predictions In this story, Bernard leaves Lucky Diggins and goes to San Francisco. He is a runaway slave and hopes to "get free of this slavery thing." Have the students write a short paper about what happened to Bernard when he reached San Francisco. Did he become free or was he found by Mr. Sawyer? Did he come to own his own business, or work for someone else? How did the actions of the State of California during the Civil War affect his status?

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Before he dies, Butte, Lucy's brother, thinks up forty-nine words for liquor. A list of forty-eight words is on page 70. Using this list for inspiration, have the students think up forty-nine words to describe someone or something. Suggestions might include: Lucy, Lucky Diggins, Belle, or Pa.