

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## By the Great Horn Spoon!

by

### Sid Fleischman

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### Book Information

Sid Fleischman, By the Great Horn Spoon!

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193 Pages

Book Level: 5.1

Interest Level: MG

The book follows the adventures of young Jack and his aunt's butler Praiseworthy, as they stow away on a ship and head for their place in the Gold Rush of 1849.

**Topics:** Adventure, Travel; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5

### Main Characters

Aunt Arabella Jack's Boston aunt and Praiseworthy's former employer, who travels to San Francisco to seek the pair after selling her house

Captain Swain Captain of the "Lady Wilma," a sidewheeler bound for California; Swain is the first of the rough but principled characters the two meet

Cut-Eye Higgins a shipboard scoundrel who steals Buckbee's map and escapes from the "Lady Wilma"

Dr. Buckbee a fellow passenger on the "Lady Wilma," who is staking his fortunes on a gold mine

Jack Flagg a twelve-year-old Boston boy, who wishes to save his aunt's house from foreclosure by seeking a fortune in the gold fields of California

Mountain Jim a "Lady Wilma" passenger, who saves the life of Good Luck, the pig, by hiding him in a barrel

Mountain Ox a fearsomely muscular miner from Grizzly Flats, who comes to Hangtown to fight "Bullwhip" Praiseworthy for the honor of their respective towns

Pitch-pine Billy a friendly Hangtown miner, who is the first miner the pair encounters in the gold fields; he introduces Jack to coffee and the pair to the techniques of gold mining

Praiseworthy the dignified, resourceful, and unflappable Flagg family butler, who accompanies Jack on his adventure and finds his own strengths in the process

Quartz Jackson a gold miner just down from the hills to San Francisco, who gratefully accepts a haircut from Praiseworthy just in time to meet his mail-order bride

### Vocabulary

**Argonauts** a reference to the search for the Golden Fleece in Greek mythology; it is also used to refer to those who took part in the California Gold Rush

**becalmed** stranded at sea due to lack of wind to power a sailing ship

**berth** a built-in bed in a ship's cabin

**cut-purse** a pickpocket

**fisticuffs** a fight with the fists, or the science of boxing

**grubstake** money or supplies advanced to a prospector in return for a share in his findings

**yardarm** one end of a slender rod fastened to the mast to support a sail

### Synopsis

As the story opens, Praiseworthy, a Boston butler, and Jack, his young master, are emerging from potato barrels in the hold of the "Lady Wilma," a sailing ship headed for the gold fields of California. The two were forced to board as stowaways after losing their tickets to a cut-purse named Cut-Eye Higgins. Praiseworthy immediately displays his unflappable character as the pair marches to the captain to present themselves. The two are sent to work in the boiler room, but the meeting begins a relationship of mutual respect between Captain Swain and the former butler.

Throughout the voyage, Praiseworthy displays his ingenuity in problem solving. Using a soot-stained pig, he engineers a foolproof way to identify the thief who stole their tickets. He brokers an impossible deal between a passenger with rotting potatoes and another with drying grapevines and saves the

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fortunes of both.

All the passengers want to get to California in record time, but none so much as the captain, who stands to win the helm of a new clipper ship if he beats the "Sea Raven" to San Francisco. The urge for speed prompts him to take a dangerous shortcut through the Strait of Magellan. The lead goes back and forth between the "Lady Wilma" and the "Sea Raven" until finally, on advice from Praiseworthy, Captain Swain burns the on-board lumber to fuel his last-minute sprint into San Francisco Bay.

Once in California, the pair is struck by the frenzied atmosphere in San Francisco. The first person they meet is a miner who advises them to go to Hangtown. Using money earned by extracting gold dust from the haircut clippings, the two make their way to the diggin's. All along, Praiseworthy tries to maintain a certain distance and decorum, as suits his station. Jack, on the other hand, likes nothing more than to be mistaken for Praiseworthy's son.

A surprise occurs as road agents hold up the stage that is carrying the pair to the gold fields. Praiseworthy is unaffected, as always, until the robbers discover his hidden picture of Aunt Arabella. It is then that, aided by the gold dust packed in his white glove, Praiseworthy sets one of them sprawling with an incredible left jab. The feat will later earn him the nickname "Bullwhip."

In Hangtown, the two meet up with a friendly miner named Pitch-pine Billy, who shows them the ropes and teaches young Jack to drink coffee. Although they come to enjoy life among the hearty, friendly miners, the two never have much luck. Finally, they travel to Shirt-tail camp, where they know Cut-Eye is holding a stolen treasure map. They want the map, for they have been promised half the takings from the mine. They meet Cut-Eye seconds before he is about to hang for horse thievery, but agree to stop the proceedings in exchange for the map. The judge agrees to let Cut-Eye go free so long as the two adventurers dig him a grave on the hillside. It is there that they hit pay dirt.

They quickly pack up their bags of gold and head back to San Francisco; there is no time to spare in saving Aunt Arabella's house. A boiler explosion aboard their riverboat forces them to cut loose their gold and leaves them penniless. After arriving in San Francisco, the pair is shocked to see Aunt Arabella herself searching for them through the streets of the city. Praiseworthy, now changed by the honesty and lack of pretension found in California, is quick to "stake his claim" and ask for her hand in marriage. To the delight of all, especially Jack, she accepts.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

In what ways did "Praiseworthy" live up to his name?

*Among Praiseworthy's many admirable qualities are his kindness and protectiveness of Jack, willingness to help strangers, reluctance to take credit for his own ideas, and modesty about his many accomplishments. As the story goes on, Praiseworthy also shows courage and a certain unflappable quality that inspires trust in everyone he meets.*

### Literary Analysis

Think about the cast of characters that Praiseworthy and Jack meet in the gold fields. Can you make any general observations about the character of the miners?

*The character of the gold miners is presented mostly by way of their colorful dialogue. As shown in the characters of Quartz Jackson and Pitch-pine Billy, these men are seen as humble, friendly, generous, and fiercely self-reliant. Quartz Jackson looks fearsome, but is only too glad to help the pair get started prospecting. Pitch-pine Billy adopts the two sight-unseen and shares what meager amenities he has.*

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## Inferential Comprehension

Praiseworthy's coolheaded problem-solving keeps the pair on course throughout the story. What are some of the ways he and Jack "plucked opportunity from the air" during the course of the book?

*Beginning with the scheme to expose the shipboard thief, and continuing on to the arrival in San Francisco, the former butler handles dire circumstances with aplomb. In California, he earns riverboat passage with gold dust sifted from miners' hair. A foolish expenditure is turned into a big business deal when the pair sells neckties at the diggin's. Praiseworthy turns disaster around at the end of the story by earning passage home selling cats.*

## Constructing Meaning

Do you think the ending of the story would be different if Praiseworthy had returned to Boston? Why or why not?

*Most likely, a return to Boston would have meant the end of any hope Praiseworthy had for winning the hand of Aunt Arabella. In Boston, such an arrangement simply "wasn't done." However, the former butler has been greatly changed by his time in California, a place where he tells her, "we say a thing straight out." His appreciation for this way of life, together with Aunt Arabella's willingness to leave Boston behind, likely combined to give him the courage to propose to her.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The first half of this story takes place aboard a sailing ship headed for the gold fields of California. The only way to the Pacific coast was a fifteen-thousand-mile passage around Cape Horn, where "the wind howls like banshees and the waves can batter a ship to splinters." To understand the realities of coast-to-coast travel in the mid-nineteenth century, give students an outline map of the Western Hemisphere. Ask them to trace the voyage of the "Lady Wilma," beginning in Boston Harbor, and including Rio de Janeiro, Cape Horn,

the Strait of Magellan, Callao, and San Francisco Bay. Add to the map the typical route that might be taken by an overland expedition to California. Help students discover why, when the overland route is apparently much shorter, so many chose the treacherous sea voyage to San Francisco.

**Understanding Characterization** The colorful characters encountered by Praiseworthy and Jack are one of the most enjoyable aspects of the book. Men from all over the country came to try their luck, often abandoning farms, homes, ships, and families in the process. To gain insight into how an author creates a colorful character with a particular cultural or historical flavor, ask students to create their own imaginary '49er and write a brief first-person account of his background and experience in the gold fields. Ask students to address the following questions: Where did he come from? What did he do before leaving home? How did he get to California? Where did he stake his claim? By what nickname was he known? Did he strike it rich? Did he ever return home? Encourage students to add any imaginary details they can.

**Comparing and Contrasting** People often change as a result of new experiences. This was certainly the case with Praiseworthy, the former Boston butler who eventually becomes a strong, plainspoken man of the world. During the story, Praiseworthy begins to lose the physical symbols of his former life. As the bowler hat, the umbrella and finally the fine, black coat are lost, so are some of Praiseworthy's old ideas about "proper" behavior. Ask students to chronicle the changes in Praiseworthy by giving them a "before and after" assignment. On one half of a piece of paper, labeled January 27, 1849, ask them to draw a portrait of Praiseworthy as he boards the "Lady Wilma" in Boston Harbor. On the other half, labeled August 16, 1849, have them draw a portrait of Praiseworthy as he leaves the diggings laden with gold and heads back to San Francisco. During class review and discussion, point out the physical manifestations of Praiseworthy's transformation as illustrated on student papers.

**Understanding Dialogue** Throughout the second

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half of the book, the salty, colorful dialogue of the miners helps to reveal the basic character of these tough adventurers. To study the use of regional and historical colloquialisms, have students create a short "English-Miner Dictionary," in which common terms and phrases are translated into their '49er equivalents. For example, the miners refer to a burro as a mountain canary, water is called dew, and coffee is jamoka.