

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Caleb's Story by Patricia MacLachlan

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## Book Information

Patricia MacLachlan, Caleb's Story  
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The stranger lurking on the Witting family's prairie farm turns out to be their long-lost grandfather, whose presence, plus prodding from Caleb, forces Jacob to deal with his past.

**Award:** ABC (Assoc. of Booksellers for Children) Choice Aw

**Topics:** English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 12, 90%; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Grandparents; Family Life, Sons; History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; Natural Environments, Plains/Plateaus/Prairies; Popular Groupings, Historical Fiction; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, See All Sides; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 4-6 (Theme: Friends and Family); Recommended Reading, Coop. Children's Book Center; Recommended Reading, Crown/Lamplighter Nominee; Recommended Reading, Junior Library Guild Selection; Series, Sarah, Plain and Tall

## Main Characters

Anna Witting Caleb's sister, who gives him journals to write in after she moves into town to work for a doctor

Caleb Witting the young adolescent son of Jacob Witting; a tender, hardworking and observant boy who teaches his grandfather to read and write so that the grandfather can learn about the family he missed and make up with his son

Cassie Witting the four-and-a-half-year-old daughter of Jacob and Sarah; a spontaneous, curious and loving child who instantly adopts the stranger who is her grandfather

Jacob Witting Caleb's father; a hardworking but stubborn man who is determined not to forgive his father for abandoning him and his mother when he was young

John Witting Jacob's father, who returns to his prairie homestead in his old age to reconcile with his son

Justin Sam's son and Anna's boyfriend, who is in Europe fighting the war

Sam the Wittings' doctor, who treats Grandfather's heart condition

Sarah Witting Jacob Witting's second wife; a strong, kind, wise woman, who urges her husband to reconcile with his father

## Vocabulary

**confidential** private; secret; not to be shared

**imaginary** not real; of the mind

**meddle** to interfere in others' affairs

**set** to put or put back in place; to position or reposition

**stubborn** set in one's ways; unbending; rigid; not easily changed or persuaded

## Synopsis

Anna hands her younger brother, Caleb, her journals before she leaves the Witting prairie farm to finish school and work for the town doctor, Sam. Caleb worries he will have little to write about, but that soon changes when he discovers an old man shivering in the barn. Sarah, Caleb's stepmother, welcomes the stranger into the house. She learns his name is John, and he has come to see her husband, Jacob. She insists John stay in Anna's bedroom and rest until Jacob returns from taking Anna to town. When John awakes from his nap, Cassie, Caleb's four-and-a-half-year-old sister, begins barraging him with questions. Caleb wants John to read what he has written about him, but John is uninterested. Caleb notices that John takes medicine when Sarah is not looking.

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When Jacob returns from town the next day, it takes him a few moments to realize that the stranger is actually his father, whom he thought was dead. Jacob storms out of the house. Caleb has never seen his father so upset, but he and Cassie are happy with the thought of having a grandfather. Jacob refuses to talk to his father, despite Sarah's encouragement. He is bitter because John abandoned his wife and Jacob when Jacob was still young. He never wrote or came back. Jacob insists he will never forgive his father.

The home is filled with silence and tension between father and son, but Cassie, Caleb and Sarah are kind to John. Caleb begins to read Anna's journals to Grandfather, filling him in on all he has missed. Sarah soon discovers John is on heart medication and insists he see Sam in town. Neither Sam nor John will discuss John's condition with the family. When Cassie asks Grandfather to read her the medicine bottle, he claims he doesn't have his eyeglasses. This serves as the clue that helps Caleb discover that Grandfather is illiterate, and this was the reason he never wrote to Papa after he left. Caleb takes on the task of teaching Grandfather to read late in the evenings.

The tension between Papa and Grandfather continues to grow until Papa pushes Grandfather one day in the barn. Grandfather pushes back, and Papa falls over a plow and breaks his leg. Grandfather sets Papa's leg himself because a storm has come and Sam cannot be reached. Despite this incident, Papa continues to be stubborn and unforgiving. Caleb and Grandfather take up the extra chores while Jacob is laid up.

Another storm arrives, and Sarah goes outdoors at night to find a dog that has not returned home. When the family realizes she is gone, Grandfather volunteers to find her. She is half frozen when he discovers her in a snowdrift. With Caleb's help, he gets her inside. Papa tends to her, and she is revived. The next day, Grandfather plans to leave. Sarah again urges Jacob to make things better. This time Jacob concedes. Grandfather confesses his

love for Jacob and admits his shame for leaving and for not being able to read. Grandfather tells him that Caleb has just now been teaching him. Jacob asks his father to live with them.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Why is it easier for Jacob to accept his father being dead than being alive and wanting to become part of the family?

*Jacob was deeply hurt by his father's leaving when he was a young boy. If his father was dead, Jacob could close that unpleasant chapter in his life because nothing further could be done about it. However, once he found out his father was alive, all the old hurts and unanswered questions came back, the biggest being why his father didn't write to him over all these years. He felt not only physically abandoned by his father, but deprived of love, too.*

### Literary Analysis

How do the storms that rage outside on the prairie mirror the "storms" that go on inside the Wittings' home?

*Snowstorms are fierce out on the prairie. Not only does snow fall, but the wind howls and blows the snow so that if one walks outdoors, one is not only hit with cold, but with blindness. The storms indoors were caused by the anger Jacob felt toward his father. The cold in the house was the silence between them and the tension that the silence brought to the household. The blindness was the resentment Jacob held, for he was not able to see his father in any other way than the way John was the day he left him. He could not see anything good about him, nor did he want to. Consequently, storms raged within the house, too.*

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#### Inferential Comprehension

Based on elements in the story, what can the students, through research and inference, conclude about the name of the war in which Justin was fighting?

*Some of the elements students could use were the facts that there was no electricity, and that transportation took place by horse and wagon rather than by car or truck. This places things in the early 1900s or before. Other clues the students may use to research include the fact that Sarah was a mail-order bride, which was common out West at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the influenza outbreak in the U.S. that occurred in 1918 and 1919. Since Justin was fighting in Europe, and the war was not taking place in the United States, it is reasonable to assume that the war was World War I, which the U.S. entered in 1917.*

#### Constructing Meaning

After Caleb watches his grandfather make excuses for not reading, Caleb realizes that his grandfather can't read. Grandfather admits in the end to his son, Jacob, that he feels ashamed. How has this story affected your appreciation of the importance of reading?

*Students may say that they see how important reading is. They may now realize that poor reading skills can be a source of embarrassment and shame in later life. Some may realize it will put them at a disadvantage in the work force in the future if their reading skills are not strong.*

### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** Life on the prairie is harsh in winter, especially at a time when homes had no electricity, oil or gas to provide light and heat. Travel to town was not an everyday affair either, and families needed to be well prepared to survive during bad storms. As a class, or in small groups, ask the students to make a list of the preparations a rural family needed to make for the long winter ahead. Make sure they look at all aspects of family life, including food, clothing,

first-aid supplies, heating material and so on. Discussion may follow about the time it took for all these tasks to be completed and how preparations needed to be started during the summer and fall months.

**Recognizing Details** When Grandfather was about to go out to look for Sarah in the blizzard, Papa told him to look for red because Sarah was wearing a red coat. This was a life-saving clue, for in a storm where the world is white, Grandfather could look until he found red, which contrasted with the white. The students may wish to experiment with how a color clue helps them find a missing object. A small colored object can be placed on an area that has generally the same background color, such as a lawn, a plowed field or a beach. Then, they can be asked to look for the object. A similar object that contrasts with the background color could be placed on the same area. The students again could be asked to find the object and note whether it was easier or harder than with a similar color.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** Cassie was proud of the title Grandfather gave to her -- "Queen of Questions." It fit her personality and behavior. It might be fun for the students to dub themselves and their classmates with fun (and respectful) titles, based on their interests or behaviors. They may wish to stick with a Queen or King title or give a title where both words start with the same letter of the alphabet, such as the Countess of Cookies or the Boy of Baseball. The teacher could then collect the lists and share them with the class, asking students to guess who a title is referring to.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** When Jacob's leg broke, a doctor was unable to immediately come to fix it, nor was Jacob able to make it to the doctor. People of the past, and people today who live far from towns or who choose to camp or hike into the woods, need to be prepared for medical emergencies. They must have not only the necessary bandages, disinfectants and medicines with them, but they need to know how to use them. The students can benefit from learning simple first-aid procedures.

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Perhaps a school nurse, emergency worker or parent who knows first-aid skills could be invited into the classroom to show the students some life-saving measures that could be performed in case of an emergency. The guest could explain why Grandfather needed to set Papa's leg and show some other techniques of first aid to the students.