

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Cat Running

by

Zilpha Keatley Snyder

Book Information

Zilpha Keatley Snyder, Cat Running
Quiz Number: 11458
Doubleday, 1994
ISBN 0-385-31056-0; LCCN
168 Pages
Book Level: 5.6
Interest Level: MG

When eleven-year-old Cat Kinsey builds a secret hideout to escape her unhappy homelife, she slowly gets to know a poor family who have come to California after losing their home in Texas to the dust storms of the 1930's.

Award: John & Patricia Beatty Award; State Award

Topics: Adventure, Escape; Family Life, Misc./Other; History, Depression Era America; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Respect All Voices: Respect; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; U.S. States/Regions, California; U.S. States/Regions, Texas

Main Characters

Catherine Kinsey (Cat) the main character of the story, who is an eleven-year-old sixth grader; she is the fastest girl runner in Brownwood School

Charles Kinsey (Father) Cat's stingy and old-fashioned father; he is twenty years older than his wife

Cliff Kinsey Cat's older half-brother

Ellen Kinsey Cat's older half-sister

Janet Kelly Cat's best friend

Lydia Kinsey (Mama) Cat's frail and timid mother

Marianne (Lillybelle) Cat's doll; Sammy calls the doll Lillybelle and, at the end of the story, is given the doll to keep

Samantha Perkins (Sammy) Zane's younger sister

Spence Perkins Zane's younger brother

Zane Perkins the oldest child of the Perkins family; he is a classmate of Cat and the fastest boy runner in Brownwood School

Vocabulary

darning mending a hole in a piece of cloth by sewing in a woven pattern

drought a long period without rain

inventory a list of items, especially of goods and materials in a store

mortified terrified

trespasser one who enters another person's property without permission

veranda a porch with a roof

Synopsis

Eleven-year-old Catherine (Cat) Kinsey is the best runner in her sixth grade class. She lives in California in the 1930's with her parents and her half-brother and half-sister, Cliff and Ellen. Her father is the owner of the town hardware store and is a long-time prominent citizen. Cat thinks he is mean, stingy, and old fashioned. She also thinks that he does not love her very much. Cliff and Ellen are much older than she, and they both work with Father at the hardware store. Cat says she hates all of them.

Cat has decided she will not run during the October Play Day because her father will not allow her to wear slacks, and she does not want to be the only girl to wear a dress. Angry about her father's attitude about slacks, Cat runs down to Coyote Creek. She is surprised to discover a hidden cave, which becomes her secret hiding place. She builds a playhouse and puts some of her favorite possessions there, including a doll named Marianne and a doll's crib.

When the October Play Day arrives at school, Cat is amazed to find that a sixth grade Okie boy, Zane Perkins, wins the race barefoot. The Okies are people primarily from Oklahoma forced to become migrant workers because of poverty. They live in a camp near Cat's house, and Cat thinks there is

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Cat Running

by

Zilpha Keatley Snyder

much to fear from Okietown, where she believes lots of thieves live. She tries to protect her grotto from any Okie trespassers who may discover it. Several days later, when Cat races to her secret place, she discovers a young girl, Sammy, playing with the doll. Cat discovers that the girl is Zane's sister and that she has been told to dress as a boy so she can wear her brothers' hand-me-downs.

After several encounters with Sammy in the cave, Cat begins to feel sympathy for her. Cat tells her she can go there to play with "Lillybelle," the name Sammy has given to the doll. When Sammy suddenly stops coming to the grotto, Cat finds out she is sick. She gathers her courage and goes to Okietown to give Sammy a warm sweater. Cat is shocked at the poverty in the camp and at the meager housing where Sammy and her family live.

As the cold fall weather begins, the Okies finish harvesting the crops, pack up, and move. The Perkins family cannot get their vehicle to run and so are the only family left in the camp. After Cat discovers that the fall rains have flooded her grotto, she takes Lillybelle to Sammy and finds Sammy very ill with pneumonia. Cat and Zane run to Cat's home to telephone a doctor to care for the failing Sammy. Because of their speedy running, the doctor arrives in time to take Sammy to his clinic, where she recuperates.

Cliff helps the Perkins family get their vehicle running so the family can travel to seek work. Cat has learned to respect Zane, and she has realized that her father is not cheap and stingy but that the hardware business is nearly bankrupt. Cat and Zane say good-bye and agree to see each other again some day.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What are Cat's reasons for being so angry when Zane wins the Brownwood race at Play Day?

Cat is too embarrassed to race wearing a dress. When Zane wins, he receives the glory that should have been hers if only she could have worn slacks. She not only believes she is faster than he is, but she also thinks he is unworthy to win because he is not really a part of the school or even the town, since he is from the Okie camp that had just moved there.

Literary Analysis

Why does the Okie camp have so many families living in it? What events cause them to be in that particular camp? Why do the families eventually leave the camp?

The prolonged drought in Oklahoma and the surrounding area had caused many farms to go bankrupt. These families were forced to pack their belongings and travel to places where they could find work. The orchards near Brownwood were ready to be harvested, thus drawing many families to work there. When fall comes and the harvesting is finished, the families have to move on to look for work elsewhere.

Inferential Comprehension

What is similar about Cat's not being able to wear pants for racing and Sammy's wearing boys' clothes until she starts school?

Cat and Sammy are similar in that they cannot wear the clothes they like because of their parents' lack of money and desire to conform to social expectations. Cat's father is unwilling to buy clothes for Cat because he knows his store is on the verge of bankruptcy. Also, he adheres to a strict moral code that prohibits girls from wearing boys' clothes. Sammy's parents have no money to buy clothes either and, out of pride, want her to disguise herself as a boy until they can buy her girls' clothes. They apparently believe that a girl wearing boys' clothes will emphasize their poverty and humiliate them even further.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Cat Running

by

Zilpha Keatley Snyder

Constructing Meaning

How does the reader learn the meaning of "Okie"?
What are the various interpretations of the word?

When the word Okie is first introduced, the reader is not given an interpretation. Cat's impression is that Okies are thieves, and she is afraid that the Okies might enter her secret cave and steal all her things. As the story progresses, Spence reveals that Okies are people who are commonly perceived as dumb, dirty, and lazy. Later it is revealed that Okies are people who had to leave their farms because of the drought. Spence says he is not an Okie because he is from Texas, rather than Oklahoma, but Cat realizes that when people use the term Okie, they may be referring to any displaced families, regardless of their place of origin.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story takes place during the Dust Bowl days of the Great Depression in the 1930's. Have the students work in teams to do research on the Dust Bowl and the migration of people from Oklahoma and other states. Give each team a map of the United States, and have them indicate where the Dust Bowl occurred and the various places of migration. Also have them write a brief report explaining the information they found in their research. Each team should present its report and map to the class.

Understanding Characterization Several times in the story the author compares a character's physical appearance to that of Shirley Temple. Ask them to find pictures of Shirley Temple or view a movie featuring her to get a clear idea of what she looked like. Then have the students work alone or in teams to make a depiction of Shirley Temple such as a drawing, a dressed up doll, collage of pictures, or detailed written description. Students should present their depiction to the class with a connection to one of the Shirley Temple references in the story.

Extending Meaning The story is rich with

references to objects of the 1930's. Some examples are: Zane Grey, Edna Ferber novels, Studebaker, Kewpie doll, celluloid dog, and paddleball. Ask each student to make a list of eight to ten items that are currently popular or important to their age group. What items do they think will be remembered most by themselves and by the rest of society? After the lists are complete, each student should share his list with the class with an explanation of why the objects were selected for the list.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The story takes place during the Dust Bowl and Depression era of the 1930's. Have students find, interview, and write a report about someone who lived through the Depression and tell how it affected them. Have them ask the person to tell personal stories and to describe the way of life. If finding someone who lived through the Depression is not possible for students, a guest speaker could be invited to describe the Depression era to the class, followed by a question and answer session. Another method to depict the times would be to show the film, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Discussion following the film should focus on the hardships of the times, prejudices, and how people managed to maintain their dignity during difficult economic times.