

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Crossing the Starlight Bridge by Alice Mead

Book Information

Alice Mead, Crossing the Starlight Bridge
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A young girl, uneasy in the mix of white and Native American cultures, longs to return to her Maine island home.

Topics: Continents, North America; Family Life, Daughters; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Moving to a New Area; People, Native American; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8

Main Characters

Ann Marie Rayanne's best friend on Two Rivers Island

Grandmother Hilda (Gram) secretary of the principal of Springbrook High School, who accepts Rayanne and her mother into her apartment home when Rayanne's father leaves

Julie young woman who is part of the loon-marking project with Rayanne

Katie and Crissy Rayanne's new friends at Springbrook

Miss Pinkham Rayanne's fourth-grade teacher at Springbrook

Mrs. Madison snobby, high school teacher

Mrs. Wilbur Springbrook High School principal, nicknamed the "Wilburforce"

Rayanne nine-year-old Penobscot girl who moves from the Two River Island reservation with her mother to live with her grandmother in Springbrook, Maine, after her parents' separation

Rayanne's father a Penobscot who had chosen to try to live on Penobscot land, but who after losing his job at the paper mill on the island, either cannot find or gives up trying to find work there

Rayanne's mother a career-minded woman who manages a ShopMore store

Scott fourth-grader who has a reputation for making trouble

Zak an energetic and eccentric high school boy who befriends Rayanne while she is under the lost-and-found table in the principal's office

Vocabulary

Abenaki member of a grouping of American Indian peoples of southern Quebec and Maine or their languages

aggravation a state of being annoyed or exasperated

flouncy to go about hurriedly and conspicuously, with self-conscious and exaggerated movements

heritage something that comes or belongs to one by reason of birth

migratory periodically to move from one region, climate or place to another

Passamaquoddy member of an American Indian people of eastern Maine

Synopsis

A story of a nine-year-old, artistically-gifted Penobscot girl who is confronted both her father's leaving them and her and her mother's need to leave the Two Rivers Island reservation. The main struggle is with all her feelings and being torn between them. At the end, she finds that some things can't be resolved neatly. However, in her imagination, she is making her bridge between her Penobscot heritage and modern mainstream America. The bridge also leads back to her beloved island.

The story opens with Rayanne, a nine-year-old in the Springbrook High School principal's office where her grandmother works as a secretary. Then the story returns to Rayanne's ninth birthday when her father left. He gave her a box of crayons, which in her anger she threw against the wall. Afterward, however, she always chose a "color of the week" and took it with her everywhere.

In financial difficulties and tired of the long commute to work, Rayanne's mother decides to move to

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Springbrook to live with Rayanne's grandmother. Rayanne's grandmother becomes Rayanne's friend and link to the Penobscot stories and teachings. Meanwhile, Rayanne adjusts with some difficulty to the loss of her father and missing her island home. In addition, she needs to adjust to her new school and feelings of loneliness.

At first Rayanne, in her pain of loss and anger, commits small acts of vandalism and violence against some of the boys who irk or tease her. She also defaces a book. But when given a creative outlet, such as drawing a logo for the fourth-grade "Sky Team," she finds new friends. However, no one asks and she cannot speak about what her drawings mean in the Penobscot tradition. She finds it easier to deal with her father's having left, but still sees his leaving in romantic, imaginative terms.

When her father finally returns, she realizes he is small and ordinary. He tells them that he plans to remarry and move not back to the island, but to Portland, Maine. Rayanne's mother realizes they were wrong to wait and hope for him to return to stay with them.

Rayanne's grandmother tries to console and help Rayanne understand. Rayanne accepts her situation, wants just to do things, and thinks about the alternatives open to her in a career and life. As a Penobscot, she is free to make her own life, and she promises not to forget.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Is Rayanne's father's reason for leaving and remarrying, "the feeling that you just need a chance to start over, since the first time you did it you hardly knew what you were doing" a satisfactory one?

The answers here could delve into what the story provides as to the characters and the extenuating circumstances. They could also explore what it means to be a parent and what responsibilities children may expect parents to fulfill or what rights children have as opposed to the adult. Students may discuss the effects of culture and interpretation of stories to help come to terms with these dilemmas.

Literary Analysis

From the story, which setting would you rather have lived in if given the choice? What if money didn't matter? How did the author succeed in making Penobscot life on the island seem appealing?

The author used such literary devices as flashback, memory and imagery to help render life on the island in a more nostalgic and romantic light than was accomplished for modern life. Students could compare also how the story of Arthur is seen through Rayanne's eyes, but the stories of the Penobscot are provided by her grandmother in brief but independent story form.

Inferential Comprehension

If it isn't fair that children get punished for not doing homework, for example, but parents aren't punished for not doing what they're supposed to do, how do you think parents are or should be punished?

This could be approached from many angles, devising just and creative punishments, arguing why children shouldn't be punished, and revealing how adults are punished (both outwardly and inwardly).

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Constructing Meaning

If Rayanne's box of crayons represents all her feelings and ideas, experiences and concepts, how has her father's gift (even if it also meant his leaving) given Rayanne very much?

The answers here could approach how even painful experiences can be beneficial in gaining understanding and how the apparent losses of the Penobscot people could still offer spiritual and artistic opportunities. The answer could also be approached creatively, using drawings and color to express meaning acquired or imagery perceived and remembered by the reader.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story is set on the Two Rivers Island reservation and the city of Springbrook, both in Maine. The contrast is drawn sharply between the more natural "poor" (Native American) past and the more urban "rich" (white) present, with the Penobscot characters attempting to bridge the two worlds. Students might find it insightful to compare and contrast the Penobscot setting in Maine to the Native Americans of other regions. Since all of the Americas was their domain at one time, for those students living in the Americas now, the indigenous people of their area could be researched. For a larger perspective, other well-known groups could be compared and contrasted with historical fiction as portrayed in movies such as *Columbus* (Caribbean Islands), *The Last of the Mohicans* (North American northeast), *Dances with Wolves* (North American plains), *The Black Robe* (Quebec), *Tecumseh, the Last Warrior* (North America west of the Appalachians to the Mississippi River), and *The Mission* (South America) could provide much in the way of comparison and contrast both as to settings and themes. Discovering the books on which these movies are based would be a good next step.

Understanding Literary Features *Crossing the Starlight Bridge* is a study in contrary themes: nature versus city, Penobscot versus mainstream

white, Penobscot heritage versus English heritage, youth versus age, children versus parent, husband versus wife, starting over versus staying, fulfilling one's role versus finding one's own way, girls versus boys, literary versus visual art. Stories and storytelling as ways in which to better understand the past and cope with the present and comprehend the universe and self are universal and every people has a heritage to build on. The mythic animal tales are an example which seem to touch the universal chord. Students might choose to research myths and tales of talking animals, whether Native American, or Greek and Roman, or Norse, or any others they might be attracted to and report back. For the more creatively inclined, it is possible to make up one's own stories and symbols. Or again, if words are not the right media, how about drawing a symbol or making a poster, such as Rayanne was planning to do at the story's end? For this book, however, it does seem imperative that like the Penobscot, the student "find his/her own way."

Understanding Characterization *Crossing the Starlight Bridge* is a story of struggle, which is revealed best perhaps in its situations and characters. How the characters try to come to terms with their pasts and try to build bridges to the future is at the heart of this book. For the students, then, it might be a good exercise to realize that we are all characters in our own lives. For each came a time when that person was new to some group. As a class discussion or writing assignment, the students could describe a time they were new to a group. How did they feel? What could they speak about? What couldn't they express? Are there things about their culture/heritage now that they think others might not comprehend or condone? This could also be done in small groups, using other media besides words--drawing, performing, singing, dancing--to find or create a way to show that aspect of them. Explain it afterward, if desired.

Understanding the Author's Craft Particularly effective in *Crossing the Starlight Bridge* is the author's use of flashback, symbolism and

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story-telling (story-within-a-story). It is possible to regard the entire story symbolically, which is engendered and made more readily understandable by the story-telling within the larger story. Woven throughout are also such symbols as the crayons and descriptions of the creative imagination at work, and how it can be used for positive expression or even for destructive ends. Once again, the students could practice story-telling techniques or create some work of art, but then have them describe how they went about the actual doing (craft) to manifest their ideas.