

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Deathwatch

by

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Book Information

Robb White, Deathwatch
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An honest, courageous, young man finds himself battling for survival against a harsh desert environment and a cynical business tycoon.

Award: Edgar Award/Honor Book

Topics: Community Life, Violence; Natural Environments, Deserts; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - High School (Theme: Tough Decisions); Recommended Reading, NY Times Editor's Choice

Main Characters

Barowitz Madec's tricky lawyer, who tries to make Ben take the blame for the old prospector's death

Ben a resourceful and scrupulous young man who is hired to be Madec's guide in the desert

Ben's uncle Ben's only family member; he fears Madec's story is true

Dr. Saunders the reserved, laconic doctor who attends to Ben and Madec when they are brought to the Diagnostic Center

Eugene Strick the ambitious young deputy who believes Madec's story

Judge Hondurak the judge who must decide whether Ben or Madec should be charged with a crime

Les Stanton the game warden who investigates Madec's story

Madec a cold and calculating businessman who attempts to destroy those who get in his way

Sergeant Hamilton (Ham) Ben's sheriff friend, who keeps Ben incarcerated after he hears Madec's story

the old prospector an old man who lives in the desert; Madec shoots him by accident

Vocabulary

embedded buried in; stuck in
intolerable unbearable; impossible to stand or bear
lacerations cuts
vultures bald-headed birds that often eat dead bodies

Synopsis

Ben is a young man who hopes to earn money for college when a businessman hires him as a guide for a bighorn hunt. Unfortunately, the businessman, Madec, is a cold and calculating man who does not like to lose. When Madec accidentally shoots an old man living in the desert, he wants Ben to help him cover up the event. When Ben refuses, Madec decides to cause Ben's death and pin the old prospector's death on Ben. He takes away Ben's clothing and tries to keep Ben away from food, shelter and water until Ben dies from dehydration.

With less than forty-eight hours before dehydration will overcome him, Ben hopes his knowledge of surviving in the desert will help him, but he finds his moves countered by Madec. His first major achievement is finding a slingshot that Madec has overlooked. In desperation Ben climbs a distant butte to try to find water. Madec tracks him there, but Ben is able to survive by drinking dirty water and eating raw birds. Madec begins climbing the butte, and Ben realizes he is tired of waiting for Ben to die.

Knowing Madec will kill him if he does not take action, Ben sneaks down the butte and hides until Madec leaves his camp. Since Madec has disabled the Jeep and Ben's gun, Ben burns Madec's tent to make Madec come to him. Ben uses the slingshot to wound and subdue Madec; he then takes Madec and the dead prospector back to town. Unfortunately, Ben's trials have not yet come to an end. He soon finds himself in jail, accused of murdering the prospector and attempting to kill Madec. Madec is nearly successful in persuading the townspeople to accept his version of events, but a local doctor produces key evidence that helps

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prove Ben's story is true.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why is Madec afraid he will be blamed for the old prospector's death?

Madec claims that people in small towns are prejudiced against powerful men such as himself, and they will be quick to judge against him. He also remembers that Ben had noted that he did not see any horns before Madec took his shot, so the accident could be construed as an avoidable event.

Literary Analysis

How does the location of the accident help Madec in his plan to cause Ben's death?

The accident occurs in the desert where a person can die very quickly of natural causes. Madec needs only forty-eight hours before Ben dies of dehydration. Very few people venture out to the desert, so it is unlikely that there will be witnesses to Madec's actions. Also, the open range prevents Ben from taking the short route to town unnoticed, and the mountain-range route is too far for Ben to travel without water.

Inferential Comprehension

Ben's uncle claims that Ben is hot-tempered. Do Ben's actions on the desert support this description of Ben's character? Explain why or why not.

For the most part Ben does not act like an angry person. Although he becomes frustrated with the situation, he struggles to control himself and think rationally about his problems and his actions. Despite the fact that Madec tortured him, Ben shoots Madec and deliberately aims away from vital organs. Ben has enough control over his feelings to keep himself from killing Madec.

Constructing Meaning

At the end of this story, Ben tells Hondurak that he had come in only to report an accident. Why might Ben decide against charging Madec with intent to commit murder?

Ben may have several reasons for making his decision. One may be a matter of pride or integrity: Madec has been attempting to corrupt him. If Ben allows himself to become the kind of person who seeks revenge, Madec will have succeeded in changing him. Another reason is that he knows Madec will do anything to win, and Ben wishes to terminate his involvement with Madec as quickly as possible. Finally, Ben has already seen the reaction of his community to his "fantastic" tale. He may recognize that with clever lawyers Madec would be able to win any trial against him.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Plot This story can be broken into two parts: Madec versus Ben in the desert and Madec versus Ben in town. Have the students map out the main events in each part. Have them show how the patterns of the two parts are similar.

Differentiating Fact and Opinion When Ben and Madec return to town, Ben discovers that it is his word against Madec's in regard to the events on the desert. Have the students write a paper explaining how people's opinions about Ben and about Madec made them look at the facts.

Understanding Characterization Ben is forced to match his wits and strengths against Madec on the desert and in the town. Have the students make a chart showing the advantages and disadvantages that both characters have in these battles.

Making Predictions By the end of the story, Ben has shown amazing survival skills and strength of character. However, the members of Ben's town do not stand behind him in his time of trouble. Have the students consider what kind of life Ben might have in the future. Does it seem likely that he will return to his town after college? Have

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them write a short story about Ben's life after this experience.