

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Finding Buck McHenry by Alfred Slote

Book Information

Alfred Slote, Finding Buck McHenry
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Interest Level: MG

Eleven-year-old Jason, believing the school custodian Mack Henry to be Buck McHenry, a famous pitcher from the old Negro League, tries to enlist him as a coach for his Little League team by revealing his identity to the world.

Topics: Community Life, School; People, African American; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, See All Sides; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 4-6; Sports/Recreation, Baseball

Main Characters

Aaron Henry the depressed eleven-year-old grandson of Mack and Jessie Henry, who has recently moved to Arborville after the accidental deaths of his parents and brother

Chuck Axelrod a TV sportscaster who shoots a human interest story on Buck McHenry, but gives the story a new twist on the air when he learns the truth

Jason Ross an eleven-year-old baseball player and card collector, who mistakenly believes a school janitor is a famous Negro leagues pitcher

Jessie Henry the wife of Mack Henry, who begins the Buck McHenry charade by telling her husband to falsely admit that he is indeed Buck McHenry

Kim Axelrod the eleven-year-old daughter of Chuck Axelrod, who joins the new team and helps Aaron and Jason deal with their problems

Mack Henry a school custodian who at first denies, then later pretends to be, Buck McHenry in an effort to help his grandson get over the loss of his family

Mr. Borker coach of the Baer Machine team, who cuts Jason from the team

Vocabulary

chromosomes rod-shaped bodies inside cells that carry the genes determining heredity

condescending disdainful

flabbergasted shocked

hermit a person who lives away from other people

immortal lasting through all time

scenario a real or imaginary plan

Synopsis

Jason Ross is an eleven-year-old who plays back-up catcher on the Baer Machine baseball team. His real passion, however, is collecting baseball cards. In fact, some of his teammates would say he thinks more about his cards than his ballplaying. And Jason would probably agree.

But playing baseball becomes an unexpected adventure for Jason when he gets cut from his team and sent to a newly formed expansion team. He is consoled by Mr. Henry, the school's custodian, and gets a few tips on base-running. He also hears some tantalizing excerpts of the exploits of the little-known Negro leagues players, as seen personally by Mr. Henry.

Jason leaves the custodian to visit his favorite card shop to learn more about baseball's forgotten stars. The shop's owner, Jim Davis, offers to sponsor Jason's new team and lets him look through a new card set of the old Negro leagues stars.

While eagerly looking through the set, Jason discovers a card that sets his new adventure in motion. He suspects Mack Henry, the custodian, is really Buck McHenry, a pitcher whose fast ball rivaled that of Satchel Paige.

Jason sets off to prove his theory. He visits Mr. Henry, who denies Jason's claim, but introduces Jason to his grandson, Aaron, who could use a new friend. Jason gets Aaron, who is grieving the loss of

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his family, to throw a few balls around by making a bet involving the Buck McHenry card. When Aaron asks his grandfather if he is Buck McHenry, his grandmother, who sees the potential for turning Aaron's life around, coerces her husband into falsely admitting he is the baseball legend.

Things start to unravel when Chuck Axelrod wants to do a story on Buck McHenry. Mr. Henry tells his story on camera to Mr. Axelrod. Later that day, Jason and Kim pedal to Aaron's, where they overhear Mr. Henry agonizing over the embarrassing predicament his lie has caused. Shocked by this news, the two rush off wondering how to make things right. Jason confesses everything to his parents as the TV broadcast starts. To Jason's great relief, Kim was able to warn her father of the case of mistaken identity and save further embarrassment for everyone.

The story ends with Jason's team, coached by Mr. Henry, celebrating a successful season. The sponsor rewards each of the players and the coach with a baseball card. Aaron glues his grandfather's card and the infamous Buck McHenry card together. He does so because, in his mind, they both gave him his life back.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Literary Analysis

Toward which character does Jason's opinion change most throughout the course of the story?

Jason has little regard for girls who try playing baseball on a boys' team. As he gets to know Kim, he develops a respect for her as a capable and resourceful person and also as a decent ballplayer.

Inferential Comprehension

Based on how the story turned out, do you think Jason would have done things differently if he'd been given the chance to start over? Give reasons to support your answer.

Jason realized just before the TV broadcast how big a mistake he had made. He envisioned Mr. Axelrod losing his job and the embarrassment the Henry family would face. He himself would be a laughing stock of epic proportions. When Chuck Axelrod's revised story airs, Jason realizes he dodged a bullet. It would be accurate to say Jason would change his tactics if given the chance, if for no other reason than to save his own reputation.

Inferential Comprehension

How did the novel prepare the reader for the way in which Mr. Axelrod handled the truth about Mr. Henry so responsibly?

The newscaster's relationship with his daughter provided earlier evidence that Mr. Axelrod was a responsible person. He not only won custody of Kim after his divorce, he clearly raised her to be a strong, ethical person. Despite his high-profile job and his busy schedule, Kim's frequent concern about letting him know her plans and whereabouts showed both her maturity and his level of caring. The fact that her phone call to the station carried such a strong weight with him fit with the previous portrayal of their relationship.

Constructing Meaning

A famous saying states: "The end justifies the means." What does this saying mean, and how does it apply to the character of Jessie Henry? Was she justified?

Another way to say this would be: It's okay to cheat as long as you win the game. This saying could be applied to Mrs. Henry because she in a sense sanctioned her husband's lie. She did so because she thought knowing his grandfather was a famous pitcher might help Aaron get over his depression. Morally, it's hard to justify telling a lie, no matter what the reason.

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Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features One of the main themes appearing in *Finding Buck McHenry* is that of racial prejudice and how it affects people's lives. Recall and write about an incident in your life where prejudice has caused pain for you or someone you know. Then brainstorm and record ways to prevent such an incident from happening again. Draw a cartoon showing your scenario.

Understanding Characterization Jason Ross, the story's main character, is an avid baseball card collector. In the real world of 1999, collecting cards and other memorabilia is indeed very popular. With a group of your classmates, plan and stage a show in which you display your collections, whatever they may be. Invite families and friends to attend.

Making Predictions The problem in this story begins when Jason mistakenly identifies Mr. Henry as the legendary pitcher, Buck McHenry. The problem is magnified when Mr. Henry falsely claims to be Buck McHenry. Write a one-page summary of how the story would be different if Mr. Henry had truly been Buck McHenry.

Differentiating Fact and Opinion The importance of presenting an accurate news story to the public was pointed out in the story. Interview a TV or newspaper reporter, and then write a set of guidelines a good reporter should follow in order to report what is factually correct.