

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Gib Rides Home

by

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Book Information

Zilpha Keatley Snyder, Gib Rides Home
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Despite the harsh treatment he has endured at the Lovell House orphanage, ten-year-old Gib Whittaker manages to maintain his hopeful outlook when he is "farmed out" to help with the horses of a wealthy banker in 1908.

Award: BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Misc./Other; State Award

Topics: Animals, Horses; Emotions, Misc./Other; Family Life, Orphans; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

Main Characters

Georgie "Rabbit" Olson a nervous young orphan who dies because of his mistreatment at the hands of Mr. Bean

Gibson "Gib" Whittaker a calm, steady orphan boy who has a special talent for handling horses

Hiram (Hy) Carter the weathered old foreman of Rocking M Ranch, who fondly remembers Gib's mother

Miss Hooper Livy's sensible and fair-minded tutor

Miss Mooney the compassionate teacher of the junior classes at Lovell House

Miss Offenbacher the domineering headmistress of Lovell House, who abuses the children with her strict rules and severe punishments

Mr. Harding Gib's cruel teacher at Lovell House

Mr. Henry Thornton a proud, unforgiving banker who has a particular hatred for the horse that injured his wife

Mr. Jebidiah Bean the callous farmer who sends Georgie Olson into a blizzard without any mittens

Mrs. Julia Thornton a beautiful, kind woman who is bound to a wheelchair; she has battled with her husband for years over her desire to adopt Gib

Olivia (Livy) Thornton the spirited daughter of Julia and Henry, who has been hurt by the constant fighting of her parents

Vocabulary

currycomb a comb with special metal teeth used to brush horses

grooming tack tools used to look after the appearance of a horse

Model T an early mass-produced automobile

orphanage a home for children who have no parent or guardian to care for them

repent to feel sorry for having done bad things

withers the space between the shoulders on a horse

Synopsis

Gib Rides Home, set in the early 1900's, tells the story of how a young orphan boy comes to live with the Thornton family. The tale begins with Gib Whittaker being returned to the Lovell House orphanage. The headmistress, Miss Offenbacher, has a rule against boys being returned to the orphanage once they have left, so the boys are mystified when Gib returns until he tells his story.

The story then leads into an extended flashback comprising the majority of the book. It details Gib's life up to the point of his return to Lovell House. Because Miss Mooney, the kindly teacher of the junior orphans, has leaked some information to him, he knows that he was left at the orphanage at the age of six after his mother died. His life at the orphanage consists mainly of chores and school; the food is poor, the work is hard, and the rules are strict.

Gib spends his time dreaming of being adopted by a loving family. When the original headmistress dies, Gib's fate falls into the hands of the cruel and controlling Miss Offenbacher and the equally severe instructor Mr. Harding. Gib is frequently beaten by Mr. Harding, but his hopes for adoption are increased when one of his friends, Georgie "Rabbit" Olson, is taken away by a farmer named Mr. Bean.

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However, his optimism is tested when he hears a rumor that most of the senior boys leaving the orphanage are not being adopted. Instead, they are being farmed-out as free labor to local farmers who promise to keep them until they reach the age of eighteen.

The rumor is confirmed when Gib and his friend Bobby discover Georgie, nearly frozen to death, hiding in the barn. Georgie had run away from Mr. Bean after he threatened to have Georgie's frostbitten hands amputated. Mr. Harding discovers the boys in the barn and Georgie is sent to a doctor, but the boys are told very little about Georgie.

In early spring, a man named Mr. Thornton comes for Gib. Gib is worried because Mr. Thornton does not seem to be a kind man, but he is comforted by his appearance of wealth and cleanliness. When Gib arrives at his new home, he finds that he has been farmed out to the Rocking M Ranch. He also discovers that the foreman, Hiram Carter, or "Hy," was a friend of Gib's mother.

Gib has been brought to the ranch to help Hy, whose leg was broken when a car frightened the horses and caused them to run over his leg. Hy tells Gib tales of his parents and the residents of Rocking M. Gib learns that the ranch belonged to Mrs. Julia Thornton, who was crippled when her beloved horse, Black Silk, got spooked at a parade and fell on her. Mrs. Thornton has been trying for years to get Mr. Thornton to agree to adopt Gib. Gib discovers that Mrs. Thornton renewed her efforts when she heard what had happened to Georgie Olson, who was reported to have died from pneumonia due to Mr. Bean's mistreatment. The household also includes their young daughter, Olivia "Livy" Thornton, and her tutor, Miss Hooper.

Gib loves taking care of Black Silk and enjoys being on the ranch, but he is disturbed by the odd anti-social behavior of the Thorntons. Livy declares she hates him, Mr. Thornton ignores him, and Mrs. Thornton does not seem to be allowed to associate with Gib. Eventually Gib forms a tenuous friendship with Livy and discovers that she also adores Black

Silk. He begins teaching her to care for the horse even though he knows that Mr. Thornton hates Black Silk because of his wife's accident.

The conflict reaches its climax when Mr. Thornton returns unexpectedly to find Livy riding Black Silk. Horrified, he deals with the situation by returning Gib to Lovell House, where he has to pay Miss Offenbacher for both allowing Gib to return and letting Gib keep the saddle given to him by Mrs. Thornton.

Mr. Harding and Miss Offenbacher seem to be treating Gib better, but this ends suddenly one day when Miss Offenbacher demands that Gib hand over his saddle. Determined that he not be deprived of this last token of happier times, Gib hides the saddle and withstands a severe beating and a night locked in a closet rather than give it up. His torture ends suddenly when he hears the rumor that Mr. Thornton has died and finds out that Miss Hooper has come to bring him back to Rocking M Ranch.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What does Miss Hooper mean when she tells Gib, "You're only one of a hundred things Henry and Julia have found to torment each other about"? How does this explain Livy's behavior?

Henry and Julia are both very strong-willed but have different personalities. Henry likes a controlled and orderly world, whereas Julia wants a compassionate and free-spirited world. They have fought for years over whose philosophy shall guide their household, with the result being that Livy has known only strife between those she loves the most. She is confused about her likes and dislikes, and she tends to socialize with Gib by constantly engaging him in arguments.

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Literary Analysis

Why is the saddle so important to Gib that he is willing to be beaten rather than give it up? What does it symbolize to him?

The saddle is Gib's only connection to his life outside of the orphanage. It not only represents his relationship with Black Silk, but it is also something that belonged to Mrs. Thornton and was touched by his deceased mother. To Gib, the saddle is a bridge to family, happiness, and freedom. Even though Gib knows that he will be beaten until he surrenders the saddle, relinquishing the saddle is the same to him as handing over the memories of love and kindness that he associates with these three figures.

Inferential Comprehension

Will Miss Offenbacher continue to be headmistress of Lovell House, or will changes be made now that Gib can feel free to talk about his experiences there?

It has already been shown in the story that the community was appalled at Miss Offenbacher's lack of judgment in allowing an abusive man like Mr. Bean to take Georgie Olson. In addition, Mrs. Thornton tries to find out what kind of treatment Gib received at the orphanage, but she is held back by her promises to her husband. Now that Mr. Thornton is dead, she is free to listen to Gib's story. Once she has, it is very likely that she will take some action against Miss Offenbacher. Since the community is already horrified by Georgie's tale, Miss Offenbacher will probably be fired when her behavior becomes public.

Constructing Meaning

How did you feel when you found out that Mrs. Thornton was friends with Gib's mother and had wanted to take care of him after his mother died?

In order to answer this question, the students will need to consider what Gib has suffered at Lovell House, and how unnecessary that suffering was since there was someone who wished to take Maggie Whittaker's place as Gib's guardian. They should also think about how hard Gib tried to remember his mother and how excited he was to find out that there were people who could tell him about her. Students will likely answer that they felt frustration and compassion for Gib.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Feelings Gib and Livy tend to keep their feelings to themselves even though they have both suffered a great deal. To help the students better understand the depth of the feelings involved in this story, have them divide into groups of three, and adopt the roles of Gib, Livy, and a psychiatrist. Have them explore what the characters might be feeling and what they can do to express their emotions in a healthy manner.

Comparing and Contrasting Hy obviously has a different opinion of Mrs. Thornton's accident than Mr. Thornton. Have the students compare what Hy feels happened to what Mr. Thornton seems to feel happened. Have the students consider the evidence for both positions and then decide whose story they believe is closest to the truth. Have them write a defense of the position they took using the book to back up their argument.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors At the time of this story, orphanages were fairly common. Many reports about the terrible conditions in these institutions arose and, as a result, the system for caring for parentless children was eventually changed. Have the students research the current foster care system and debate whether they believe the treatment of children is better or worse today.

Responding to Literature Gib Whittaker has a

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special talent with horses which makes him feel good about himself even when his life is hard. Have the students think about whether they have a special talent that raises their self-esteem. Have them write about their skill and give an example of a time it helped them to feel good about themselves.