

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Great Turkey Walk by Kathleen Karr

Book Information

Kathleen Karr, The Great Turkey Walk

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Interest Level: MG

In 1860, a somewhat simple-minded fifteen-year-old boy attempts to herd one thousand turkeys from Missouri to Denver, Colorado, in hopes of selling them at a profit.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; SLJ Best Book; State Award

Topics: Adventure, Travel; Animals, Turkeys; Natural Environments, Wilderness; Power Lessons Vocabulary, Grades 4-6; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

Main Characters

Amos Quinn a Denver businessman who wins the auction for Simon's turkeys; he asks for validation of Simon's ownership when Samson claims to be the rightful owner of the turkeys

Aunt Maybelle Simon's critical and stingy aunt, who resents having to raise Simon and often suggests he is stupid

Bidwell Peece an alcoholic who gives up drinking in order to be Simon's drover for the trek to Denver; he becomes a father figure to Simon and his other young traveling companions

Clancy the cavalry soldier who fights with Simon after a group of soldiers shoot at Simon's turkeys

Cleaver the con man who works at the circus with Samson and aids Samson in his attempts to steal Simon's turkeys

Elizabeth Hardwick (Lizzie) a sixteen-year-old girl who loses her family on the prairie; Simon falls in love with her

Emmett Mr. Peece's loyal and scrappy terrier that helps herd the turkeys to Denver

Jabeth Ballou a fifteen-year-old boy who joins Simon's caravan while he is trying to escape from slavery; he unties Simon after Samson steals the turkeys

John Winter Prairie the leader of the Pottawattomie people, who questions the travelers about their right to go through Pottawattomie territory; he saves the travelers from Samson

Miss Rogers the kind-hearted teacher who tells Simon he is ready to go out in the world after he spends three years in the third grade; she lends Simon the money to buy the turkeys

Mr. Buffey the turkey farmer who sells Simon the turkeys; he tries to raise his price and shortchange Simon a few turkeys when Simon makes his purchase

Samson Green the unscrupulous father of Simon; he abandoned Simon after Simon's mother died and tries to steal Simon's turkeys several times

Simon Green a fifteen-year-old boy who is known for being simple-minded; he proves himself by driving a herd of turkeys to market in Denver and gaining several friends along the way

Uncle Lucas Simon's uncle, who took Simon in after Simon's mother died; he gives Simon a broken-down wagon and lends him corn and mules only because he hopes to get rid of Simon and make money at the same time

Vocabulary

cholera a dangerous disease that affects the digestive system

dejection sadness, depression

folderol silliness or nonsense

gulled fooled or cheated

guzzle drink greedily

ruckus a loud disturbance

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vicinity area

Synopsis

Simon Green is leaving school at the age of fifteen with a third grade education and must now decide what to do with his life. He knows he will not be happy staying with his aunt, uncle, and cousins on their farm. On his way home from the school, he notices that Mr. Buffey has a bumper crop of turkeys. Mr. Buffey tells Simon that while the turkeys only cost him a quarter each, turkeys are going for five dollars apiece in Denver. Simon feels he has found a way to make money. He believes he can buy the birds from Mr. Buffey, herd them to Denver, and sell them for a large profit. He persuades his aunt and uncle to lend him mules and corn for his venture. He then borrows money from his schoolteacher, Miss Rogers, and hires the newly sober Bidwell Peece to be his muleskinner, or drover.

After a brief quarrel with Mr. Buffey about the turkey count, Simon and Mr. Peece set out for Denver with a thousand turkeys. A few days into the journey, Simon is approached by Jabeth Ballou, a runaway slave, who turns himself in to Simon because he is starving and hopes to be fed. Simon agrees to let Jabeth join them, since he believes everyone has a special talent. Once Jabeth is given Simon's knife, he proves he is very talented in catching food for their meals.

When the travelers reach Jefferson City, Missouri, Simon makes Mr. Peece and Jabeth stay safely in camp while he goes to see a circus in town. At the circus, Simon gets conned by a man named Cleaver. When Simon gets angry, Cleaver calls on Samson, the circus strongman. As Samson and Simon look at each other, they both feel as though they are looking into a mirror. They quickly realize that they are father and son, reunited after ten years. Samson gets Simon a seat in the circus tent, and after the show, Samson claims sorrow made him abandon Simon after Simon's mother died. Simon is skeptical and regrets letting slip the purpose of his journey, because Samson then insists on joining Simon. Simon quickly returns to

the camp, where he and Mr. Peece agree to leave very early the next morning in the hope of avoiding Samson.

The travelers are already on the road when Samson and Cleaver catch up with them. They steal the turkeys and tie up Mr. Peece and Simon. Fortunately, Jabeth had hidden earlier and is able to set Simon and Mr. Peece free. The travelers follow the trail of Samson and Cleaver and abandoned turkeys to Russellville, where Simon learns that some villagers stole six turkeys. While Samson and Cleaver are sleeping, the travelers are finally able to overpower them. Simon takes restitution for the missing turkeys, and Mr. Peece takes the thieves' mistreated horses. They turn the thieves over to the angry citizens of Russellville, who bear a grudge because Samson and Cleaver shot at them for stealing some of the passing turkeys.

When the travelers enter the Kansas Territory, Jabeth celebrates his freedom from slavery because he is now in a non-slave territory. Simon discovers Mr. Peece had turned to alcohol because he lost his family. Simon suggests that he and Jabeth are now his family, and the two boys persuade Mr. Peece to teach them to shoot. The shooting attracts the attention of the Pottawattomie tribe, and John Winter Prairie, the tribal leader, accompanies his men to the travelers' camp. By feeding the Indian warriors and apologizing for the travelers' indiscretion, Mr. Peece makes amends for being on Indian lands and thereby breaking the U.S. treaty with the Pottawattomie. Jabeth also informs John of their troubles with Samson and Cleaver.

The travelers pass safely through the Pottawattomie prairie only to discover they are being followed by Samson and Cleaver, who are armed and riding on camels stolen from the circus. The travelers are saved when the Pottawattomie suddenly arrive to help. Simon repays John Winter Prairie with some turkeys and the camels and asks them to detain Samson and Cleaver for a while.

Not long after their adventures with the Pottawattomie, the travelers find their turkeys under

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attack by the U.S. Cavalry. Enraged, Simon challenges one of the soldiers to fight. Simon quickly wins, and challenges another soldier when the captain arrives and chastises his men.

The group travels for several days on the prairie before they come across a sod house. A hysterical young girl comes out of the "soddy" wailing about damnation, and the travelers look up to see a cloud of grasshoppers coming. The problem is taken care of by the turkeys, who quickly eat them. The girl is Lizzie Hardwick, and her entire family has just died from disease. Simon is sympathetic and decides to take her to Denver with them. He is attracted to her but is disappointed to find out she is a year older than he.

A few days later, Simon scolds Mr. Peece for taking Lizzie's farm equipment after she clearly requested it be left behind, but Lizzie approves of Mr. Peece's actions. After several days of Simon's coddling, Lizzie loses her temper. She objects to being treated like an exotic creature. When she rejects Simon's notion that they cannot court because Lizzie is older than he, Simon begins to feel better.

The travelers finally arrive in Denver, and Mr. Peece wisely auctions the turkeys off at six dollars each to Amos Quinn. Just before the transaction is completed, Samson and Cleaver burst onto the scene claiming that they are the rightful owners of the turkeys. When Quinn asks for proof of ownership, Simon proudly pulls the receipt out of his shoe. Samson and Cleaver are taken to prison, and Simon asks Lizzie to write a letter to Miss Rogers telling her of his adventures and his plans to start a ranch with his traveling companions.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Simon decide to take Lizzie with them when the travelers leave the sod house on the prairie?

Simon is struggling with the notion of leaving Lizzie behind even before she speaks to him. He feels sorry that she has lost her family and is greatly affected by the desolation of Lizzie's home. When Lizzie wakes up and tells Simon that he is her angel and describes the suffering she has been through in the last few days, Simon does not have the heart to leave her behind. Simon is also greatly flattered by being called an angel.

Literary Analysis

What is the home of the Pottawattomie people like?

The Pottawattomie people are forced to live on a very small tract of prairie in Kansas. Game is scarce there; all the buffalo are gone and even small animals seem hard to find. There are very few trees and miles of waist-high grass. The prairie is very different from their former home in the Wild Rice Country to the north, which was much larger and full of trees and lakes.

Inferential Comprehension

What effect did the deaths of Mr. Peece's wife and children have on his life?

For many years Mr. Peece gave up on life. He became a chronic drinker, wandering from town to town, cutting off all relationships with people, and keeping a dog as his only meaningful companion. Even when Mr. Peece is given a second chance to have a family, the pain of the loss of his first family is so severe that he does not begin to speak of the travelers as a permanent group until they finally reach Denver. Simon fully expects Mr. Peece to leave him because Mr. Peece has resisted the idea of considering Simon and the others his family. When Mr. Peece tells Simon he is staying, it seems to be the first time Mr. Peece has had a real home since the death of his family.

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Constructing Meaning

How does Mr. Peece get the people of Denver to keep bidding until the turkeys are going for six dollars apiece?

First, he flatters the crowd by referring to them as "all good folks of the fine, forward city of Denver." Then Mr. Peece begins talking of the quality of the turkeys and stressing how far the turkeys had to travel in order to get to Denver. He goes on to describe the trials of the trip in more detail and then suggests that if coffee was selling for two dollars a bean in Denver, forty pounds of turkey should go for more. When the turkeys get to five dollars and seventy-five cents, Mr. Peece singles out the proprietor of a provisions shop and urges him to make the final bid for turkeys to sell to the "turkey-hungry" city of Denver.

number of miles they traveled. If possible, have them examine a historical map of the region that represents Simon's time period.

Teachable Skills

Describing Actions or Events Simon has many amusing and exciting adventures as he travels to Denver. Have the students write a short, concise synopsis of a chapter in order to demonstrate their understanding of the action and give them practice in summarizing.

Understanding Characterization Samson and Cleaver have obviously been conning people for a long time. Have the students choose one of these characters and create a wanted poster that describes their negative qualities. Have the students include a drawing on their wanted poster of what they think the character might look like.

Comparing and Contrasting Simon goes through many changes on this journey. In a class discussion, have the students explain what they think has changed about Simon from the time he left Union to the time he arrived in Denver. Have them also note what they think has stayed the same about Simon.

Recognizing Setting Simon and his friends make an extensive journey in this story. In order for the students to fully appreciate the magnitude of this trip, have them trace Simon's path from Union, Missouri, to Denver, Colorado, and estimate the