

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Laughing Boy

by

Oliver LaFarge

Book Information

Oliver LaFarge, Laughing Boy
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This novel has been called the greatest Indian love story of all time -- an American classic.

Award: Pulitzer Prize

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Emotions, Love; People, Native American; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Romance, Romance (All)

Main Characters

George a white man whom Slim Girl lies with and manipulates for money

Jesting Squaw's Son Laughing Boy's understanding friend

Laughing Boy a young Navajo man who marries Slim Girl, an Americanized Navajo woman, even though he is unfamiliar with American ways

Red Man a man who desires Slim Girl and knows her secrets

Slim Girl a Navajo woman who was sent away to an American school as a child but later wishes to reconnect with the Navajo people through her marriage to Laughing Boy

Vocabulary

anodyne something that can soothe pain

apposite appropriate

chagrined feeling disappointed or humiliated

domesticity the state of being committed to the duties and pleasures of one's home

expiation atonement or reparation for a wrong done to another person

hard goods hand-crafted jewelry

inimical hostile or unfriendly

portentous foreshadowing a coming event

Synopsis

The story begins as Laughing Boy, a young Navajo man, is heading to Tse Lani to attend a dance and horse race. He looks forward to showing his skill as a jewelry maker and horse rider. While there, Laughing Boy sees old friends and meets new ones. His friend Jesting Squaw's Son attends the events also. The first night of the dancing a girl pulls his blanket off and drags him out to dance. After the dance the girl insults Laughing Boy by not customarily bargaining with him to release him from dancing with her. The next day, Laughing Boy enjoys wrestling and trading with others but cannot get the girl off his mind.

On the third day, Laughing Boy heads away from the others to find time by himself. He is surprised to meet the girl, whose name is Slim Girl. They speak for a short time and Laughing Boy notices his heart is pounding and his mouth is dry. That night he again walks away from the others, and Slim Girl finds him. Laughing Boy decides he is going to speak to his eldest uncle about her, meaning he wants to marry Slim Girl. Laughing Boy speaks with his uncle, Wounded Face, who tells him she is bad because she is not like her people anymore. Laughing Boy does not want to hear this, so he leaves. Slim Girl immediately meets him and persuades him to break tradition and come with her to Chiziai, where she has a home, because she is certain that Laughing Boy's family would not approve of her.

Laughing Boy wins the horse race later that day and then spends the evening gambling away his winnings. At daybreak Laughing Boy leaves with Slim Girl. Red Man, who knows Slim Girl well and wants to win her heart, tries but fails to get Wounded Face to stop them. On the way to Chiziai, Laughing Boy wounds a Pah-Ute who had stolen his brother's horse. The two go on to Slim Girl's home, which is not the typical Navajo hogahn but rather an adobe shack. Slim Girl arranges for Yellow Singer, a haggard-looking Navajo, to perform the marriage prayers. After Yellow Singer and his wife leave, Slim Girl prepares a sugared whiskey drink for Laughing

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Boy. She then kisses him, which is a very American action.

Laughing Boy and Slim Girl settle into their new life together. Slim Girl takes up the art of weaving and, though she struggles with it at first, she continues, and Laughing Boy helps her see the beauty in her work. Laughing Boy begins making his silver and turquoise jewelry again. They work side by side and enjoy one another's company. Slim Girl continues to go to the nearby town of Los Palos, telling Laughing Boy that she is making money working for a preacher's wife. She is actually going to lie with a white man named George. Slim Girl's plan is to get revenge against white people by manipulating George for more and more money. She is doing this so she and Laughing Boy can be rich and will not have to raise sheep. Slim Girl keeps her secret life from Laughing Boy by telling him he should not go into town for fear the American police will put him in jail for attacking the Pah-Ute man. Unfamiliar with American ways, Laughing Boy accepts this suggestion.

One day Laughing Boy's cousin comes to their home and tells them there will be a full dance for the sake of his cousin's ill sister. Slim Girl agrees to go with Laughing Boy. During their days in T'o Tlakai, the home of Laughing Boy's family, the two manage to show that they are not as Americanized as the relatives feared. Laughing Boy's sisters accept Slim Girl, but the rest of the family has grave doubts about their life. Many members of Laughing Boy's family discuss the matter and finally agree to let him live his life and prove to them that it is good. Slim Girl and Laughing Boy return to Chiziai after the dance.

Life is not as comfortable for them after their return and they find themselves becoming critical of one another. Jestig Squaw's Son arrives one day, distraught over being unable to marry a young woman that he met. Laughing Boy helps him understand that things will be all right. Jestig Squaw's Son stays for three weeks and then returns home.

Shortly after this, Laughing Boy heads out to find a stray horse. The search takes him all over the area and around the other side of Los Palos. Just as Laughing Boy is about to catch the horse, he sees Slim Girl in a house with a white man. The white man runs away as Laughing Boy shoots at him. After hitting the man in the shoulder with an arrow, he turns his bow on Slim Girl. In his anger he shoots an arrow at Slim Girl, hitting her in the arm. Laughing Boy leaves and contemplates suicide. When Slim Girl returns to their house, Laughing Boy has a change of heart and helps her remove the arrow from her arm. She then tells him the truth about her past. Knowing the whole truth, Laughing Boy feels better, and the two decide that when Slim Girl heals they will move north where she has relatives.

As Laughing Boy and Slim Girl head north to build a new home, Red Man spots them. Out of anger and jealousy he fires three shots at them. One of the shots hits and kills Slim Girl. Laughing Boy covers her with blankets and jewelry and performs the burial ceremony. He fasts and keeps watch over her for the traditional four days. During this time he has visions of many things and comes to understand that he can go on living and that, while he will be by himself, he will not be lonely. As the story closes he is once again attending a Navajo dance.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How do the Indians in this book solve many of the disputes between tribes?

They generally solve problems by retaliating. For example, if one tribe steals from another, then the second tribe steals from the first tribe. If someone from one tribe kills a member of another tribe, then generally the second tribe gets retribution by killing a member of the first tribe. The quote "an eye for an eye" describes this concept.

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Literary Analysis

In what does Laughing Boy take pride? Why does he have reason to be proud?

Laughing Boy is proud of his jewelry making and his ability to choose and break fine horses. He has reason to be proud of the jewelry since it is admired by many people and since his father admits that he has nothing more to teach him as a jewelry maker. The pride he has in his work with horses is affirmed by the numerous orders he receives from others. He is well-known and liked among the people with whom he trades.

Inferential Comprehension

The cultures of the Navajos and the white people represented in this story are very different from each other. What are some of the main differences between the cultures?

Among other things, the Navajos pray to many gods, change their names to reflect a person's changing character or actions, rely on traditional activities to gather what they need to live, and prefer to stay together as a community. The white people employ new inventions such as trains, worship one god, view Indians as ignorant, keep one name, and rely on money to get the things they need and want.

Constructing Meaning

Slim Girl believes that money is going to be the key to living the happy life she envisions. What do you think is the key to living a happy life? Why?

The answers to this question will vary widely. No two people feel exactly the same about what constitutes a happy life or how to achieve it. Some students may think the answer lies in material things like money or possessions while others see a more spiritual element as the key.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The story mentions some of the ways that white people have affected the lives of the Indians. Have the

students choose a tribe or location in the United States and research how the white people affected the lives of the native people who lived in the area first. Have them write a report detailing these effects and what the consequences were to the tribe's lifestyle.

Comparing and Contrasting The jewelry and blankets that Laughing Boy and Slim Girl make are intricate works of art that reflect the characteristics of their culture. Have students find photos and illustrations of the art work of various Native American tribes. Ask them to compare and contrast designs, colors, materials, textures, etc. and have them explain how each tribe's culture influences their art work.

Identifying Reading Strategies Locate passages in the story that contain difficult vocabulary and ask the students to write their own definitions for each unfamiliar word by studying the context in which it is used. The students may then use a dictionary to check the accuracy of their work.

Responding to Literature Laughing Boy and Slim Girl speak about the practice of changing an individual's name from time to time. In the Navajo culture, the names are changed based on what someone does or experiences. Using the system of naming that the Indians used, have the students choose names for themselves and explain why they chose them. Ask them to think of an earlier time in their lives when another name may have applied or ask them to predict what they think will be a good name for them in the future.