

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Meet Kirsten, an American Girl

by  
Janet Shaw

### Book Information

Janet Shaw, Meet Kirsten, an American Girl

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Interest Level: MG

Nine-year-old Kirsten and her family endure many hardships as they travel from Sweden to their new home in America in 1854.

**Topics:** Adventure, Life Changes; History, Emigration/Immigration; People, Pioneers/Settlers; Read Now Power Up Recommended Lists, Work it Out: Conflicts; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; Series, American Girl

### Main Characters

Anna and Lisbeth Aunt Inger's two daughters

Aunt Inger Uncle Olav's wife; she was a widow with two daughters before marrying Uncle Olav

Kirsten Larson the nine-year-old main character of the story; she leaves her home in Sweden with her family to come to a new home in Minnesota

Lars Kirsten's older brother

Marta Kirsten's Swedish friend who also travels with her family to America; she dies from cholera while on the journey

Mr. Larson (Papa) Kirsten's father; he is taking his family to Minnesota to a better life

Mrs. Larson (Mama) Kirsten's mother; she sometimes becomes discouraged on the long trip

Peter Kirsten's younger brother

Uncle Olav Kirsten's uncle, who has a farm in Minnesota

### Vocabulary

**amber** a dark, orange-yellow stone often used for jewelry

**cholera** a very contagious intestinal disease that usually caused death in humans before a modern medical treatment was developed

**knapsack** a bag strapped onto one's back used for carrying supplies

**petticoats** ruffled underskirts worn by girls and women

**plank** a heavy, flat board that can be used in making floors

### Synopsis

In March 1854, nine-year-old Kirsten Larson and her family leave their home in Sweden to travel to America. Uncle Olav had left Sweden for America six years earlier and now has a new farm in Minnesota. He has asked the Larsons to come to help him with the farm. The Larsons sail from Sweden to New York, a trip that takes many weeks of cramped living with twenty other Swedish families in the hold of the ship. Kirsten's friend, Marta, and Marta's family are also making the journey. When they finally arrive in New York in June, no one is allowed off the ship until the health inspector checks everyone for contagious diseases like typhoid and cholera.

New York is very large and crowded. Kirsten remembers the maple tree by the door of her home in Sweden and wonders how America will ever feel like home. When Kirsten goes with Papa and her brother Peter to get bread and milk, she becomes separated from them and lost in the crowded streets. She asks several people for help, but no one can understand her Swedish language. She sits on the steps of a brown house and cries. A kind woman comes out and tries to communicate with Kirsten. By outlining the shape of a ship in the dust, Kirsten is able to show the woman where she wants to go. The woman returns Kirsten to Battery Park, where her family is anxiously waiting for her so they can continue their journey on to Minnesota via Chicago. Marta's family is going to Minnesota also, but they are leaving on a different day. The two girls say good-bye, not knowing if they will ever see each other again.

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After a long, hot train ride of several days, the Larsons reach Chicago. They spend a few nights in a boarding house. To Kirsten's surprise, she meets Marta on the porch of the boarding house. The girls enjoy traveling together from Chicago to the Mississippi River and onto a riverboat heading to Riverton, Minnesota. Kirsten realizes America is beginning to feel like home. She has food, a place to sleep, and her good friend.

On the third morning of riding on the riverboat, Kirsten finds out Marta has cholera. Kirsten is shocked that her good friend is so sick. During the night, Marta dies. The next morning Marta is carried off the boat in a wooden box to be buried on shore. When the riverboat arrives in Riverton, Kirsten gets off feeling lonely for Marta.

In Riverton, Papa discovers he does not have enough money to rent a wagon for the trip to Uncle Olav's farm. They leave most of their belongings in a trunk to be shipped to them later. They must walk all the way to Uncle Olav's farm through the rain and the mud. When they finally arrive, hungry and tired, they are happily greeted by Uncle Olav, Aunt Inger, and her two daughters, Anna and Lisbeth. Everyone is soon hugging and chatting. The Larsons settle in their own small log cabin on Uncle Olav's farm with a maple tree by the front door. Kirsten finally feels that she has a new home. The story ends with Kirsten happily playing with Anna and Lisbeth in their secret fort.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

When the sailing ship arrives in New York, Lars tells Kirsten the health inspector will look at everyone on the ship and no one who is sick can stay in America. Why then is Mama allowed to stay in America, even though she has been sick since leaving Sweden?

*The health inspector is checking for people with contagious diseases that could endanger the people of America. Papa explains that Mama has been seasick from the rough ride across the ocean. Seasickness is not contagious and would not be a threat to the health of the people in America.*

### Literary Analysis

The Larson family uses various forms of transportation to get from Sweden to Uncle Olav's farm. Identify the types of transportation they use during their journey. Why do they use so many different types of transportation?

*The family travels across the ocean from Sweden to New York in a large sailing ship. They board a train for the trip from New York to Chicago. They travel from Chicago to the Mississippi River by wagon, and up the Mississippi to Riverton, Minnesota, on a riverboat. From Riverton, they intend to travel in a wagon to Uncle Olav's farm. Unfortunately, they discover they do not have enough money and must walk the final leg of the journey. Many types of transportation are used because that is what is available to them in the year 1854. The only way to cross the ocean is in a ship. The railroad has been built from New York to Chicago, but not to the Mississippi River or to Minnesota. There are no airplanes, automobiles, or buses yet.*

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### Inferential Comprehension

The Larson family is coming to America to live a better life. How does the reader know that the Larsons do not have much money? Give specific examples.

*There are several situations that show the family's lack of money. When they arrive in New York, they see that the women have fancy clothes with lots of ruffles and that the men wear tight trousers with white jackets. Kirsten notices how tattered her own clothes are. A second indication of their financial situation is Papa's response when Kirsten asks to go on an upper deck of the riverboat. Papa explains the upper deck is for rich people. Another example occurs when the family gets off the boat in Minnesota. Papa tries to rent a wagon for the trip to Olav's farm but returns dismayed, since he does not have enough money left to rent the horse and wagon.*

### Constructing Meaning

There are several references in the story to the term "heart." When Mama is sick on the ship and the storms make her feel worse, Kirsten tells her not to "lose heart." When land is sighted, Papa tells Mama that she is brave and "has heart." After arriving in New York, Papa tells Mama they will soon get back their strength and not to "lose heart." When Kirsten gets lost, she wants to "have heart, like Mama." Explain what is meant by all the references to "heart."

*The Larson family uses the word "heart" to represent courage. When sadness and discouragement is a problem, having "a heart" will bring hope and the willingness to continue. The Larsons endure many hardships on their journey to and across America, but they summon the courage to see themselves through the hard times.*

### Teachable Skills

**Extending Meaning** When Kirsten gets lost in New York, she asks for directions and for help in finding her way back to Battery Park. No one helps her because no one can understand what

she is saying in Swedish. When the kind woman in the brown house finds her on her steps, she tries to talk with Kirsten, but neither one understands the other's language. Have each student work with a partner to try to describe an event without using language. They can draw pictures and make sounds, but not speak or write words, much the same way Kirsten had to communicate with the strangers in New York. After a pre-determined amount of time, have the partners switch roles so that the other student can attempt to convey a different event without using words. Class discussion should follow focusing on how Kirsten must have felt not being understood by anyone when she was frantic from being separated from her family. The discussion should also include how language barriers affected most of the immigrants to America and how it is still a problem today as immigrants come to this country from non-English speaking countries.

**Recognizing Detail** When the Larsons are on the ship, the author refers to various parts of the ship. Kirsten sees sailors crawling into the rigging to adjust the sails; the passengers scramble into the hold; there are bunks lining the walls; the sailors lock the trapdoor against the waves; waves beat against the hull; everyone leaves the ship on the gangplank. Have the students obtain a picture of a sailing ship or they can draw their own picture if desired. Have them label each part and provide a description of the part and what its use or purpose is. The pictures can then be displayed in the room.

**Responding to Literature** The Larsons leave their country, their home, and their friends and family in order to come to America for a better life. In the United States, most people have an ancestor that is from another country. Invite an immigrant to speak to the class describing the hardships of leaving one's home and family to begin a life in a new country. The speaker should also point out the hopes and aspirations associated with the move. The students should ask questions of the speaker that relate to the story. For example, how long did the journey

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take? When did the speaker feel like the new country was "home"? Did the person travel with other friends, other family members, or alone? How did the person decide which personal possessions to bring along and which to leave behind? After the speaker leaves, have each student write a report on how they would feel if they had to move to a different country. What things would they miss most about this country? What would appeal to them most about another country? What personal possessions would they bring with them, and which would they leave behind?

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Kirsten and her family come to Minnesota from Sweden. Have the students research Sweden and write a report on their findings. The report should include the country's location, climate, language, major cities and attractions, and some historical events that occurred around 1854 when Kirsten and her family left. Graphics or visual aids should be included in the report.