

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for On the Banks of Plum Creek by Laura Ingalls Wilder

Book Information

Laura Ingalls Wilder, On the Banks of Plum Creek
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After moving to Minnesota, the Ingalls family encounters a terrible blizzard and a grasshopper plague.

Award: Newbery Honor

Topics: People, Pioneers/Settlers; Series, Little House; U.S. States/Regions, Minnesota

Main Characters

Carrie the youngest daughter of the Ingalls family

Jack the Ingallses' dog

Laura the middle daughter of the Ingalls family; she loves to play and to be outside

Ma Ingalls a pioneer woman who has moved with her husband and daughters to Minnesota

Mary the oldest daughter of the Ingalls family; she is quiet and enjoys housework

Mr. and Mrs. Nelson neighbors of the Ingalls family; Mr. Nelson helps Ma put out a fire

Mr. Hanson a Norwegian farmer who trades his land, oxen, and underground home to Pa

Nellie Oleson a classmate whom Laura and Mary dislike

Pa Ingalls a pioneer farmer who has just moved to Minnesota with his family

Vocabulary

alight to get down from

knoll a small hill

lichens a type of plant formed from a combination of fungus and algae, usually found on rocks and trees

pullets hens less than one year old

scythe a tool with a long handle attached to a curved blade used for cutting long grass or grain

threshing separating the grain or seeds from a plant by beating

yoke a device used to join two animals together at the neck

Synopsis

At the beginning of the story, the Ingalls family arrives in Minnesota to purchase a small farm after having traveled from Indian Territory out West. The farm includes a house dug into the side of a bank along Plum Creek. Pa, Ma, and their three daughters, Mary, Laura, and Carrie settle into the underground house and enjoy the nearby creek. Although the girls have been warned not to go near the deep swimming hole, Laura's curiosity leads her there one day. Laura is scared away by a badger, and she confesses her disobedience that night. As a punishment, she must stay in the house for the entire next day.

The Christmas season approaches, and Ma encourages the girls to be unselfish and wish for a team of horses for Pa instead of asking for presents. Pa gets the horses, and the girls are pleased that their sacrifice has helped him.

As spring nears, Pa dreams of the wheat he will plant, the harvest it will bring, and the things he can buy with the profits. Pa buys lumber on credit to build his family a house as soon as the wheat sprouts. He plans to pay for it when his wheat is harvested. The house is everything the family has dreamed of, and the wheat grows beautifully.

During the summer, Mary and Laura begin school. They enjoy it very much except for their conflicts with Nellie Oleson. Nellie is very bossy, and she calls the girls names because she thinks her family's wealth makes her superior. Nellie gives a party at her house for all the school children a week later. Mary and Laura marvel at the many nice things that Nellie has, but when Laura wants to touch one of Nellie's dolls, Nellie yells at her. Laura vows she will get even with Nellie, and she soon gets her chance when Mary and Laura have their own party two weeks later. Laura scares Nellie with a crab in the

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creek and laughs when Nellie gets bloodsuckers all over her legs.

A church is built in the town, and Sunday services quickly become a highlight of the week for the Ingalls family. Laura and Mary love Sunday school and enjoy Reverend Alden. Meanwhile, the wheat continues to flourish and is almost ready to harvest, but the Ingallses' dreams are crushed when millions of grasshoppers arrive and eat all the wheat, as well as every other green thing. Pa is forced to travel east to look for work. Ma and the girls stay home, keep up with the chores, and wait anxiously for Pa to return. Finally Pa does return and brings home enough money to pay for part of the lumber for the house and to buy some needed items for the family.

A mild winter arrives, and the Ingalls have a wonderful Christmas. Reverend Alden makes Christmas especially pleasant by bringing presents from the east for the people in his church.

Pa does not plant his wheat in the spring because the grasshoppers have laid eggs and the eggs are hatching. Pa plans on going east again to earn money. Then something strange and amazing occurs -- all the grasshoppers begin to march west. Nothing stops their marching and, on the fourth day, they all fly away. Pa still has to go east and leaves Ma and the girls to take care of the farm. Ma, Mary, and Laura battle a fire with the help of Mr. Nelson and harvest many potatoes and turnips before Pa finally returns.

Pa comes home just in time for a hard Minnesota winter. The family endures many blizzards. Pa is even caught in one and spends several days in a snow cave. Ma and the girls are terrified that Pa will never return, but he does. The family rejoices that they are together again.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Pa must feel many things while he is fighting against the grasshoppers and is watching his crop being destroyed. What emotions do you think Pa feels?

Pa probably feels anger at his circumstances and hopelessness in the face of his large debt. He may feel guilty about building his house on credit instead of waiting until he had the cash. He also may feel ashamed that he is not providing for his family better.

Literary Analysis

The main conflict in this story is created by nature. Contrast the way weather affects our lives today with the way it affects the Ingalls family.

For most people in modern times, weather can make things inconvenient but does not affect our lives to the extent it does the Ingallses. For the Ingalls family, the weather drastically changes their lifestyle and plans for several years. Although farmers today are affected by the weather, they are not as helpless because of insecticides, crop insurance, and social programs designed to help people in hard times.

Inferential Comprehension

If Pa had not owed so much money for the house, do you think he would have stayed on the farm after the grasshoppers destroyed his crops?

Students could offer several possibilities. He could have moved with his whole family in order to settle in a different farming community. Or, he may have stayed on the farm with his family instead of going east to harvest other farmers' wheat. Or he may not have done anything differently.

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Constructing Meaning

Do you think Pa is right to buy so much on credit?

their possessions and explain their feelings in a show-and-tell format.

Students can discuss the advantages and disadvantages of Pa borrowing money as well as people borrowing money in modern times. One advantage of borrowing money is that it enables people to have things right away instead of waiting. One disadvantage is that people who buy on credit take a risk that they will not have enough money to pay off their debts or will get behind in payments and could lose something of great value (whatever was used as collateral).

Teachable Skills

Describing Actions or Events The invasion of grasshoppers into Minnesota is a disastrous event. Have students research grasshopper or locust plagues and other insect invasions in the United States. Ask students to create a chart listing places, dates, causes, and effects of these invasions and methods used to battle them.

Recognizing Setting Using the description the girls give on their way to school for the first time, have the class make a model of the town. Ask each student to make a large cardboard box building of a typical business of that era and decorate the building appropriately. Then set aside a class period in which students may operate their "businesses" using play money.

Understanding the Main Idea The Ingallses depend upon their neighbors to help them in times of need. In modern times, however, we are generally much more independent. Have the students share ways they have helped their neighbors, as well as ways they can be more helpful in the future.

Recognizing Feelings Laura loves her doll Charlotte even though she does not play with her often, and she is very sad when Charlotte is given away. Have students discuss similar possessions they might have. Ask them to write a journal entry describing the possession, explaining why it is special to them, and telling how they would feel if it were given away. Or have students bring in