

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Skylark

by

### Patricia MacLachlan

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### Book Information

Patricia MacLachlan, Skylark  
Quiz Number: 10209  
HarperCollins Publishers, Inc, 1994  
ISBN 0-06-023328-1; LCCN  
87 Pages  
Book Level: 3.2  
Interest Level: MG

In the sequel to Sarah, Plain and Tall, Sarah's new family experiences some doubts about their future.

**Award:** Newbery Honor

**Topics:** Family Life, Misc./Other; Family Life, Stepmothers; People, Pioneers/Settlers; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Series, Sarah, Plain and Tall

### Main Characters

Anna Witting Caleb's sister and Sarah's stepdaughter

Caleb Witting Anna's brother and Sarah's stepson

Jacob Witting (Papa) Sarah's husband and Anna and Caleb's father, who is a determined pioneer

Mattie, Harriet and Lou Sarah's aunts

Sarah Witting Anna and Caleb's stepmother, who is originally from Maine

William Sarah's brother

### Vocabulary

**coyote** an animal similar to a wolf

**drought** a period of dryness

**phonograph** an instrument for reproducing sounds from a revolving disc

**trickle** to flow in a thin, gentle stream

**woolly ragwort** a type of plant

### Synopsis

Caleb and Anna Witting live on the prairie with their father, Jacob, and their stepmother, Sarah. Two

years earlier, when Sarah joined the family, the fields were full of wildflowers, roses grew by the house, and there was plenty of water in the pond. Now, however, a drought has come; everything is dry and brown, and there are no crops.

Jacob tells his family that although others have left during droughts, they will never leave because they were born there and their names are written in the land. When Caleb and Anna remember Sarah was not born there, they become concerned.

Despite a grass fire, high temperatures, dry wells and departing neighbors, the Wittings attempt to wait out the drought. When the drought continues to linger, Sarah, Anna and Caleb take the train to Maine to stay with Sarah's aunts and brother. Although they have good times in Maine, Anna and Caleb miss their father and worry that they will never see him again. After rain finally comes to the prairie, Jacob travels to Maine to bring his family home. Once back at the farm, Sarah writes her name in the dirt, demonstrating her commitment to the family and the land.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

How do you think Sarah felt when she and the children went to Maine?

*Answers will vary, but will probably include concepts such as: she was happy to be with her family in Maine again; she was happy that the children were safe from the drought and the high risk of fire; she was sad to leave Jacob; and she was worried about the Witting family.*

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## Literary Analysis

Think about the part of the story when the barn was burning. Describe the emotions that this scene creates.

*Answers may include the following: fear, horror, despair, hopelessness, and determination.*

## Inferential Comprehension

Choose two characters from the book and compare and contrast them by listing three ways they are the same and three ways they are different.

*Answers will vary. Some characteristics that may be noted are the following: Jacob--determined, quiet, loving, committed; Sarah--quiet, committed, sympathetic, loving, playful; Anna--quiet, creative, sympathetic; Caleb--energetic, playful, trusting, dependent.*

## Constructing Meaning

How would the story have been different if rain had not come to the prairie?

*The entire family may have moved to Maine permanently, or the family would have remained separated.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** In *Skylark*, the Witting family lives on a prairie during the time of the pioneers. Many of the pioneers were farmers who raised animals and grew crops. Have the students research life on the prairie during this time period and create a model or picture depicting that life. Their models could center on an aspect of pioneer life, such as working in the fields (what crops, what tools used, how were animals used to help, etc.) or what a cabin would look like (sides, floors, loft, cooking facilities, furniture, etc.)

**Comparing and Contrasting** Droughts still happen today, although their effects are not felt as much in the United States due to modern engineering. Divide the students into groups and have each group research one aspect of our

culture that helps prevent us from feeling the extreme effects of drought experienced by the Witting family. Possible areas of study include the following: digging wells (then and now), modern irrigation techniques vs. pioneer irrigation techniques, and water recycling and water-treatment plants.

**Understanding Sequence** Sometimes an author will decide to continue the story of one book in another book. This is called a sequel. At the end of *Skylark*, the family is back home on the prairie, the prairie has had rain, and Sarah is going to have a baby. What do you think will happen next? What would you name a sequel to *Skylark*? Write a short outline for a sequel to *Skylark* and give the sequel a title.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** Anna liked to write. In her journal, she recorded some similes. (A simile is the comparison of two unlike things, usually using the words like or as.) One of the similes Anna used is "a dress soft like a mist." Another way to compare things is with metaphors. Metaphors take two nouns and find something in common between them. Have each student in the class think of a noun. Write the nouns on the board. Have the students create similes or metaphors by pairing the nouns and explaining how two seemingly unrelated items have at least one thing in common, (for example, morning--paper). Morning is like a blank sheet of paper because they are both unmarked and are waiting to be filled.