

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Summer Soldiers by Susan Hart Lindquist

Book Information

Susan Hart Lindquist, Summer Soldiers

Quiz Number: 32211

Delacorte Press, 1999

ISBN 0-385-32641-6; LCCN

178 Pages

Book Level: 5.2

Interest Level: MG

After his father goes off to war during the summer of 1918, eleven-year-old Joe, along with his friends, contends with the town bullies and tries to figure out the meaning of courage.

Topics: Behavior, Bullying; Emotions, Courage; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Sons; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Wars, World War I

Main Characters

Billy Teale a friend of Joe, Jim, and Luther

George Morgan a gentle father and horse-lover who chooses not to enlist in World War I despite tremendous pressures at home

Great-aunt Binny Joe's cantankerous aunt, who comes to help Joe's family while Mr. Farrington is away

Harley Thornton Luther's oldest brother, who takes over leadership of the sheep ranching when the men go to war

Jim Morgan Joe's friend who is shunned by most of the town because his father did not enlist in the war

Joe Farrington the narrator of the story, an eleven-year-old boy who takes over on his family's sheep ranch after his father goes to war

Luther Thornton a friend of Joe, Jim, and Billy, whose older brothers terrorize him and his friends

Mr. Thornton and Mr. Teale other ranching fathers who choose to enlist

Roy and Arlo Thornton younger brothers of Harley, who join him in bullying Luther and his friends

Russell Farrington a California sheep rancher who chooses to leave his family behind and join the army during World War I

Vocabulary

chamber pot a portable item used in a bedroom as a toilet

drover someone who drives sheep or cattle

Kaiser title used for the emperor of Germany from 1871 until the end of World War I

sniper a military rifleman who fires from a concealed place

suffrage the right to vote

Synopsis

The story opens in California during World War I. Joe Farrington and his family are sheep ranchers, and Joe and his friends Jim, Billy, and Luther enjoy helping with the stock. Their biggest problem is Luther Thornton's older brothers, who begin a campaign to torment the younger boys. In fact, Joe thinks their war with the older Harley, Roy, and Arlo Thornton is a lot like America's conflict with the Germans so far away.

The Great War has been going on for four years, and it is a constant topic of conversation among the men at the ranch, all of whom were excused from service because of their old age and family status. One night, while sitting around the campfire, the men decide their duty lies with the American troops overseas. They all enlist, with the noticeable exception of George Morgan, the gentle horse lover, who chooses to stay behind to help the sons and wives with the sheep.

From the beginning, Morgan's decision sets him up as an object of distrust, particularly with Harley Thornton. Over many months, antagonism progressed to the point where Harley takes over responsibility for the valley's sheep and refuses to let George Morgan participate. In time, even George's son, Jim, experiences the scorn of his neighbors and friends in the valley.

Joe Farrington and his friends remain loyal to Jim -- until something happens to change Joe's mind about the war. News reaches the family that, almost

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Summer Soldiers by Susan Hart Lindquist

a year after he left home, Joe's father has "gone missing" in France. The family continues to write their weekly letters to their father, but as no news is heard, Joe begins to resent the fact that George Morgan stayed safe at home among his loved ones.

On the night before he left, Joe's father had told Joe about a small cookie tin that contained some things from his childhood. He did not think much about it then, but now something tells him it is important to look for it. He digs holes all over the valley, but finds nothing.

One day soon thereafter, Joe wakes to the sound of faint cries on the distant beach and feels sure there is a shipwreck. When all available hands arrive on the scene to help, they discover that a group of horses is chained to the wreckage and will surely die if they are not released. Without hesitation, George Morgan swims into the swirling sea, releases the horses and tries to swim with them to safety. He dies in the attempt.

Thereafter, the town knows that whatever Morgan's reasons were for staying out of the war, they did not involve cowardice. Later that day, as Joe thinks about all that has happened, he suddenly realizes where his father's cookie tin must be! Because the box represents all the things he loved the most, Joe discovers his father had hidden it under the very rock on which the two of them spent their last evening together.

To earn much needed money for the Morgan family, Joe, Jim, Billy, and Luther drive the Morgans' sheep to market without the help of the older Thornton boys. The drive is a success and gives the boys the courage to stand up to the Thorntons. Jim Morgan, with courage and a certain haughty dignity, lets Harley Thornton know that his help is no longer needed by paying him for the shearing work and riding away. The war in Joe's California valley is over, but the war overseas goes on.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What are Joe's reasons for searching for his father's cookie tin?

Joe decides to look for the tin after his father has "gone missing," somehow reasoning that it would help in the search for his father. In a deeper sense, he is trying to establish a connection with his father, to discover the deeper things that were left unsaid between them on the night he left to fight the war.

Literary Analysis

What are some of the ways detailed in the book in which World War I affected Americans on the "home front"?

The book details a number of sacrifices that ordinary citizens made for the war effort, specifically regarding rationing food and gasoline. Feelings of patriotism ran high, as well as distrust of those with German names. Other interesting details include the "Four-Minute Men," who gave patriotic talks at the movie theaters, and the creation of Daylight Savings Time.

Inferential Comprehension

The reader is never told exactly why Mr. Morgan chooses not to join the other men in fighting the war. After reading the book, what can you infer about why George Morgan makes this decision?

Mr. Morgan is described as a gentle man who prefers the company of his horses and family. The first clue to his reasons comes the night the other men decide to enlist. He remarks that it is all "so blasted confusing." Later, he comments that he does not need to "be a hero." Generally, Mr. Morgan is a pacifist, and his loyalty to his family outweighed his loyalty to his country or honor.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Summer Soldiers by Susan Hart Lindquist

Constructing Meaning

How was the conflict between Joe's friends and the older Thornton boys like the war going on overseas?

Joe, Jim, Billy, and Luther, like the Allies, have greater numbers but are weaker until they band together. The older Thornton boys, like the Central Powers, are fewer in number, but are successful in conducting unprovoked attacks. It is only when all four boys drive the sheep to market together that they show their strength in unity and regain respect and safety. Likewise, the Allies defeated the Central Powers when they united their strength.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The treatment of the sheep shearer named Karl Bauer is representative of the intolerance sometimes shown by Americans during times of war. In World War II, Japanese Americans suffered similar treatment at the hands of "patriots." Assign students to research either treatment of German Americans during World War I or the Japanese internment camps of the World War II era, paying special attention to the motivation and justification given for these behaviors. Students should write a brief report on their findings.

Teachable Skills

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning On the night of the last sheep drive before the men go off to war, Mr. Farrington recites a poem called "The Village Blacksmith," by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The poem seems to spark the discussion around the campfire that leads the men to enlist in the service. Obtain a copy of the poem and read it with the class. Discuss the meaning of the poem and how this poem might have acted as a catalyst to spur the men to join the American forces overseas.

Extending Meaning Mr. Farrington's old cookie tin contains a lot of ordinary things, but it is very meaningful to Joe because it contains the everyday things that meant the most to his father. As a class project, ask students to create their own "cookie tin" full of simple things that are meaningful to them. Ask for volunteers to share their "treasures" with the class.

Responding to Literature A "pacifist" is someone who believes that violence is an unacceptable way to solve problems, even on a global scale. A "patriot" is defined as someone who is enthusiastic about his or her country. Initiate a classroom discussion in which the students discuss the nature of Mr. Morgan's conflict in the book. Is it right for him to let the other men fight while he stays safe at home? Are the other men unfair to their families when they choose to go and fight?