

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Sweetgrass

by

### Jan Hudson

### Book Information

Jan Hudson, Sweetgrass  
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Interest Level: MG

Sweetgrass, a fifteen-year-old Blackfoot Indian girl, saves her family from a smallpox epidemic and proves her maturity to her father.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Booklist Editors' Choice; Canada Children's Literature Award; Canadian Library Association Honour; Governor General's Literary Award

**Topics:** Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); Family Life, Growing Up; Family Life, Marriage; People, Native Canadian; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Take a Stand: Leadership; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, Elementary School Library Collection; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies

### Main Characters

Bent-Over-Woman Sweetgrass's stepmother, or almost-mother, and wife of Sweetgrass's father, Shabby-Bull

Eagle-Sun a young warrior whom Sweetgrass hopes to marry

Favorite-Child Sweetgrass's cousin and a favored child betrothed to the son of a chief

Five-Killer a chief who takes Pretty-Girl as one of his wives

Otter Sweetgrass's twelve-year-old brother

Pretty-Girl Sweetgrass's thirteen-year-old friend, who is given in marriage as a slavewife for the price of five horses

Robe-Woman Favorite-Child's mother

Shabby-Bull Sweetgrass's father, who is respected as an injured warrior

She-Fought-Them-Woman Sweetgrass's wise grandmother, who was once a warrior

Sweetgrass the principal character in the story, a fifteen-year-old Blackfoot girl who longs to marry and who demonstrates her maturity when she nurses her family to health during a smallpox epidemic

### Vocabulary

**Chinook** a warm dry wind that blows from the eastern slope of the Rockies and brings a rapid change in temperature

**kimataps** Blackfoot people who come from poor families

**minipoka** the favorite child of a powerful family

**pemmican** a food made from dried berries, dried meat, and suet to use as emergency rations

**saskatoons** the purple fruit from a shrub

**travois** a frame between two long poles that is pulled by a horse and is used to carry one's belongings

### Synopsis

The story opens as Sweetgrass, a fifteen-year-old Blackfoot girl, picks strawberries with her friend Pretty-Girl. Pretty-Girl is two years younger than Sweetgrass, but her parents have already announced her marriage. Sweetgrass thinks of Eagle-Sun, a young warrior whom she likes, and wonders when her father, Shabby-Bull, will allow her to marry. Shabby-Bull, however, thinks she is not ready for marriage, for in his opinion she is not yet strong enough to be a wife. When summer comes, Sweetgrass and Pretty-Girl, who is now married, are getting water when they sense an evil presence. They arrive back in camp shortly before an enemy attack occurs. Sweetgrass shows her bravery during this incident.

As the annual Sun Dance approaches, Sweetgrass hopes her father will announce her marriage. Instead, he challenges her to finish twenty-eight buffalo hides to show she has the strength to be a sits-beside-him wife. Sweetgrass and Eagle-Sun are only able to steal looks at each other, play Toss ball,

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and speak to each other long enough to know their feelings for one another during this festival. After the celebration, Eagle-Sun travels north to trade goods while the women pick berries and the men hunt buffalo. When asked to butcher her brother Otter's slain buffalo, Sweetgrass is almost killed when the buffalo rises and charges at her. While Sweetgrass is healing, Eagle-Sun returns to camp with fine goods from the traders. The next day he rides south to trade for horses.

Several days later Sweetgrass and Pretty-Girl, who is now pregnant, are picking berries when Eagle-Sun returns with a Piegan tribal member to announce that the smallpox has hit the Piegan tribe. Eagle-Sun's and Sweetgrass's families go to separate winter camps.

The Blackfoot spend the winter as family units. Food becomes scarce and Shabby-Bull departs for a hunting trip despite the objections of his wife, Bent-Over-Woman. While he is away, the smallpox strikes, and the baby and Little-Brother die. Otter and Bent-Over-Woman also come down with the disease and Sweetgrass nurses them. She breaks a taboo of the tribe by catching and serving fish in order to avoid starvation. Her father finally returns and acknowledges that Sweetgrass is now a woman.

When spring returns, Sweetgrass and her cousin, Favorite-Child, pick strawberries while Otter waits on the ridge to signal when he sees Eagle-Sun. Eagle-Sun has sent a messenger saying he is coming. As Sweetgrass awaits his return, it is revealed that half the Blackfoot lost their lives from smallpox, starvation, and suicide. Gone are Pretty-Girl, Grandmother, and Favorite-Child's father and brother. Favorite-Child contracted the disease, but survived. The story ends with an understanding that Sweetgrass and Eagle-Sun will finally marry.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Why does Sweetgrass become frustrated with Favorite-Child?

*Favorite-Child is one who loves to string people along as well as boast about herself. She always seems to bait Sweetgrass with a morsel of news and then lets her wait a long time before she reveals it. She also boasts about her position in life, brags that her betrothed will not have to be a warrior, talks down about Pretty-Girl's situation, and is even bold enough to ask if Sweetgrass had heard how many were still living in the camp of White-Crow (Eagle-Sun's father) after the epidemic.*

### Literary Analysis

How is the author's use of the first-person point of view helpful to the development of the story?

*The first-person point of view allows the reader to see the Blackfoot culture through a young girl's eyes. The reader can learn about the daily routine and culture through fresh and questioning eyes. This point of view also gives an emotional quality to the story, especially when describing the longings of young love. The reader is able to witness the inner growth of a young girl.*

### Inferential Comprehension

What can the reader conclude from the use of the word "almost" in referring to various relatives?

*The reader gains the sense that the Blackfoot have an appreciation for genealogy and consider relationships important. "Almost" is the equivalent to "half" in some cases and "step" in others. The word defines the relationship, which is important in a culture in which men have many wives.*

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### Constructing Meaning

The author uses names for her characters that point to some personality trait, accomplishment, or physical characteristic of a person. Make a character list. Why do you think a particular name was chosen for a given individual? Is there anything you notice about the names?

*Answers will vary, but the names generally reflect an observable quality of a character, an accomplishment or action, or a symbol of the character's personality. Bent-Over-Woman, Shabby-Bull, and Pretty-Girl all have names that reflect their appearances. Five-Killer and She-Fought-Them-Woman have names that reflect their accomplishments. Otter, Sweetgrass, and Eagle-Sun all have names that are symbolic of their nature. Otter is young and playful, like an otter. Eagle-Sun has a nose pointed like an eagle and is also strong and noble like the Sun. Sweetgrass appears as ordinary as grass, but is also strong, dependable, and pleasant like sweetgrass.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Smallpox not only took a huge toll on the Blackfoot tribe, but on populations around the world. Have the students find out what smallpox is, the disease's symptoms and the course it follows, as well as its mode of infection and epidemiology. What populations did this disease particularly affect? How was it eradicated? Who is given credit for developing the vaccine? Are there still populations in the world that fight this disease?

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Jan Hudson read histories of the Blackfoot people after marrying a Native American and adopting his daughter. She found accounts of a smallpox epidemic that wiped out nearly half of the Blackfoot population during a particularly harsh winter. She was so affected that she incorporated the historical records into a story of a young girl and dedicated it to her daughter. Have the students research the records of the indigenous people of their area. What can they discover about diet, daily routine, social structure, and

celebrations? In addition, they could outline a story around the facts they find.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** *Sweetgrass* is rich in figurative language, especially similes. The author uses the natural elements of the prairie and the Blackfoot's rhythms of life when comparing things. This gives the story authenticity and helps set it in the native culture at that particular time. The students can be encouraged to look back through the book and find some of these similes. Then, using the first part of the simile, complete the simile using elements in their world and part of their daily life and experience.

**Comparing and Contrasting** It may prove interesting to compare and contrast the daily life and expectations of a Blackfoot girl to a girl in modern society. Develop a chart listing various tasks and the time involved in accomplishing them. Items such as food gathering, food preparation, and household chores should be listed. Public behavior, conduct toward parents, and age of marriage are other items that can be included. Have the students comment on their observations.