

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Thunder Cave

by

Roland Smith

Book Information

Roland Smith, Thunder Cave
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Book Level: 4.2
Interest Level: MG

Determined after his mother's accidental death to foil his stepfather's plans for his future, fourteen-year-old Jacob travels alone to Africa in search of his father, a biologist studying elephants in a remote area of Kenya.

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Adventure, Travel; Continents, Africa; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Sons; People, African; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Respect All Voices: Respect; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 6-8 (Theme: Surviving); Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies

Main Characters

Dr. Sam Walters Jake's step-father, with whom Jake has never had a strong relationship

Dr. Robert Lansa Jake's father, an animal researcher who has lived and worked in Kenya for years

Jake Lansa the novel's fourteen-year-old protagonist who goes to Kenya to search for his father after his mother's death

Michael "Donny" Donovan a villain from America who ruthlessly harvests African ivory and skins through his well-financed poaching operation

Moja Donovan's sadistic right-hand man, he leads a small army of poachers and develops a special hatred for Jake

Sitonik a frail Masai spiritual leader whom Jake and Supeet visit before the novel's final conflicts play out

Supeet an educated Masai tribesman who rescues and befriends Jake

Taw Jake's paternal grandfather and a Hopi Indian who gives him spiritual gifts for his journey

Vocabulary

kopje a small hill covered with boulders

kraals traditional Masai villages

Laibon title given to Masai spiritual leaders

Masai nomadic group of Kenyan tribes, many of whom still follow traditional customs

Nairobi a major city in Kenya

Nguruman Escarpment an area deep in Kenya's bush country

Nkokua the "long rains" that end a prolonged drought

petroglyphs carvings made on rock

Swahili an African language widely spoken in Kenya

Synopsis

As the novel opens, Jake Lansa is living in New York City with his mother, Beth, and his stepfather, Sam Walters. While close to his mother, Jake's relationship to Sam has never progressed beyond a surface civility. However, Jake has maintained strong spiritual and emotional ties to his real father, Dr. Robert Lansa. For four full years, Dr. Lansa has been working in Kenya with the wild elephant population. From letters quoted in the book, it is made clear that their father-and-son bond has continued to grow, despite the circumstances that have separated them physically.

When Beth Walters is killed by a motorist while jogging, the events of the novel are set in motion. Sam quickly decides to escape his painful memories in New York by leaving for an anthropological dig in Honduras. Hastily, he arranges for Jake to be taken in by relatives in Nebraska.

Despite the fact that it is impossible for anyone to contact his father, Jake secretly decides to go to Kenya to find him. The situation there is particularly

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unstable because of an on-going drought. Jake is both mature enough to plan his journey realistically and naive enough to believe he can make it without help.

Before flying to Kenya, Jake visits Taw, his paternal grandfather, in a Poughkeepsie nursing home. Taw is a full-blooded Hopi whose spiritual strength and traditions Jake deeply respects. Taw accepts Jake's quest and gives him certain spiritual gifts to take, including a kachina doll representing a powerful Hopi spirit. His Native American perspective foreshadows the native culture Jake will encounter in Africa.

After a series of harrowing mishaps in Nairobi, Jake sets out on his bicycle to traverse 250 miles of wilderness and find his father. Within days, he is deathly ill in a land where animals roam freely. Rescue comes in the person of a Masai tribesman named Supeet. Although highly educated, Supeet had chosen to leave so-called "civilization" and live instead according to the traditional ways of his nomadic people. He believes he can end the current drought by following an arduous ancient custom. After he nurses Jake back to health, the pair agree to travel together on their separate quests.

On their journey, Jake quickly learns and appreciates Masai ways as survival tools honed in the land he crosses. As Supeet becomes the boy's spiritual guide, he is also destined to become a spiritual leader to his own people. Their friendship is soon forged into a mutual campaign for survival by the appearance of a ruthless and well-financed gang of poachers. Jake learns they are the reason his father remained in the wilderness, trying to save the lives of a herd of rare big-tusked elephants.

The efforts of Jake, Supeet and Dr. Lansa manage to foil the massive poaching operation and bring the Nkokua, or "long rains," to the suffering country. Their story blends adventure with a serious look at how different cultures shape both personal and political choices.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why did Donovan choose the time of drought for his poaching operation?

The dry lands made transportation in the bush easier, and the lack of water made elephants easier to find and kill. But more importantly, the political trouble caused by the widespread famine gave authorities less time and fewer resources to spend on enforcing the anti-poaching laws.

Literary Analysis

What was the importance of the snake amulet Jake wore?

It showed that Hopi symbols were similar to those of the Masai and hinted at the similar spiritual ideas in both cultures. For Jake personally, the amulet is described as "a vital organ," and he feels physically ill at ease whenever it is removed from his neck. This physical sensation gave a clue to how important his Hopi heritage was to Jake spiritually.

Inferential Comprehension

Compare Sitonik to Taw. How are they alike? How are they different?

Both are very spiritual men who are learned in the ways and customs of their traditions. Neither can -- or chooses to -- cope with modern ways of living. Sitonik has a sense of community and a position of respect among his people that Taw has only with Jake and Dr. Lansa. Yet both are clearly portrayed as carriers of wisdom whom Jake respects.

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Constructing Meaning

How realistic was Jake's plan to find his father?

Jake could think of many practical problems he might have, but he could not foresee the dangers other people would present to him. He arrived with his bicycle well stocked for the trip, and then lost his food to a customs official and the bike itself to thieves. Without Supeet's "miraculous" appearance, he probably would have died. Even with Supeet, the unforeseen threat of the poachers nearly resulted in Jake's death.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Jake's grandfather gives him a Native American kachina doll to take with him to Africa. Supeet and Sitonik regard the figure with great respect. Students might find it interesting to explore the traditions and history of the kachinas. In some areas of the United States, museums display collections of these "spirit dolls." You may even consider asking students to design or make a kachina figure, either based on actual dolls or from their own creative impulses.

Extending Meaning While the poachers in the book are fairly stock villains, poaching is treated as a serious dilemma. The Kenyan government lacked the resources to enforce existing laws effectively, and in reality those laws have been changing over the past decades. Ask your students to convene an "international commission" to examine the history of poaching in Africa, the current state of animal protection, and the further laws they could recommend to help protect wildlife.

Making Predictions Much of the book's plot relies on coincidence or contrivance. The random death of Jake's mother, Sam's departure for a conference, and Supeet's blindness are all examples. As a writing assignment or discussion topic, ask students to pick one such unlikely "cause" among the plot's turning points to change. How might the novel have been different if Jake's mother hadn't died, or if Sam had been a

more responsible stepfather, or if Supeet had not become dependent upon Jake's assistance? One approach might be to stipulate the particular change, then challenge students to find ways to keep the ensuing plot the same.

Differentiating Fact and Opinion Jake encounters wildlife throughout his journey in Africa. His father researches the natural social behavior of long-tusked elephants. Supeet teaches him to "invisibly" stalk a resting rhinoceros. You may want to ask students to "fact check" the novel's assertions about animals in the wild. How accurate is Smith's book? What other interesting facts have scientists learned about how animals behave? Most libraries and video stores stock a variety of documentaries that could also serve this purpose.