

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Trouble River

by

Betsy Byars

Book Information

Betsy Byars, Trouble River
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Interest Level: MG

When he builds his raft, a twelve-year-old boy never dreams that it will serve as the sole means of escape for him and his grandmother when hostile Indians threaten their prairie cabin.

Topics: Adventure, Escape; Adventure, Survival; Family Life, Grandparents; History, Frontier/Pioneer Life

Main Characters

Charlie Dewey's faithful dog; he is both protector and companion

Dewey Martin a young boy who builds a raft and uses it to travel downstream to escape an Indian attack

Grandma a bossy woman with a strong will to survive who travels downstream with Dewey

Mr. and Mrs. Martin Dewey's parents, who travel to a nearby town for Mrs. Martin to have a baby

the Dargans a friendly family that was the first to settle in the area

Vocabulary

emigrants people who have left or been driven from their homeland

hurdy-gurdies instruments such as barrel organs that are played by turning a crank

infernal hellish, sinister

pungent an unpleasantly sharp or bitter odor

renegade an outlaw or rebel who works outside an organized group

Synopsis

Dewey Martin is putting the finishing touches on a raft he has been building when his grandmother,

concerned about his whereabouts, calls him up to the cabin. He confesses what he had been doing, but she is not pleased. She has an uneasy feeling and wants Dewey to stay inside. Dewey's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Martin, have traveled to the nearest town, Hunter City, so that Mrs. Martin can have her baby where medical help is available. Dewey and Grandma have been left at home on their prairie homestead to care for the animals.

Dewey waits for Grandma to fall asleep before sneaking back down the riverbank to work more on his raft. He is startled by the snort of a pony and sees a lone Indian sneaking around the homestead. Charlie, Dewey's dog, attacks the Indian and drives him off, getting injured in the process. Knowing the Indian will return with more Indians, Dewey persuades Grandma to travel with him downstream on Trouble River on his raft to the Dargans, kind and welcoming people on a neighboring homestead. Dewey grabs a few provisions and brings Grandma's rocker aboard for her comfort.

As Dewey, Grandma, and Charlie start down the river, Dewey wishes he felt more confident about the journey. Grandma gives incessant orders, while Dewey just grits his teeth and tries to be pleasant. The river lives up to its name as Dewey and Grandma encounter a series of problems. When the raft gets stuck, Grandma must wade ashore until Dewey frees it. The next day, they arrive tired and hungry at the Dargans' homestead only for Dewey to find all their buildings burned to the ground. Dewey knows his parents would have stopped at the Dargans' en route to Hunter City, and he is filled with dread. With a heavy heart he returns to the raft, and Grandma and he set out for Hunter City, where they hope to find Mr. and Mrs. Martin safe. They stop at nightfall to eat and rest but are attacked by wolves. They escape unharmed and, believing the worst to be over, continue on their way only to face treacherous rapids before arriving unscathed in Hunter City.

Once in Hunter City, some men help Dewey and Grandma off the raft just before it breaks apart. Grandma gives Dewey a rare word of praise and

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begins to bark orders to the men of the town. Grandma and Dewey learn that the homesteads all up and down the river have been burned, but they hear that Mr. and Mrs. Martin have arrived safely in town. Mrs. Martin has given birth to a healthy baby girl. The Martins comfort Dewey, and he vows to himself to make another boat someday.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How does Dewey get his grandmother to do things?

Dewey listens and tries to do the things Grandma would like as much as possible. Perhaps that is why when he explains to her the importance of doing things differently than she would like, she is willing to comply, even as she lets him know she does not like it. He tries to reason with her respectfully and accepts her tirade of words about how unhappy she is. Even though she complains a lot, the reader gets a sense that Grandma trusts that her grandson has their best interests at heart. She cooperates because of this.

Literary Analysis

What elements help make *Trouble River* end on a hopeful note?

Even with the destruction of homes and families, the story ends hopefully. A major contributing factor comes from the fact that Dewey and Grandma survive the journey. While on the journey, Grandma relates stories of the hard times she and others faced previously and still survived. She also tells about the strength of people's spirits in the midst of hardship. The baby's presence at the end adds the element of new life and a sense of the continuing cycle of life and death. Also, Charlie again takes the lead in front of Dewey, and this gives the reader a sense that wounds, both physical and emotional, can heal. It is reported that a small band of renegades have been captured, leaving hope that Indian problems may be over. In the end, the Martin family is intact, so the reader knows they can give comfort and strength to one another.

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Inferential Comprehension

At the beginning of the story, Dewey thinks about having to stay on the homestead with his grandmother rather than being in Hunter City. "It seemed unfair that his parents were there where something was always happening and he was left back at the cabin where everything was always the same." Do you think Dewey felt the same at the end of the story?

At the beginning of the story, Dewey only considers the number of chores and other work that has to be done at the homestead to care for the animals. He also knows he must obey his grandmother even though she is very critical and often crabby. He wants to be in Hunter City to see the buildings, hear music from the various establishments, and visit with the people emigrating in the wagons. He also wishes he could visit with his friend Jimmy to tell him about the raft. His only joy in being left behind is working on his raft. After encountering the Indian at the homestead, experiencing the difficulties of traveling down the river, and seeing the destruction at the Dargans' cabin, Dewey longs for the comfort and security of his entire family. He will probably be very content to be at the homestead with chores and animals to tend.

Constructing Meaning

"Trouble River wound through the prairie like an animal on the scent of its prey. It hurried, then slowed, it twisted, then straightened, turned again and again, hooked, and at last, after its long and twisted journey, began to gain speed before it would rush headlong into the Big River...." How is Dewey and Grandma's journey like the river?

Dewey and Grandma first think their journey will only take them to the Dargans' cabin and the ride will be like the river in front of their house -- wide, straight, and smooth. Instead, they face many obstacles along the way, unexpected twists and turns, just like the river running its course. They, too, are like animals on the scent of prey -- searching for Mr. and Mrs. Martin and looking for landmarks but often finding destruction or obstacles before they can move on in their search. In the end they rush through a dangerous passage but emerge to the safety of their family in Hunter City.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Details Most of this story takes place on a raft. As a class project, the students may wish to build a model of a raft. Assign small groups the task of building a small raft out of twigs or popsicle sticks or other light weight, buoyant material. The models can be tested in a sink or tub of water.

Recognizing Setting The author does not indicate the exact location of Hunter City or Trouble River in the story. The students may want to guess at an approximate area of the country where the Martin farmstead is placed. Then, from the various descriptions in the story, suggest that the students construct a map of Dewey and Grandma's journey from the Martin homestead to Hunter City. The author details some twists and turns of the river, the approximate locations of the farmsteads, and a general sense of direction. Have the students make a map scale and indicate the locations on the map of where the various events took place as well as the locations of the feeder streams and Big River. The maps could be displayed in the classroom.

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Responding to Literature Ask the students to get out their writing materials and then present the following situation to them. Grandma has only a moment to think before she must leave the cabin to flee for safety. She grabs her velours satchel and follows Dewey to the raft. Pretend you have one minute to leave your house before some type of disaster strikes. You can only take things you can personally carry. What will you grab that is precious to you? Give the students only one minute to respond and then ask them to put down their pencils. The students can then read their lists aloud and perhaps share why they chose the item or items they did. If they had more time to think, would they have chosen differently?

Identifying Persuasive Language Having a gun was considered almost a necessity during the time of the story. People needed to provide for their own protection against outlaws or wild creatures. The right to bear arms is protected in the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution. This right is now being questioned because of high crime rates in cities and violence in schools. Ask the students to research this issue of current interest. Then have them divide themselves evenly into two panels of students, one on each side of the issue, to debate this topic of gun control.