

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Young Landlords

by

Walter Dean Myers

Book Information

Walter Dean Myers, The Young Landlords

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Book Level: 5.1

Interest Level: UG

Five devoted friends become landlords and try to make their Harlem neighborhood a better place to live.

Award: Coretta Scott King Award/Honors

Topics: Community Life, Helping Others; Community Life, Neighborhood; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 10, 90%; U.S. States/Regions, New York

Main Characters

A. B. Tucker a thief whom Paul first suspects of being involved in stealing the stereo equipment

Askia Ben Kenobi a strange tenant in Stratford Arms who causes problems for the Action Group

Bubba one of Paul's good friends and a member of the Action Group

Chris a local boy who is accused of stealing stereo equipment

Dean a member of the Action Group

Gloria a member of the Action Group who falls in love with Paul

Jack Johnson the famous boxer who Mrs. Brown thinks lives in her apartment

Kelly Smith a local man who unwittingly leads Paul to the stolen stereo equipment

Mr. Pender the Action Group's strange accountant

Mrs. Brown a tenant of Stratford Arms who believes Jack Johnson lives with her

Paul Williams a teenage boy who accidentally buys the Stratford Arms for one dollar; he narrates the story

the Captain a local gambler

Vocabulary

evidence information used to establish the truth of a claim

evolution a process of development or change

incense a substance burned to produce a pleasant odor

slumlord a landlord who exploits the tenants with bad property or service

Synopsis

Paul Williams and his friends make up the Action Group. They are a group of urban teenagers who are concerned with helping others. The group's first project is to improve the appearance of Stratford Arms, a local apartment building that is very dilapidated. Gloria, one of Paul's friends, calls around to find out who owns the building. The Action Group confronts the slumlord, and he sells the building to Paul for one dollar.

The Action Group decides the upkeep of the new building is going to be a top priority. The members attempt to make repairs and get to know their tenants. One of their most troublesome tenants is Askia Ben Kenobi, a strange man who often does not pay his rent. Another tenant, Mrs. Brown, is convinced that Jack Johnson, the famous dead boxer, lives in her apartment. The group does its best to meet everyone's needs.

In addition to maintaining the building, the group is intent on catching a thief. Chris, one of Paul's friends, has been accused of stealing stereo equipment from Mr. Reynolds's store. Paul and his friends are convinced that Chris did not commit the crime, so they do their best to find out who did. They tail local thugs and bother policemen, all to no avail.

The Action Group members, intent on making their building a nice place to live, must raise money to make repairs. They hold a rent party, but they do not make as much money as they hoped for. With the hope that they would receive the reward money, the group once again focuses on finding out who stole the stereo equipment. They sneak into a warehouse

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where they believe the stolen goods are being kept, only to be run out and shot at by a security guard. When they return to the safety of their office, Paul tells Gloria that he loves her. She is so embarrassed that she laughs. Paul, equally embarrassed, runs home.

Soon after the warehouse incident, Paul and his friends host a street fair to raise more money for Stratford Arms. Gloria hosts a kissing booth, and when Homeboy accosts her, she beats him up. The street fair is fun, but the group does not make much money. As the group is cleaning up, they meet Kelly Smith, who tells them that he can get them some cheap stereo equipment. Paul is intrigued by this information. He is sure that Kelly will lead them to the stolen goods.

Bubba and Paul meet Kelly and travel to a small furniture store. Inside, a man shows them some stereo equipment. Paul and Bubba tell him the price is not right and start to leave. The man relents and shows them some less expensive equipment in the back room. Paul and Bubba buy the equipment and rush to the office to check the serial numbers. They are devastated that the numbers do not match, until Paul's father shows them the location of the correct numbers. The numbers match and they are elated.

After the police finally come to speak with them, the Action Group finds out that although Chris did not steal the stereo equipment, he accepted money from the criminals involved. The Action Group is a little disappointed and decides not to accept the reward money. By the end of the novel, the friends realize that hard work can be rewarding.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Although he is blamed for a crime, Chris never says that he knows who committed the crime. Why do you think he does not tell anyone?

There seem to be two main reasons Chris does not say anything. Chris probably enjoys the money he receives from his boss. Also, Chris probably feels he should protect his boss, since he actually took the money.

Literary Analysis

Bubba is very excited about the possibility of becoming a numbers runner. He tries to show the Captain his abilities, but the Captain tries to change his mind. Why do you think Bubba is interested in something that is illegal?

Bubba is very concerned with social status and money. He hopes that running numbers would make him fit in and give him a chance to earn a lot of money. He is excited to work in a "profession" that would allow him to meet interesting and "cool" people.

Inferential Comprehension

What do you think Paul will do when he grows up? Will he continue to be a landlord, or do you think he will become bored with the occupation and try something new?

The students' answers will vary. Some may say that Paul has the attitude and intelligence to become anything he wants in life. Others may say he is too trusting to become successful in the real world. Students can point out specific character or environmental influences that will shape Paul's future.

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Constructing Meaning

Mr. Pender is the Action Group's accountant. However, he seems to be more than their employee; he also helps to guide them. What is an example of Mr. Pender's tendency to help the children with more than their finances?

One example of Mr. Pender's helpfulness is his suggestion that the Action Group find out who stole the stereo equipment by researching the identification numbers. This is crucial in helping the group discover the thief.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Paul describes the Stratford Arms as a slum. Ask your students to visualize what it might look like. Next, ask the students to draw a picture of Stratford Arms. In small groups, have them evaluate and discuss the similarities and differences they have drawn.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Have the students reread the passage in which Paul describes how his neighbors help with the street fair. Ask your students to create their own street fair in the classroom. Perhaps this could be a fundraising activity for the school.

Recognizing Feelings According to Paul, his father never seems to understand him. Throughout the beginning of the story, Paul's father often criticizes Paul's actions. Ask your students to write a short essay on how they might feel if they were Paul. Ask them to include reasons and specific events in the novel.

Responding to Literature Paul and his friends acquire an entire apartment building. They are required to make repairs, collect the rent, and be available to their tenants. Ask the students to consider the enormous responsibility the Action Group has. Then ask the students to imagine they are the owners of an apartment complex. Have them write a short response explaining how they would handle the responsibilities.