

Teacher to Teacher: Trade Book Teaching Ideas from the OLRC Reading Group: "Journey"

Journey

Author: Patricia MacLachlan

Summary: An eleven-year-old boy named Journey feels angry and betrayed when his mother leaves him and his sister to live with her parents. He spends the summer looking through family photos, trying to understand his mother, learning to recognize the sustaining love of his grandparents, and letting go of his anger.

Introductory Notes: Teachers should carefully consider their students and what kind of literary experience they want to foster when assigning this book. It is lovely little novel and does not require much extra guidance on the part of teachers to make it accessible or enjoyable.

Teaching Ideas

Context activities:

1. Teachers may want to begin by bringing in a camera--or several--and asking students to spend time looking through the view finder. How is looking through a camera different than normal vision? Do cameras tell the truth? If so, what kind of truth do cameras reveal? You may want to bring in published collections of photographs, particularly photos of people. Ask students which ones they think are especially good.

If several students own cameras, you may want to jointly plan a photography project. For example, each person could create a family tree, taking photos of each family member doing some activity that is typical or representative of the individual or of the entire family.

Or, part way through the reading of this book, you may ask students to bring in family photos. Do other classmates see family resemblances? Do you see yourself in your family members? Because we might look alike, are we alike?

2. Teachers may want to begin by talking about names. As a group list on the blackboard some of the most unusual names you've heard. What are some of your favorite names? Why? Can a name be representative of an era? Of a region? What significance does a name have for the person named? What significance does a name have for the namer?

Reading and writing questions:

(Teachers may want to use some of these in class discussion, some as journal prompts, some as in-class writing prompts.)

Epigraphs and introduction:

1. What do you think Welty means? Is she right?
2. What does Gowin mean?
3. What kind of child do you think Journey is?

Chapter 1:

A. In the beginning of the story, Cat is giving away her possessions, and her grandparents are taking

them over from her. What kinds of things would you give away? What would you never give away? Why?

B. Pay attention to the important details about the photo of Journey's father. Why is this photo significant? In almost every chapter a character makes a comment about the role or purposes of photography. Perhaps one student could become the class recorder, making a notation each time a mention is made.

Chapter 2:

A. How old is Journey? Do you think the way he behaves is realistic? Is he facing facts realistically?

B. Compare the two photos of Grandma and of Journey's Mom.

C. On p. 12 the italics are describing a memory, almost like a dream. Which of your five senses are involved in this memory? Is this how your memories work? In this memory, Journey knows the truth of his mother. How can memories--like photos--help us to feel truths that we aren't able to put into words?

Chapters 3 and 4:

A. Why is the question on p. 14 put in italics?

B. Can you hide behind a camera? How?

C. Pay attention to the memory on p. 18. How is this one like a photo? Do you ever have incomplete memories like this one?

D. Think about the relationship between Emmett and Cooper, Cooper and Cat, Cooper and Journey. What kind of kid is Cooper?

E. Why doesn't Journey recognize Grandfather's photo as quickly as the others do?

F. Recall the first time you drove a car. Was it scary? You may want to write an entire journal entry describing the whole experience.

G. Why do you think taking the group photo by the car is so important to Grandfather?

Chapter 5:

A. This chapter begins with some wonderful images. Think about the language that MacLachlan uses throughout the book. Look for a poem that matches or corresponds with a chapter, a paragraph, a sentence, or an image. Or find a picture from a magazine or a photograph that fits their idea of how something in the book might look. Explain and discuss your choices. What can the poems do that the photos or pictures don't?

B. What's the difference between a cliché (finish off these expressions: red as a ----, quick as a---) and a really good metaphor or simile? Start a list on the board of the really good ones that MacLachlan uses.

- for ex. ants like sightseers (p. 27)
- mists that lay like lace (p. 26)

- sudden silence like noise (p. 7)

Ask students to underline the words--from any of the chapters-- that really jolt them.

C.How do similes work? Why are good similes and metaphors the sign of good writing?

D.Why does Journey want to fix blame? Who does he think is to blame?

Chapters 6 and 7:

A.Compare Journey's and Cat's reactions to their mom's actions. How do you think you would behave in their situation? Why?

B.Why does the news about the family photos bother Journey so much?

C.Think about family rules. Does/did your family have rules? How do they get started? It is often odd how families try to live by them, even when the rules may be fairly irrational. Who named Journey? What difference did the family rule make in his situation?

D.Think about the relationship between Grandma and Grandpa. Do they have a good marriage in your opinion? Why did Grandpa's eyes get wet on p. 45? What did the conversation between Journey and his Grandfather mean?

Chapters 8 and 9:

A.What had Mama done with the photos? In your opinion, was it like murder? How did you feel when you read this section?

B.Why does Journey fight with Cooper?

C.What does Mrs. McDougal mean when she talks about photos?

D.Consider the setting of this book. Where exactly do you think the book is set--pick a state. Does it remind you of places you've been?

Chapters 10 and 11:

A.Think about what makes a good mother (see conversation on p. 59 and 60) and a good brother (p.62). What is your definition of a good mother? A good brother? Write an incident from your life that illustrates your definitions.

B.Talk about point of view, and then ask students to write a letter from Journey's mom to Journey, explaining what she is doing and why she left him and Cat.

C.Write 3 or 4 journal or diary entries from the point of view of any one of the characters in the novel.

D.How are Grandfather and Journey alike?

Chapters 12 and 13:

A.Think about the musicians you know or adults who decide to learn to play a musical instrument. Why does Grandma bother to learn the flute? What purpose does it serve for her? What is the

importance of music to this story? Both the flute and the camera were past interests of Cat's. What does it say about the grandparents that they take those two hobbies?

B. What does the memory described on page 71-73 reveal about Cat? Journey? Their mom?

C. What does Journey finally learn? Why is it important? How could he have known something before he knew how to verbalize it?

D. What do you think has happened to Journey's relationship with his grandfather? His mother?

E. Journey's last words are interesting--why would MacLachlan choose to end the book this way?

F. Think again about the title. What name would you have chosen for the book? What other name could Journey (the boy) have been given that would fit him?

Follow-up activities:

A. If students expressed their delight in MacLachlan's writing, you may want to follow by reading (or by encouraging students to read individually) Sarah, Plain and Tall, or Baby, both short novels and both beautifully written. If your students enjoyed the rural setting of Journey, you may want to read through MacLachlan's picture book All the Places to Love, which has been beautifully illustrated by Mike Wimmer.

B. If students were struck with the phenomena of children who have been left by parents, you may want to encourage them to read Katherine Paterson's Great Gilly Hopkins, a short novel about a foster child who moves heaven and earth to get back with her own biological mother. Kevin Henkes' novel Words of Stone tells the story of another angry and resourceful young girl who has been left with her grandmother. C. Ask students to research the phenomena of children being raised by relatives or folks other than parents. Perhaps they could speak with social workers or school psychologists or look for newspaper articles about this issue. How common is it in your community? What are the repercussions for the children? For the caretakers?

D. You may want to end the unit by asking students to write a thoughtful journal reflection, stating their emotional reactions to the book, commenting on how the book spoke (or didn't speak) to their lives. Or perhaps they would prefer writing a persuasive argument, telling a friend or family member why (or why not) they should read Journey.

Field Testing

These teaching ideas were field-tested in a rural ABE program with a small group of adult learners who had worked together on another short novel of MacLachlan's, Baby, and were so pleased with the first novel that they asked for the chance to do another one. Both men and women were in the group. Reading and activities took place twice a week for a month in 30-45 minute sessions.

Teacher's changes

The teacher began with #2 of the Context activities, read chapter one aloud, and followed #1 from the teaching suggestions. In the second session, she continued to read aloud, interrupting the story frequently to lead discussion and to answer questions. As the sessions continued she asked participants if they would like to read aloud to the group. She found that they encouraged each other and, as time went on, became willing to read aloud without practicing first at home.

For Chapter two, she focused on suggestion C, and for Chapters 3 & 4, she focused on C and G. She combined the reading of Chapters 5 and 6, using the first two suggestions for Chapter 6 & 7 and the next session following with suggestion C, on family rules. She used suggestion D with Chapter 8; however, she noted that it was difficult for them to imagine a specific setting for the story. For Chapters 10 and 11, she followed suggestions A and D and found the discussion to be particularly energetic. For the final chapters she focused on suggestions C, D, and E.

Readers' responses:

The participants made thoughtful comments, especially about why the family photos bothered Journey so much, and about issues that they could connect to their own lives, such as what qualities marked a good mother or good brother.

Learners enjoyed the book, all of them responding with positive comments. Perhaps because they had become comfortable with reading together, they preferred reading aloud and listening to each other rather than reading silently. When in mid April they finished Journey and knew there would not be enough time to read another book before the end of the term, they expressed interest in continuing the reading group next fall.

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