

Teacher to Teacher

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Teaching Ideas from the OLRC Reading Group *A Long Way from Chicago* & *A Year Down Yonder*

Author: Richard Peck

Title: *A Long Way from Chicago*
A Year Down Yonder

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Teaching suggestions for two books, both by Richard Peck are provided in this publication. The second book is a sequel to the first, so teachers may want to have students read both. Teaching ideas are also offered by title, however, in the event that teachers elect to use only one.



Field Testing

The Richard Peck books *A Long Way from Chicago* and *A Year Down Yonder* were field tested in two Ohio adult education programs, each in two classes. All of the students expressed high interest in the books even though most of them were not readers outside of the class. Teaching suggestions for two books required more time than any of the classes had available. Neither program used the teaching strategies or explored the web sites. Although both introduced the books by reading them aloud in class, students also read the books outside of class. Students with a foreign background had some difficulty with the setting and colloquial language.

Large City: With a wide range in ages (18-70) and reading levels (2-8 grade), ten learners took the books home for a month as an incentive for leisure reading. Whenever two or more students completed the books, the small group discussed the plot and characters. They also wrote paragraphs on the Depression and Grandma's personality. Students especially enjoyed the short, self-contained chapters because busy work and family schedules often reduced their time for reading. In other words, Grandma was a big hit!

Small City: Men's Book Club: Six male, non-leisure readers from 18-50 years of age volunteered to meet for one half hour a week to discuss what they had read, one chapter at a time. Beginning with a student summary, they listened to the teacher read humorous passages aloud and discussed topics like the Depression, Roosevelt, prohibition, and "homeless drifters." All were enthusiastic about

reading another book in a club next year, despite the admission that two had not done the outside reading. Their description of Grandma Dowdel progressed from "sneaky" and "mean" to "clever" and "loving." They especially enjoyed the colloquial language (although one South African member had difficulty imagining American mid-western life in the 30's).

Mixed Adult Education and ESOL: The four women and one man, aged from 31 to 51 years of age, included ESOL students and several students with learning difficulties. Although the teacher used the book to teach the characteristics of a novel--setting, protagonist, conflict, and foreshadowing--she utilized several of the Teaching Suggestions. She read the text aloud and discussed the differences between vengeance and justice while encouraging students to share exaggerated family stories. Although idioms, colloquialisms, and vocabulary were emphasized throughout, the foreign students had difficulty understanding Grandma's character.

Summaries

A Long Way from Chicago

Subtitled "A Novel in Stories," this is a book about Joey and Mary Alice, who leave their home in Chicago each summer during the depression to spend a week with Grandma Dowdel. Grandma Dowdel lives in a very small downstate town, and she is, to say the least, an unforgettable character. This was a Newbery Honor Book.

Ohio Literacy Resource Center

Enhancing Adult Literacy

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A Year Down Yonder

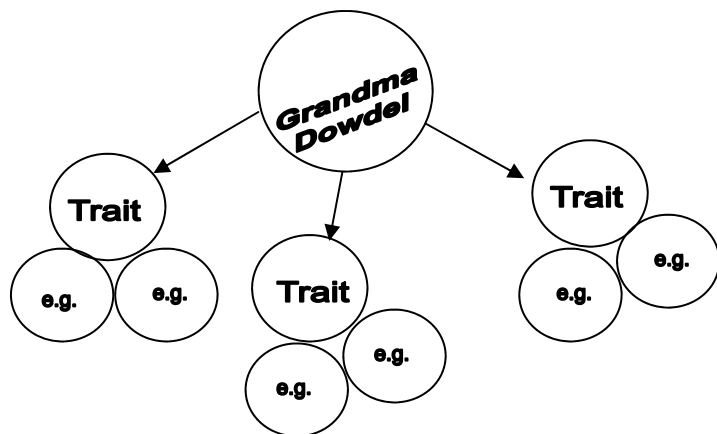
During the recession of 1937, Mary Alice, now a teenage city girl, spends a year in a rural town with her spunky, trouble-making grandmother. This is the sequel to *A Long Way from Chicago* and won the Newbery Medal.

Introductory Notes

These books make good fiction additions when studying the Depression. The books would also compliment study of families or family history. Any combination of teacher read-aloud and student independent reading is advised. You may want to read more aloud for students whose reading ability is below Level 4 (grade 4 or 5). More activities are provided below than what teachers would probably want to use. Consider learners' needs and interest when selecting from the activities. All strategies mentioned are described in detail at: <http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/read-listen.html>

Reading Group members found the books humorous. If your students do as well, they might want to "collect" funny parts and share them now and then. Discussion or writing might focus on the author's use of humor: What role does humor play in the book? How does reading something funny affect you?

Grandma Dowdel's character is well developed. Every couple of chapters, you might want to ask learners to make notes about Grandma Dowdel's character in their reading logs or journals. As new notes are added, invite students to review their previous lists (and revise, if warranted). Small-group sharing may enhance this learning. As a culminating activity, ask pairs of students to develop a "character tree" for Grandma.



Students may want to share these with others and decide as a whole about her most important character traits. (As students share examples of these traits, you'll have a good opportunity to help them see the power of "showing, not telling" in writing.)

Peck's writing is very strong. You may want to ask students to keep track of exceptionally effective sentences. (You might suggest examples of figurative language; both books contain excellent examples.) You can invite students to share these occasionally, which will probably lead to mini-lessons for writing. It may also lead to a discussion of why these are award winning books.

These books may spark interest in reminiscence writing. Learners may want to compare small towns and big cities or life in small towns then vs. now while noting differences in their journals as they read.

Specific Suggestions: *A Long Way from Chicago*

Before beginning the book, ask learners to complete a Think-Pair-Share activity that focuses on their perceptions of some family member at two points in time: when they were children and now as adults. A Venn diagram may help to organize thinking.

You may also want learners to begin a K-W-L chart about the Great Depression. Every chapter or two, you can ask teachers to add/modify information on the chart.

Locate Chicago and St. Louis on a map. If possible, use a map that shows train routes and ask learners to note all of the small towns between cities.

Prologue: Read aloud. Invite discussion about point of view—the adult Joey is narrating stories about his childhood. How might the resulting stories differ from those told by a child without the intervening years? Also point out to students the sentence "As the years went by, though, Mary Alice and I grew up and though Grandma never changed, we'd seem to see a different woman every summer." Ask them to speculate about why this may be so, and tell them that they'll be tracking this "different woman" as they read.

Shotgun.... : Read aloud as a DL-TA. Stopping points: Title: p.5, end of first full paragraph (...a slow month for news"); p.8 top ("Take them tomatoes off the fire."; the extra space on p. 11; p. 14 top ("Twitched"); end. Invite discussion or writing about why Grandma lied to the reporter. Also, ask students to begin a list of words to describe Grandma. They may choose words from the book or come up with their own descriptions. Students whom are artistically inclined may want to sketch Grandma.

The Mouse in the Milk: Ask students to read the chapter in sections. Use the Sketch to stretch activity after each section to prompt discussion. Stopping points: the line on the bottom of p. 19, the extra space on the top of p. 21, the extra space on the top of page p. 31, end. Follow up: Ask students to add to their lists of description words for Grandma. Ask them to write in their journals about whether Grandma had changed in the year since the shotgun episode. Do an Agree? Disagree? Why? Activity with the following sentences:

Small town life is pretty much like life anywhere else.
People's way of interacting hasn't changed much in 80 years.
Grandma and Effie Wilcox really are enemies.

One-Woman Crime Wave: Ask students to read the chapter in sections. After they have read each section, ask them to identify what they consider to be the most important paragraph from the selection and then to share these in small groups along with their reasons for selecting the paragraphs. Stopping points: extra space on p. 54 ("And I don't tell my private business"), end. Follow up: Ask students to add to their lists of describing words for grandma. Ask them to write in their journals about whether Grandma has changed in the year since the mouse in the milk episode. For discussion writing: did grandma win the battle with the sheriff? Why? Is this the way the battle should have been resolved? Why?

The Phantom Brakeman and Things with Wings: Ask students to read these two chapters independently. Then ask students to add to their lists of describing words for Grandma. Have students work in pairs to complete herringbone charts about the central issues in each chapter. Then ask them to make groups of four to share herringbones; evaluate the tricks Grandma played and talk about why she does this? Decide which trick is worse or more harmful? Why.

Centennial Summer and The Troop Train: Read these aloud to learners. Then ask students to add to their lists of describing words for Grandma. Ask them to write in their journal about whether or not Grandma had changed in the years since the phantom brakeman.

Ask students to complete a Discussion Web activity using this as a prompting sentence: Grandma is a good substitute parent for Joey and Mary Alice.

Ask students to write bio-poems or acrostics about Grandma. They may want to refer to the words they have been listing about her throughout the book.

For discussion or writing:

Compare the children's perception of Grandma at the beginning of the book to their perception at the end. Have their ideas changed? What have the children learned about their Grandma?

What role do rumors play in the book? How does this compare to the role of rumors in today's world? Would Grandma be as successful at spreading rumors in 2006? Why?

Specific Suggestions: A Year Down Yonder

If students have read *A Long Way from Chicago*, invite a discussion of characters, setting, and key plot elements. Students may want to re-read journal entries made while reading the book.

Prologue and Rich Chicago Girl: Read these aloud to students. Ask students to complete a Venn diagram about “small town life, then and now.” You might want to do this with the class as a whole. Another option would be for partners or small groups to complete the diagrams and to follow with whole group conversation. Possible discussion/ writing topic: Did Grandma do the right thing with Mildred Burdick? Students may want to sketch Grandma.

Vittles and Vengeance: Ask students to read independently. After reading, invite discussion (perhaps followed up with writing) on these topics: What do the townspeople think of Grandma? Are vengeance and justice the same? What do you think of Grandma's actions? Was it acceptable for her to steal pumpkins and pecans? Why?

A Minute in the Morning: Read aloud to students. Follow-up: p.41, “When I was a girl we had to walk in our sleep to keep from freezing to death.” Invite learners to share exaggerations their parents told them as children. Create a list and invite discussion about why this may be such a common occurrence. Mary Alice listens to radio plays in the evening. Learners may wish to explore one of the most famous of these, *Fibber McGee and Molly*:

Unofficial Fibber McGee and Molly site:

<http://www.compumart.ab.ca/agirard/fibber/79.htm>

A short script excerpt (suitable for Readers Theatre)

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5157/>

Radio Hall of Fame (includes episode that can be played)

<http://www.radiohof.org/comedy/fibbermolly.html>

Away in a Manger: Ask students to read the chapter in sections. After they have read each one, ask them to draw quick sketches of the aspect that seem most important to them. They can share these sketches with one or two others, explaining what they drew and why. Stopping points: p.60 top (“...clenching her jaw”), extra space on p.64, p.68 middle (“I'd have come dangerously near kissing Grandma then, if she'd let me”), extra space p. 72, end.

Follow-up for discussion: How does Grandma show love? How does Grandma deal with poverty?

Hearts and Flour: Read aloud to learners using DL-TA. Stops: p. 77 (“our side”); p.79, end of newspaper excerpt; p.83, extra space (“crumbled”); p. 87, extra space; p. 90 (“or this girl here will take them”); end. Follow up: Ask learners to skim back through this book (and *A Long way from Chicago*, if they have read it) to reassess Grandma's relationship with Mrs. L.J. Weidenbach throughout the book. (One way to do this would be to divide books up so that each student is responsible for skimming a couple of chapters. When episodes that feature Mrs. W are located, the whole group can then re-read them.) Ask learners to consider what they know about Mrs. W. Under. What circumstances have she and Grandma interacted in the past? Why do they think Grandma found Aunt Mae? What do they predict the future relationship will be between Grandma and Mrs. W?

A Dangerous Man: Ask learners to read this chapter independently. Afterwards, ask groups to consider the following sentences, deciding if they agree or disagree with each and developing reasons for their opinions:

Arnold Green, the New York artist, was the “dangerous man.”

Grandma invited Miss Butler to dine to spite Maxine Patch.

Mary Alice and Royce will develop a friendship.

Learners may want to consult the following WWW site to learn more about artists involved in the WPA: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaposters/wpahome.html>

Gone with the Wind and Ever After: Read these aloud to learners. To conclude, they might want to discuss whether leaving was the right thing for Mary Alice to do, to compare Grandma and Mary Alice (in terms of personalities or characteristics), or to focus on the life lessons Mary Alice learned from her time with Grandma.

Culminating Activities for Either Book: Ask students to conduct individual (or small group) inquiry about some aspect of the story: the Great Depression, life in the 1930s, and so on. Suggest that students frame the inquiry by generating questions and then using the Internet and traditional sources to find answers. Arrange an opportunity for students to share what they have discovered with others. These sites may be particularly helpful.

Depression News—the 1930s

<http://www.sos.state.mi.us/history/museum/explore/meseums/hismus/190075/depressn/labnews2.html>

Documenting America

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>

Picturing the Century

http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/picturing_the_century/home.html

FDR's First Inaugural Speech (“The only thing we have to fear...”)

http://historychannel.com/speeches/archive/speech_254.html

John Dillinger (from American Experience—Public Enemy #1)

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/dillinger/>

Many of the scenes in the books lend themselves to Reader's Theater. Ask small groups of students (3 or 4) to a) identify a favorite or powerful scene, b) rewrite it into a format suitable for Reader's Theater, c) decide on and practice parts, and d) perform the Reader's Theater for others in the group.

Learners may want to complete a then-and-now matrix. Another possibility would be to contrast city life with small town life. In either event, pairs of learners can make notes on the matrix and then use the notes to develop longer pieces of writing.

Aspects	Then	Now
Families		
Celebrations		
Communities		
Rumors		
Poverty		
[student choice]		
[student choice]		

Internet Resources for Additional Teaching Ideas

For *A Long Way from Chicago*

Literature Learning Ladders

<http://eduscapes.com/newsbery/99b.htm>

Literature Circle Questions from Scholastic

http://teacher.scholastic.com/arrow/lwtc_disc_guide.pdf

Multomah County Library

<http://www.multcolib.org/talk/yrca/guides-longway.html>

For *A Year Down Under*

Linda's Links to Literature

http://www.richmond.k12.va.us/readamillion/LITERATURE/literature_lesson_plans_y.h

