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Book Summary

After Nathaniel's leg is crushed in an accident, his father brings home an orphan boy, John Worth, to help work the fields. Nathaniel feels increasingly jealous of the boy who has taken over not only his work but the attention of his father, who has barely spoken to him since his injury. In school for the first time, he is far behind even his youngest classmates, and he feels as useless there as he does at home. Meanwhile, Worth is still grieving for his family and his old life. As the farm chores prevent him from going to school, he also resents losing his dream of an education and a good job. And for all the work he does, Worth knows he will never inherit the farm that he is helping to save. But a battle between ranchers and farmers-and a book of Greek mythology that Nathaniel reads aloud each evening-forges a connection between the two boys, who begin to discover that maybe there is enough room on the farm, and in the family, for both of them.

Author Information

A. LaFaye writes: "I'd read about the Orphan Train and felt sympathy for those kids who were plopped down in a whole new world after facing great family tragedies. But I began to wonder about the families who took them in, especially those families that already had children. I wanted to look at how the new additions shaped the family."

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Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. In the first chapter of the book, according to Nate, how does Ma know that a storm is coming?

Nathan explains that working as a tinkerer has heightened Ma's senses. "You spend so much time working with the tiny pieces of a clock that your eyes get to seeing the finest things. That's how come my ma can hear lightning in the grass," he says on pages 1-2.

2. Where did John Worth live before coming to stay with the Peales? Why has he come to Nebraska?

John Worth has come to Nebraska from New York. He is an orphan and found a home with the Peales, who are in need of help around the farm following Nate's injury.

3. What does Ma do for neighbors to earn extra money for the family?

Ma does tinkering. She fixes household objects like clocks, lamps, and kitchenware.

4. How does John adjust to life on the farm? Why does he find many of the chores Pa assigns him difficult to complete?

John Worth has a tough transition to farm life. On page 30, Pa says, "Can't even pull a teat. Can't tell a rake from a hoe. The boy has been living under a rock." Ma explains that because he has been living in the city, John is unaccustomed to farm work. Additionally, John's adjustment to his

new life is marred by nightmares related to the fire that killed his family.

5. In chapter 17, why has Mr. Clemson given Pa a number of cows and a bull?

Pa accepts the livestock as compensation for the corn trampled by Clemson's cattle.

6. On page 116, Anemone accepts the repaired pan from Ma and comments, "Your husband does good work." How does Ma respond to this? Who actually repaired the pan? If you were Ma, how would you have responded to Anemone? Can you think of a reason Ma would allow someone else to get credit for her work?

According to Nate, Ma "gave that smile...that said 'I did this, not my husband, but thank you anyway.'" As the quote implies, Ma actually did the work but did not correct Anemone. Readers should understand that Ma is respecting the gender roles that are important in the place and time of this story. Look for references in one or both of these passages: first, on page 12, in which Nate explains that Ma learned tinkering from Pa but "folks didn't take to women doing man's work;" the theme of clearly defined gender roles continues on page 32, when Pa scolds Nate, who is folding napkins, for doing women's work. In explaining what they would do in Ma's situation, readers should demonstrate an understanding of the historical and social context influencing Ma.

7. Imagine you are Nate Peale. It is a sunny day and you have done your chores. What would you do to pass the afternoon on the farm? Ride Belle to the river? Practice reading? Something else?

This is an opportunity for readers to visualize the farm beyond what is explicitly mentioned in the book. In addition to things that Nate actually does during the story, other activities for Nate are up to the imagination, as long as they are appropriate in the context of the book.

8. What does Anemone lend Nate? Why does this gesture mean so much to him?

Anemone lends Nate a book on Greek mythology. The gesture is meaningful to Nate for three reasons. First, he is touched by the attention from Anemone. After his first encounter with her, he says, on page 70, "I just wanted to enjoy the feeling that somebody liked me. That warm-in-the-heart feeling I hadn't known since we left the farm, and I had to say good-bye to Benny Sadler who lived down the road." Second, the hero stories Nate enjoys inspire him to search for the hero in himself. Later in the story, when he and John race to stop the fence cutters, Nate draws connections to Hercules. Third, having the book helps Nate learn to read, a skill he particularly values after his accident.

9. On page 63, Nate says, "Part of me wondered why [Ma] hated John Worth so much." Briefly list the two explanations Nate offers. Then, in your own words, explain why you think Ma seems to dislike John for much of the story.

Nate says, "Was it just because [John] reminded her of the kid who robbed Mrs. Feringeld? Or that Pa didn't get her approval first?" Readers may choose to elaborate on these reasons or to conjecture on their own. For example, Ma might resent John, who is healthy, because she sees him as attempt to replace the injured Nate.

10. Briefly explain why Horace Danver is cutting fences on the Peales' property.

Horace Danver is hoping to fan the flames of ongoing tension between ranchers, who need land for cattle, and farmers who use the land for crops. The Danvers believe a ranching family, the Gandrys, are responsible for the death of one of their own, Calvin Danver. When fences are cut, cattle trample on crops and farmers blame ranchers. Presumably, Horace believes that if the Peales' crops are trampled, anger at ranching families like the Gantrys will intensify.

11. On page 46, Nate says, "A man with a bad leg needed book learning to find his place." What do you think Nate means by this? Why is it especially important for Nate to do well in school after his accident? Hint: Remember the time and setting for this story.

Readers should understand that in 19th-century agrarian communities, most men fed themselves and their families through farming or physical labor. Since this will not be an option for Nate, he must develop other skills that begin with reading, writing, and arithmetic.

12. Compare the way in which Nate views John at the beginning of the story to the way he views John at the end of the story. What do you think is the explanation for this change?

At the beginning of the story, Nate has mixed feelings about John. He seems jealous of any time John spends with Mr. Peale, yet also feels guilty about his own resentment. On page 40, he says, "... [John] was a farmhand, not a son. Not my brother. Just a boy who did my work." However, Nate continues, "Thinking such made me feel small. It didn't do me no good to remind myself he wasn't part of the family."

Later in the story, Nate, hoping to spend more time with his father, suggests John eat at the table with the family. "More important," Nate adds, "I could hear what they had to say to each other, know what John Worth said that made Pa listen. Made him talk. And even laugh." By the end of the story, Nate comes to sympathize with John, who lost his family in a fire, and even helps him learn to read. Together, they help stop the fence cutters and Nate comes to see John as a brother.

There are several plausible explanations for the change. One reason may be that Nate, who feels as though he lost his father after the accident, sympathizes with John, who lost his own family. Another reason might be that as the relationship between Nate and Mr. Peale improves, Nate is able to set aside his early jealousy.

13. Based on what you learned about John Worth in the book, what profession do you think he will choose as an adult? Do you think he will go on to be a banker in the city? Do you think he will inherit a share of the farm? Or do you think he will do something else entirely? Be sure to use specific evidence from the text in your answer.

On page 126, after discovering John has a talent for math, Nate asks him, "You want yourself a job at a bank?" Referring to a bank job as "a ticket to the good life," John replies, "Yep. A bank or on the exchange or for one of them trading houses in New York." John goes on to say that he won't inherit any land because Mr. Peale, who sees him as a hired hand, will leave it all to Nate. However, by the end of the story, there is reason to believe that down the road, Mr. Peale may see John as more than help. Therefore, readers can develop a reasonable case for either profession (farmer or banker).

14. On page 88, Nate finishes reading to John and wonders, "if maybe the quiet feeling inside me just might be the start of something good." Based on what happened in the rest of the book, would you say Nate was right, wrong, or both? Explain your answer using examples from the text.

In this scene, Nate and John are growing closer. However, soon after, they exchange punches over a misunderstanding. While John and Nate quickly reconcile, the fallout from the fight seems to add to family tensions. Then, fence cutters are seen on the Peale property. Ultimately, John and Nate work together to thwart them. At the end of the book, they are much closer to viewing each other as brothers. Thus, while there was trouble in the short term, the better answer is probably that Nate was right-the scene on page 88 was the start of something good.

15. Pa seems to blame himself for several hardships that befall his family, including the accident that broke Nate's leg. Reread the argument between Pa and Ma on pages 57-58. Do you agree with Ma, who says, "I don't blame you, Gabriel"? Or do you think Pa is at least partly responsible for any of the unfortunate events he lists in chapter 8?

The three events for which Pa blames himself are the death of Nate's sister, Missy, who choked on a piece of bread while in the care of a neighbor; the accident that shattered Nate's leg when

thunder spooked a horse; and the family's move from Chicago to Nebraska, which brought them new challenges. In the case of Missy's death, there is little reason for Pa to blame himself. He and Ma were at work in the factory and the death was the result of a freak accident. In the case of Nate's broken leg, it is true Pa was pushing Nate to hurry; however, if the storm had not scared the horse, it is likely no harm would have come. With respect to moving to Nebraska, this appears to be a decision Pa made with little consultation from Ma. And though he can't control the weather or the locusts, he is ultimately responsible for bringing the Peales to the prairie.

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-7; Analysis: 8-10; Synthesis: 11-13; Evaluation: 14-15.

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