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Seeking Cassandra

by Lutricia Clifton

Grades 3 to 7

Instructional
Standards

About the Book

When work takes twelve-year-old Cassie's mom abroad, Cassie is stuck living with her dad in his Winnebago in Palo Duro Canyon State Park for the summer. Surrounded by kids she deems uncool, and in the case of mysterious X possibly dangerous, Cassie believes this to be the worst summer ever. Her feelings change when several arrowheads go missing from an archeological dig site on park property. Cassie immediately has a suspect in mind, but when she starts jotting down clues in a detective journal and putting the pieces together, Cassie feels uneasy. Have her assumptions about other people led her down the wrong path?

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Literature/Language Arts

Realistic Fiction—Explain to students that this story is an example of realistic fiction, meaning that the story comes entirely from the author's imagination, although the incidents in the story are realistic, or could have happened. Ask them to name some other stories that they think are realistic fiction. **CCSS RL.5.2, 5**

Similes—The author uses many similes in the story. Alert students to the fact that similes often contain the word *like*: "The ground below looked like a big brown pancake." Ask them to find other examples of similes in the story. Have them write a short descriptive paragraph using three similes of their own. **CCSS L.5.5, 5.A**

Questions for Discussion

This story follows twelve-year-old Cassandra (Cassie) as she moves from her home in Austin, TX, to Palo Duro Canyon State Park in the mountains outside of Amarillo, TX. As she adjusts to her new life, she encounters many experiences that may be familiar to students. Ask students to select one or more of the following questions to discuss with partners, in small groups, or to use as writing prompts. **CCSS W.5.1, 3, 4; SL.5.1, 4; L.5.1, 2**

Setting—The author writes very vivid descriptions of the new environment where Cassie finds herself. Have students write a detailed description of the place where they live. Have them include interesting things they see on their way to and from school. Have them compare and contrast their environment with Cassie's.

Moving to a New Place—Have you ever had to move to a new place, leaving your regular life and good friends behind? How did you feel about it? What did you do to adapt? How were your reactions the same or different from Cassie's? If your feelings changed, what made them change? Compare Cassie's life in Austin to her life at the campsite. How is it the same, and how is it different?

First Impressions—When Cassie first saw X and noted that he was Mexican-American and had tattoos, she automatically thought that he was in a gang. How did her feelings about X and his brother Hector change? Describe a similar experience you've had where you had certain perceptions of someone at first, but later your ideas changed. Do you feel that first impressions are always correct? Why or why not?

Characters—Cassie has interactions with various kids and adults in the story. Have students choose one or two of the characters and describe everything about them: their appearance, what’s important to them, where they live, how they act, whom they influence. **CCSS RL.5.3**

Friendship—Cassie was very unhappy about having to leave her good friends in Austin. Have students discuss what friendship means to them. How do you make new friends? What is really important in a friend? Can feelings toward friends change? How and why does this happen?

“Respect for people and the natural world.”—This is what Ranger Burns told the kids that they would learn in the Junior Naturalist Program. Have students explain what this phrase means to them.

Responsibilities—In the story Cassie’s father gives her certain responsibilities in their trailer home. Ask students to describe the responsibilities they have in their own households. How important is it for kids to have responsibilities at home? What can they learn from performing these various tasks?

Secrets and Rules—Keeping secrets and following rules both play a part in this story. Ask students to describe in detail when they think it is okay to keep secrets and when it is okay to break rules.

Cassie’s Journal—At first Cassie uses her journal to list clues and write her own assumptions about who stole the valuable spearheads. At the end she uses the journal to list the things she had learned from all the experiences she had in Palo Duro. Ask students to list things they have learned from their experiences—so far—in their own lives.

Science—This story includes references to many flora and fauna in Palo Duro State Park, as noted below. Encourage students to use Google or other resources to access information and visual representations of them. They may also wish to do further research on individual species. **CCSS W.5.2, 7, 8; RI.5.7**

Trees/Plants: sagebrush (p. 11), mesquite (p. 12), hackberry (p. 16), chinaberry (p. 16), sunflower (p. 16), juniper (p. 16), cottonwood (p. 63), yucca (p. 78), star thistle (p. 83), blackfoot daisy (p. 83), buffalo grass (p. 83), prickly pear cactus (p. 83).

Animals: Palo Duro mouse (p. 50), Texas horned lizard (p. 50), harvester ants (p. 51)

Research/Online Resources

Junior Naturalist Program—This link provides a copy of the handbook that Cassie and her friends probably had to complete: tpwd.texas.gov/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd_bk_p4506_0007m.pdf. For a description of the program for young students, click here: juniornaturalist.net/rjn_about.html.

Palo Duro Canyon State Park—tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/palo-duro-canyon presents a description of the area where the story is set, including links to photos, activities and additional information.

JA Ranch—www.ranches.org/jaranch.htm presents the history of this ranch (p. 53), and the part that Charles Goodnight and John Adair played in its founding, along with many black-and-white photos.

Winnebagos and Conestogas—Visual images can be found here: goo.gl/jlwU6E (Winnebago) and here: tinyurl.com/pod4f62 (Conestoga). These may help students, especially urban ones, to get a better idea of what life might be like in this type of housing.

Guide prepared by Sandy Schuckett, School Library Consultant

About the Author

Lutricia Clifton is a Texas author whose works include *Freaky Fast Frankie Joe*, which was named a Texas Bluebonnet Award Master List title, and *Immortal Max. Seeking Cassandra* is her third novel.