The Shorter Works of Mildred D. Taylor: Welcome to the Real World

Mildred D. Taylor discovered her most frequent narrator, Cassie Logan, when revising her first book, *Song of the Trees* (1975). The success of that novella inspired Taylor to recast her own family history and stories as the history and stories of the fictional Logan family. The results have been satisfying to Taylor and to her readers. In addition to her full-length novels about Cassie and her family, Taylor has published five short books: *Song of the Trees*, *The Gold Cadillac* (1987), *The Friendship* (1987), *Mississippi Bridge* (1990), and *The Well: David's Story* (1995). Of the five, *Song of the Trees* and *The Well* are short novels; the other three stories are illustrated books.

All five books could be used in literature circles, especially over a short period of time, perhaps only a day or two, and would allow for differentiated or leveled instruction. Because of the great popularity of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), it’s likely that many students have already read it, so literature circles built around these five books would be ideal for teachers who want to cover social and historical issues similar to those in *Roll of Thunder* without requiring students to reread that novel. Another approach would be to use the shorter books as prereading for *Roll of Thunder* or one or more of Taylor’s other novels. The five shorter books cover the Logan family from 1910 through the 1950s and introduce students to the issues and many of the characters in the Logan novels. Students who have already read and discussed the shorter books will have considerable reading momentum for tackling one of Taylor’s full-length novels.

*The Gold Cadillac, The Friendship, and Mississippi Bridge* can be read aloud or silently in about a single class period, so they might be ideal selections for struggling or
unmotivated readers. Groups of better readers could tackle *Song of the Trees* and *The Well*. Though the five books have different settings, conflicts, or characters, they do have one thing in common: in each story, a child in the Logan family is introduced to the harsh, painful realities of racism.

**Song of the Trees**

Mildred D. Taylor’s first book launched her writing career. In her acceptance speech for the inaugural NSK Neustadt Prize for Children’s Literature in 2003, she said, “Because *Song of the Trees* won [the Council on Interracial Books for Children Award], all my dreams of a literary career began to come true” (7). The book received other awards, serving as a wonderful prelude for her next novel, the Newbery Medal–winning *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*.

*Song of the Trees* is based on an incident that took place on Taylor’s family land in Mississippi during the Depression, and references to it appear in many of the other Logan books.

**Setting**

Rural Mississippi, 1932

**Characters**

Cassie Logan, narrator (eight years old)

Big Ma, Cassie’s grandmother

Christopher-John, Cassie’s brother (seven years old)

Mary Logan, or Ma, Cassie’s mother

Stacey, Cassie’s older brother (eleven years old)
David Logan, or Papa, Cassie’s father

Little Man, Cassie’s youngest brother (six years old)

Mr. Andersen, a white lumberman

Tom, a white lumberman

Doc Thomas, Mary’s doctor

Claude, a black lumberman

Plot Summary

While picking blackberries in the forest near their home, Cassie and her brothers overhear two white lumbermen planning to chop down most of the trees on the Logans’ property. Cassie’s grandmother, Big Ma, has agreed to let the men take the trees in exchange for sixty-five dollars. She’s intimidated by Mr. Andersen, the white foreman, who warns that Cassie’s father might have an “accident” if Big Ma doesn’t grant permission to take all the trees they want.

Andersen assumes he’ll get his way because Cassie’s father is in Louisiana working on the railroad and will be unable to stop the transaction. Worried about losing the trees, Cassie’s mother and grandmother send Stacey to Louisiana by horse to bring his father home. When Stacey and Papa return, they spend the night wiring the forest with dynamite. In the morning, they confront the lumbermen, threatening to blow up themselves and the forest if the lumbermen don’t leave. Eventually, the men do leave, but Papa and Cassie wonder if the trees will ever sing again like they used to.

Discussion

*Song of the Trees* lays the foundation for all Logan stories that follow it. First, it sets forth Taylor’s two primary themes: the importance of family and the importance of the land.
Next, it establishes the personality of Papa. In his showdown with the white lumbermen, he’s courageous and wise; in his conversations with Cassie, he’s loving and understanding. The story also plants the seed for the basic conflicts that run through all of the Logan stories: the battle against racism and the struggle to keep the land.

Readers can sense the incredible frustration African Americans must have felt when dealing with racial prejudice in Depression-era racist culture. They knew that in most cases, they were helpless to resist because neither the law nor law enforcement officials protected them. Like Papa Logan, many African Americans often had to resort to cunning, sometimes desperate measures to protect themselves, their families, and their possessions.

Prereading Questions and Writing Topics

(Also see the prereading activities in Appendix C of Teaching the Selected Works of Mildred D. Taylor.)

1. Research the causes of the Depression. Why and how did it happen? What effects did it have on poor farmers and their families?

2. Interview someone who lived during the Depression—a grandparent or great-grandparent if you can. Find out what his or her life was like then.

3. Find out what life during the Depression was like for families living where you now live. Write a brief description of that time. If possible, include photos from that period.

4. Describe a time you experienced the natural world—hiking, camping, or visiting a natural setting (a forest, a mountain, a lake, the ocean). What did you see, hear, smell, touch? How did it make you feel?
5. What’s the hardest thing you’ve ever had to do in order to help your family?

6. What would you do if someone richer and more powerful than your parents tried to steal a generations-old treasure from their land?

Questions for Writing and Discussion

1. Cassie talks about how old the trees are and the events they’ve witnessed through history—Indians building fires beneath them, fleeing black men hiding behind them. Choose a tree near where you live or go to school. Imagine all the events that the tree may have witnessed and describe them. If you can, research local historical events for which the tree would have been present.

2. Cassie and her brothers aren’t respectful to Mr. Andersen and the lumbermen. Are there times when disrespect to adults is justified? Explain why you believe or don’t believe disrespect toward adults is sometimes justified.

3. After reading that Stacey has left to get Papa but before Stacey and Papa return, predict what Papa’s reaction will be when he gets home. How do you think he will handle Mr. Andersen and the lumbermen chopping down the trees?

4. Consider Papa’s method of getting rid of the lumbermen. Do you think it was a good idea? Do you think he really would have blown up the forest? Was there another way he could have protected the trees?

5. Why are the trees so important to Cassie? Why are they so important to Papa?

6. The author doesn’t tell us what happened to Stacey during his horse ride to get Papa. Imagine what Stacey’s ride would have been like. Write a brief story detailing what happened to Stacey while he rode to retrieve his father.
7. How does the Logan family’s experience compare to other Depression-era families in rural Mississippi? Research what life was like in that area of the country during the Depression. How did other families cope with economic hard times? Were there lots of men who went to other states for work?

8. This story ends with Papa Logan surviving a showdown with the white man, Mr. Anderson, and Anderson is furious that Papa’s threat has saved the trees. What might Mr. Anderson and his friends do to retaliate? Why aren’t Cassie and her father more worried about the potential retaliation?

9. Research current logging practices. Is reforestation an effective way to replace the trees that loggers cut down? What products are made from trees? In Song of the Trees, the lumbermen use axes to chop down the trees. What methods do loggers use today?

10. What does David Logan mean when he says that “a black man’s always gotta be ready to die” (37)?

Making Text-to-Text Connections to Other Stories

1. Find references to the tree-cutting incident in some of Taylor’s other books. What purpose does that story play in these novels? Why is the experience so important to Cassie?

2. Make a list of characters from Song of the Trees who appear in other Taylor stories. Choose any one character, and make a Venn diagram that compares that character’s traits and attitudes in Song of the Trees to his or her traits and attitudes in another Taylor story.
3. This story led to many more books about Cassie Logan and her family. What kinds of conflicts would you predict that Cassie and her family are going to have in the future? How might Cassie (or her father) solve some of those problems?

4. Read another novel about children who lived during the Depression—Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust*, Richard Peck’s *Long Way from Chicago*, Pam Muñoz Ryan’s *Esperanza Rising*, or Christopher Paul Curtis’s *Bud, Not Buddy*, for example—and compare the experiences of the children in these novels to those of Cassie and her brothers. How are their stories similar and different? How does the characters’ race affect the stories?

Additional Resources and Work Cited


“Lesson Plan: Plot and Conflict and *Song of the Trees*.”

[http://www.okaloosa.k12.fl.us/technology/OkaloosaALERTLessons/plotandconflicthomas.htm](http://www.okaloosa.k12.fl.us/technology/OkaloosaALERTLessons/plotandconflicthomas.htm)

“*Song of the Trees* Lesson Plan and Handouts.”

[http://teachers.henrico.k12.va.us/Specialist/franceslively/unitplans/songoftrees7.htm](http://teachers.henrico.k12.va.us/Specialist/franceslively/unitplans/songoftrees7.htm)

The Gold Cadillac

The plot for this book comes not from stories Taylor heard from her father or uncles but from one of her own childhood experiences. Though her immediate family lived in Ohio, they maintained close ties with their Mississippi relatives and friends, and those relationships were reinforced by regular trips to the South. Taylor’s father loved nice cars, especially Cadillacs, and some white people resented his ability to own nicer cars than they owned. The resentment was especially strong south of the Mason-Dixon line. A fancy new car driven by an African American man in Mississippi could only lead to trouble, and indeed, it did.

The book won the 1988 Christopher Award.

Setting

Toledo, Ohio, and Mississippi, 1950

Characters

‘lois, narrator

Wilbert, or Daddy

Wilma, ‘lois’ sister

Dee, mother

Mr. Pondexter, neighbor

Mr. LeRoy, neighbor

Mr. Courtland, neighbor

Aunts and uncles in Toledo, Detroit, and Mississippi

White policemen
Plot Summary

One day, 'lois is surprised—and pleased—when her father brings home a brand-new Cadillac. She and her sister, Wilma, share their father’s excitement, but their mother is unhappy because the family was supposed to be saving money to buy a new house. When Daddy decides to take the family on a trip to Mississippi in the new car, his relatives and neighbors warn him that it’s “a mighty dangerous thing, for a black man to drive an expensive car” (67), especially in the South. He ignores their concerns and makes the trip, only to be stopped by a white policeman, not for any crime but for what is known today as DWB, “driving while black.” The policeman takes Daddy from the car, leaving 'lois, Wilma, and Dee to spend a sleepless night alone in the car, worried about him—and themselves.

Daddy returns, ruffled but unharmed, the next morning and announces that he’s decided to leave the car with a cousin in Memphis and to borrow a different car for the rest of the trip to Mississippi. When they return to Ohio after their Mississippi vacation, Daddy sells the car.

Discussion

*The Gold Cadillac* is Taylor’s only book that is not clearly about the Logan family, but the story still has some of the key traits that appear in her other books. Daddy is loving, happy, and courageous. He loves his family and the South, and he’s willing to make sacrifices—in this case, selling his new car—for the good of the family.

The story begins as a funny domestic tale in which the father is in hot water because he’s made a big purchase without first discussing it with his wife. The lighthearted mood continues as the family prepares for a trip to Mississippi; the girls are
excited to ride in the new car, to see relatives, and to eat their mother’s picnic foods. The warnings from neighbors and family create a subtle but ominous foreshadowing. Though no one is physically injured by the racist incident at the heart of this story, ’lois has seen, for the first time, how terrifying racism can be. It’s her first step to realizing how vulnerable African Americans are in a racist society.

Prereading Questions and Writing Topics

(Also see the prereading activities in Appendix C of Teaching the Selected Works of Mildred D. Taylor.)

1. What is your most important material possession? Explain why.

2. What do you think your parents would say is their most important material possession? Why do you think they would say that?

3. Think of a time you were really afraid. Write about how you felt and what caused your fears.

4. Think of a memorable family trip. It doesn’t have to be a trip that was fun, though it could be; rather it should be a trip that you remember well—maybe because a lot of things went wrong, or something exciting happened, or you went to a place you’d never been before. Write about this trip in as much detail as possible. Be sure to include the things you saw, smelled, heard, experienced along the way.

5. How close are you to your extended family? Do you know your cousins and aunts and uncles? Does your extended family get together often? Do you think it’s important for extended family to be close to one another? Why/why not? Write about a time you’ve spent with your extended family.
6. Imagine that you have been arrested, not for committing a crime but simply for who you are. How would you react? Who could help you?

Questions for Writing and Discussion

1. Why was life so different for northern blacks, like the family in this story, than it was for southern slacks in 1950?

2. Some of the uncles try to convince Wilbert not to take the trip to Mississippi. One of them says, “Man, those white folks down south’ll lynch you soon’s look at you. You know that!” (24). Wilma and ’lois don’t know what the word lynch means. Research the history of lynching in the South.

3. On a map, chart a course the family might have taken to get from Toledo, Ohio, to Mississippi.

4. Wilbert says to ’lois, “I’m hoping one day the police won’t stop us just because of the color of our skins and we’re riding in a gold Cadillac with northern plates” (37). Research whether the problem of police pulling drivers over because of their race still exists today. You may want to look at “Understanding Bias-Based Traffic Law Enforcement: A Manual to Reduce Bias-Based Traffic Law Enforcement,” produced by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and available at http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/enforce/biasbased03/BIAS-BASED.pdf. This report includes many articles from around the country about racial profiling. Compare what is happening today to what is depicted in The Gold Cadillac. Have things changed? Why or why not?

5. This story won a Christopher Award in 1988. The Christopher Award is given to a children’s book that “affirms the highest values of the human spirit.” According to the
award’s web site, this means that the book should “celebrate the humanity of people in a positive way.” In what ways is *The Gold Cadillac* a worthy recipient of this award?

**Making Text-to-Text Connections to Other Stories**

1. Mildred D. Taylor’s middle name is Delois, shortened to ’lois by her sister and cousins. ’lois is the narrator of this story, and that’s clearly an autobiographical connection. What other details from Taylor’s life appear in this story?

2. Although the names are different from the characters in the Logan stories, Taylor says that this book is a part of the Logan family saga. What connection might ’lois’s family have to the Logans?

3. Select one of Taylor’s other stories, and make a list that shows the similarities and differences between *The Gold Cadillac* and this other story.

4. Research the murder of Emmett Till. Till was a real African American boy from Chicago who took a trip to Mississippi at about the same time that ’lois and her family take their trip. Compare and contrast ’lois’ story and Emmett’s.

**Additional Resources**


The Friendship

Taylor’s second book in 1987 stirred some controversy among some teachers and librarians who were concerned that John Wallace’s attack on Mr. Tom Bee was too graphic and too painful for young readers. Though it’s never mentioned in Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, this episode also took place in 1933.

This book won the American Library Association’s Coretta Scott King Award in 1988.

Setting

Rural Mississippi, 1933

Characters

Cassie Logan, narrator (nine years old)
Stacey Logan (twelve years old)
Christopher-John Logan (seven years old)
Little Man Logan (six years old)
Big Ma, Cassie’s grandmother
Jeremy Simms, a white boy
Charlie Simms, Jeremy’s father
R. W. and Melvin Simms, Jeremy’s brothers
John Wallace, owner of the Wallace store
Thurston and Dewberry Wallace, storekeepers, John Wallace’s sons
Kaleb Wallace, Dewberry and Thurston’s brother
Aunt Callie Jackson, elderly woman in need of medicine
Mr. Tom Bee, elderly sharecropper

Plot Summary

The Logan children—Stacey, Cassie, Christopher-John, and Little Man—stop by the Wallace store to pick up some medicine for Aunt Callie Jackson, an elderly woman who lives near them. Their parents have forbidden them to go into the store because the Wallaces are vicious racists who prey on the local African Americans, but Stacey decides that getting the medicine is more important than obeying their parents. After purchasing the medicine, they meet Mr. Tom Bee, an elderly sharecropper who needs to pick up some things from the store. The children agree to wait for Tom while he makes his purchases; then, they’ll walk to Aunt Callie Jackson’s together.

While in the store, Tom is taunted by the Wallace boys, Thurston and Dewberry. He asks to speak to their father, John; in asking for him, Tom uses John’s first name instead of the traditional “Mister” that is expected of blacks when addressing whites. This infuriates the Wallace brothers; however, when John comes to the counter, he gives Tom what he’s asking for and puts it on his credit. Later, Tom tells the Logan children that when John was a little boy Tom saved his life and took care of him until he was healthy again. For this service, John told Tom that he could always use his first name.

After visiting Aunt Callie Jackson, the children and Tom pass the store again. Tom goes in again to pick up some tobacco he’s forgotten. While there, he refers to John by his first name in front of several other white folks. As the children watch, John shoots Tom in the leg with a shotgun. As Tom lies on the ground, his leg blown open, John says “this here disrespectin’ me gotta stop and I means to stop it now. You gotta keep in mind you ain’t nothing but a nigger” (45).
Discussion

The intense presentation of racism in this short book previews a change in Taylor’s stories. Though racism and its effects are present in all the previous Logan books, the raw violence portrayed in *The Friendship* is the harshest yet. The earlier books show acts of violence, of course, but those scenes have much more preparation and serve as only a small part of a larger work. The violent act in *The Friendship* is compressed into essentially a single scene, and that compression significantly magnifies its effect. The reader is not prepared for John Wallace’s shooting of Mr. Tom Bee, just as the children aren’t prepared for such a sudden and surprising outburst. The anger and irrationality of John Wallace’s actions, and the pain and uncertainty it plants in the hearts of Cassie and her brothers, stays with the readers long after the story is over. In Taylor’s earlier books, Mama or Papa is there to blunt the rawness of racism or to explain it to Cassie—and to the readers. In this short book, Cassie must witness and process a startling racist event all by herself, and it’s almost too much for a nine-year-old to manage alone.

The force of the story may also be too much for young children, and that was part of the concern expressed by some teachers and librarians when *The Friendship* was first published. The format of the book suggests that it’s targeted for children, but the content of the story is clearly for teens or for children who, unlike Cassie at the Wallace store, will have a kind teacher or parent on hand to temper the force of John Wallace’s cruelty to poor old Mr. Tom Bee. The central question that lingers after the story’s conclusion is this: why did John Wallace, a man who owed his life to Mr. Tom Bee, shoot the old man? It’s impressive that such a simple story can provoke a question that leads to very complicated answers.
Prereading Questions and Writing Topics

(Also see the prereading activities in Appendix C of *Teaching the Selected Works of Mildred D. Taylor.*)

1. Are there any elderly people in your neighborhood or city who have been there a long time and know a lot about the history of the place and the people there? Interview one of these people and find out what she or he remembers about your town or neighborhood.

2. Taylor writes the dialogue of the characters in this story so that it sounds just like the characters would sound while speaking it. For example, “Got no teeth to chew ’em with” (26); “I take care-a this” (29); “Them old britches done stretched way too big!” (30); and “I done told you before ’bout calling me by my Christian name, it ain’t jus’ the two of us” (31). Listen to the way people around you speak. Go to a place where you can listen to people speak without being noticed (the mall, your school’s cafeteria, a restaurant, your living room) and write down, as best you can, exactly what people are saying. What are some things you noticed about the way people speak that you hadn’t realized or thought of before?

3. How do you show respect to adults? What would happen to you if you failed to show the proper respect to an adult?


5. How would you treat an old friend who no longer allows you to call him by his first name?
6. If your friends and relatives tried to shame and pressure you into breaking a promise to an old friend, a friend who once saved your life, what would you do?

Questions for Writing and Discussion

1. Taylor includes details about each of the Logan children that help develop their characters. For example, she writes that Christopher-John is “always sympathizing with other folks’ feelings” (17). Look for these details throughout the story and make a list of them for each of the Logan children.

2. The story ends—“There was no other sound” (53)—without revealing what John Wallace might have felt after shooting Tom and hearing him yell. How do you think John felt? Do you think after the story ends he picked up his shotgun and shot again? Do you think he felt guilty for what he’d done? Do you think he went to help Tom? Explain what you think John felt and did after the story ends, and include why you think so.

3. The Logan children wouldn’t have witnessed Mr. Tom Bee getting shot if they had obeyed their parents and not gone to the Wallace store to get the medicine for Aunt Callie Jackson. Do you think they made the right decision in going into the store to get the medicine? Why/why not?

4. Who do you think are the friends referred to in the title of this book? What does the book have to say about friendship? Consider your own friends. Are there any lessons you can learn from this book about dealing with your friends?

5. Why is Jeremy Simms friendly to the Logans while all the other white people in the story are mean to them?
6. This book won the Coretta Scott King Award, named after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s widow. According to the American Library Association, which gives the award, the prize “is given to an African American author for an outstandingly inspirational and educational contribution. The [winning] books promote understanding and appreciation of the culture of all peoples and their contribution to the realization of the American dream.” Do you think *The Friendship* meets the requirements for the award? Why or why not? Explain in what ways it does (or does not) promote understanding and appreciation of the culture of all peoples and their contribution to the realization of the American dream. Is the story inspirational and educational? In what ways?

7. Some critics felt that the content of this book was too powerful for children to read. What is the appropriate age for a reader of this book?

Making Text-to-Text Connections to Other Stories

1. In what other books does the character Mr. Tom Bee appear? How is he different in those other stories?

2. Skim *The Land* to discover the full story of Mr. Tom Bee and John Wallace. How has their relationship changed over time? What social or political ideas would have influenced John Wallace’s change in attitude?

3. What roles do John Wallace or his sons play in other Logan stories? Why would Taylor choose to have John play such a central role in this story?

4. What might the Wallace store symbolize?

5. Read Taylor’s other short, illustrated book, *Mississippi Bridge*; then use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the main events in the two stories.
6. How is the title ironic?

Additional Resources

Novel Units. [http://www.educyberstor.com/store/novelunits/catalog/index.html]

Teaching and Learning Literature with Children and Young Adults 6 (4): 2–10.

Children Reading and Responding to Maniac Magee and The Friendship.” Reading

Safer Places: Students Respond to Mildred Taylor’s The Friendship.” Journal of
Literacy Research 32 (2): 145–86.

Neamen, Mimi, and Mary Strong. 2001. More Literature Circles: Cooperative Learning


Mississippi Bridge

Though this compact story appears to be a children’s book, it presents such a potent and
tragic spin on racism that it is, in reality, a book for older readers. This is Taylor’s only
story not narrated by a member of the Logan family; Taylor instead uses the Logan
children’s enigmatic white friend, Jeremy Simms, as her narrator. Like many of Taylor’s
other stories, Mississippi Bridge is based on experiences she’d heard during family story-
telling sessions, but it’s also clearly connected to one of the most public aspects of the
pre–Rosa Parks South: segregated seats on public buses.

Setting

Rural Mississippi, 1931

Characters

Jeremy Simms (ten years old)

Ma

Lillian Jean, Jeremy’s sister

Pa, or Charlie, Simms

R. W., Jeremy’s older brother

Melvin, Jeremy’s older brother

Rudine Johnson and her mama

John Wallace, storekeeper of the Wallace store

Miz Hattie McElroy, widow, former teacher of Jeremy’s

Grace-Anne, Hattie’s granddaughter

Uncle Moses Thompson, old black man who works for Hattie

Josias Williams, black sharecropper, leaving for a lumber job

Stacey Logan (ten years old)

Caroline Logan, or Big Ma, Stacey’s grandmother

Cassie Logan (seven years old)

Christopher-John (five years old)

Little Man (four years old)

Miz Georgia
Henry Amos and family

Shorty Amos, a classmate of Jeremy’s

Plot Summary

The story begins with Jeremy Simms’ description of the general inactivity and boredom caused by heavy spring rains. While killing time at the Wallace store, Jeremy watches two African American women, Rudine Johnson and her mother, come to the store and admire a pretty wide-brimmed hat that’s for sale. Rather than treat the potential customers courteously, Mr. Wallace treats them rudely, but when Miz Hattie McElroy, a white woman, and her young granddaughter come into the store, he treats them kindly.

The white woman and her granddaughter are waiting for the bus to Jackson, and they’re soon joined by Josias Williams and Big Ma Logan, who also plan to go to Jackson. The new African American customers receive the same shabby racist treatment that Rudine and her mother received moments before.

When the bus finally arrives, everyone, black and white, finds seats on the full bus; according to Jim Crow policy, the blacks take the seats in the back of the bus. With Big Ma on the bus, the Logan children, who walked with her to the store, say goodbye and head home. Jeremy follows to talk with them briefly, then goes back to the store alone. Outside the store, he finds “a bit of a ruckus going on” (44). The Amoses, a large white family, arrived just before the bus left and purchased tickets. Because the bus is full, the driver has made all the black passengers get off into the driving rain to make room for the white family. Big Ma obeys silently, but Josias resists and is finally thrown into the mud by the driver.
With the Amoses aboard, the overcrowded bus speeds down the muddy road toward the rickety old bridge that the Logan children have walked over on their way home. Hoping to catch up with Josias, who’s walking home in the rain, Jeremy trails the bus and gets to the bridge just in time to see the bus skid over the side and into the raging waters of the Rosa Lee. Josias orders Jeremy to return to the store for help and then springs into action to rescue the people trapped in the bus. Despite his heroic efforts, many of the passengers drown, including Miz Hattie McElroy and her granddaughter.

Discussion

Even as a little girl, Taylor recognized the racial binaries in Mississippi and other parts of the United States. In a preface to *The Friendship and Other Stories*, she writes, “Still, there were two sides of the South I saw. The one of racism, of oppression and segregation, filled me with fear and anger. But the other South, a South of family and community, filled with warmth and love, opened to me a sense of history and filled me with pride” (1989, 7). These binaries appear in all her stories, but placing them opposite each other in *Mississippi Bridge* creates a painfully potent lesson in racism. By juxtaposing the treatment of African American characters with the treatment of white characters, Taylor creates a story dripping with irony. Even before the accident, it’s clear that the African Americans in the story are generally more noble that the do-nothing white men hanging out in Wallace’s store. In Josias, the nobility is confirmed at the story’s conclusion when we see him heroically going into the dangerous river waters to rescue the white people who only minutes before have taken his seat on the bus, causing him, most likely, to lose his job.
The situational irony in this brief story is especially poignant. As in the larger society of the time, the African American characters at the Wallace store are humiliated and mistreated by the white people in power: they’re treated rudely in the store, they endure racist slurs and verbal abuse, they take the Jim Crow seats in the back of the bus, and when new white passengers show up, the African American passengers who have already endured so much are forced to give up their seats. The final ironic twist occurs when the bus, now filled exclusively with white passengers, careens off the wet, dilapidated bridge and into the flood waters below and the black man who has been displaced by the whites is the first person to the rescue. When the story concludes with Jeremy’s description of the rescue effort and the final line, “Me and Josias, we was there all day” (62), an important question lingers in the reader’s mind: just exactly whom do the Jim Crow laws hurt most?

As with *The Friendship*, some reviewers worried that the story may be too powerful or too painful for young readers. A review in *School Library Journal* called it “an angry book,” but also praised the story: “Well written and thought provoking, this book will haunt readers and generate much discussion” (DeWind 1990, 120). The deceptively simple story will indeed haunt readers, as it should.

**Prereading Questions and Writing Topics**

(Also see the prereading activities in Appendix C of *Teaching the Selected Works of Mildred D. Taylor.*)

1. Have you or your family been through a tragic event? How did it affect you? How did you learn to move on afterward?

2. What are some famous bridges? Why are they famous?
3. How did Jim Crow laws and racial segregation affect African Americans who rode public buses in Mississippi in the 1930s? What would you do if a local law forced you to give up your seat to someone else on a bus?

4. What is situational irony? Explain one example from a story you’ve read recently.

5. What would you do if someone who had just cruelly injured you (or someone you love) suddenly needed your help?

6. Imagine that you’re terribly poor and desperate for a job. You hear that a good job is available in a town that’s just a bus-ride away. The only catch is that you must be there today to get it. You show up at the bus station, purchase your ticket, and get on the crowded bus. Moments before the bus leaves, the driver makes you get off the bus to make room for some of his friends. What would you do?

Questions for Writing and Discussion

1. Why did Mildred D. Taylor choose to have Jeremy Simms narrate this story instead of Cassie? Would the story have been substantially different if Cassie had narrated it? How?

2. This story won a Christopher Award in 1991. The Christopher Award is given to a children’s book that “affirms the highest values of the human spirit.” According to the award’s web site, this means that the book should “celebrate the humanity of people in a positive way.” In what ways is Mississippi Bridge a worthy recipient of this award?

3. Who are the heroes and who are the villains in this story? How can you tell?

4. Jeremy says, “Being tenants wasn’t bad as being sharecroppers” (24). What’s the difference between a tenant farmer and a sharecropper?
5. Why are the Simmses and the other white characters so cruel to the African Americans in this story?

6. Explain why the bus accident is a good example of situational irony.

Making Text-to-Text Connections to Other Stories

1. This is the only one of Mildred D. Taylor’s books not narrated by a black person. How does that change the way the story is told, if at all?

2. Jeremy says of the Logans, “They was a fascination to me. They had a way ’bout them” (25). Later he says, “All I wanted was to be friends with them Logans, let ’em know how I was feeling ’bout ’em, but I just couldn’t seem to get no way close to ’em” (44). In the other Logan stories, find examples of Jeremy’s behavior that indicate he’s trying to get close to the Logans.

3. The Montgomery bus boycott began after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. Research the Montgomery bus boycott and its effects on the civil rights movement.

4. How does Taylor foreshadow that something bad is going to happen on the bridge?

5. After Josias is thrown off the bus, Pa Simms beats Jeremy for “snivelin’” after Josias (50). Find examples in other Logan stories of Jeremy’s being punished for his refusal to be racist.

Additional Resources and Works Cited


“Helping Children Cope: Teacher Resources for Talking About Tragedy.”

The Learning Page/Lesson Plans. [http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/theme.html]


**The Well: David’s Story**

This was Taylor’s first book after a five-year publishing hiatus, and it surprised some readers that it is a prequel, not a sequel, to the Logan saga. In addition to departing from the general chronology of stories Taylor had already published, this book also departs from the general narrative stance Taylor relied on for all but one of her previous books. Instead of telling the story from the perspective of her well-established female narrator, Cassie Logan, Taylor uses Cassie’s father, David, to tell a tale from his childhood, a tale that though it differs in setting and voice, contains the same themes and conflicts that are prominent in all of Taylor’s books.

In addition to appearing on a number of best-book lists, *The Well* won the Jane Addams Children’s Book Award.
Setting
Rural Mississippi, 1910

Characters
David Logan, narrator (ten years old)
Charlie Simms, white neighbor (about fourteen years old)
Mitchell Logan, David’s oldest brother
Kevin Logan, David’s brother (also older)
Hammer Logan, David’s brother (thirteen years old)
Ed-Rose Simms, Charlie’s brother (about thirteen years old)
Mama, or Caroline Logan, David’s mother
Grandma Rachel, or Ma Rachel, David’s grandmother, a former slave, called Pansy by the whites on the plantation
Aunt Callie, Caroline’s sister
Mr. Clinton Melbourne, white neighbor
George Melbourne, Clinton’s son
Halton, David’s cousin
Uncle Lawrence, Aunt Callie’s husband
John Henry Berry, Hammer’s friend (thirteen years old)
Dewberry Wallace, white friend of Charlie and Ed-Rose,
Joe McCalister, black neighbor
Pa, or Paul-Edward Logan, David’s father
Mr. Tom Bee, black neighbor
Sheriff Peterson Rankins
McCalister Simms, or Old Man McCalister, Charlie’s father

Aunt Cora, Sheriff Rankins’ cook

Reverend Jones, minister of the church

Plot Summary

Ten-year-old David Logan narrates this story set in the summer of 1910. A severe drought has struck Mississippi, and all the wells in the Logans’ community have run dry, except for the one on Logan land. David explains his family’s traditional generosity even though being generous is sometimes difficult, “especially when some of the folks you had to share with were folks the likes of Charlie Simms and his family, folks who hated your guts” (9). Still, as good neighbors, the Logans willingly allow everyone—white and black—access to their well water.

One day when the some of the hatefully racist Simms family come to take water, David’s older brother Hammer meets them and refuses to take the their verbal abuse without challenging their right to Logan water. Mama intervenes and tells Hammer that the Simmses are welcome to the water. Then she threatens to give Hammer a strapping if he makes any more trouble. Hammer obeys his mother, but the confrontation leaves him simmering.

The next day, David, Hammer, and one of their friends, John Henry Berry, drive cattle to the Rosa Lee Creek, and when they get there, they discover that Charlie Simms, three other white boys, and slow-witted Joe McCalister, a black friend of the Logans, are already there watering their own cattle. A childish argument ensues during which Charlie accuses the Logans of being “uppity” because they own cattle and land.
Never one to put up with racist abuse, Hammer antagonizes Charlie by reminding him of things the Logans have that the Simmses don’t, including their own water, water that the Simmses have had to borrow from the black Logans. Hammer’s insult infuriates Charlie and he threatens, “Well don’t y’all go gettin’ so prideful ’bout that water, nigger! Maybe one day you won’t have it! Maybe one day y’all’ll find somethin’ dead floatin’ in it!” (25). Charlie demands that the Logans leave the creek, and to David’s relief, they do.

On their way home a few days later, Hammer and David encounter Charlie Simms in his family’s wagon, stuck in the ditch. Charlie orders the boys to help him; Hammer refuses, but to avoid trouble, David agrees to help. David holds the wagon up to make room for Charlie to remount a wheel, but while Charlie is working to put the wheel on, David’s strength gives out and he lets the wagon drop. When the wagon falls, it knocks Charlie into the ditch. He thinks David did it on purpose and punches him in the jaw. Hammer comes to his brother’s defense, and he pummels Charlie into unconsciousness. Hammer’s violence against a white person terrifies David because he knows that Hammer could be lynched for hitting Charlie.

When Charlie recovers, he tells his father that Hammer and David ambushed him and beat him with a piece of lumber. Mr. Simms is furious, of course, and demands that the sheriff visit the Logans to investigate the “crime.” Having known the sheriff for a long time, Mama uses logic and her good food to convince him that her boys haven’t done anything. The sheriff agrees but points out that Jim Crow laws demand that the black boys pay some sort of penalty for insulting a white boy. As the Logans’ friend, he offers to suggest to Mr. Simms that David and Hammer will work the Simms farm all summer long if the Simmses agree to drop their charges. Before the sheriff leaves the
Logans’ home, the Simmses arrive for well water, and the sheriff convinces Mr. Simms to accept the deal, though Simms makes an additional demand: he wants David and Hammer whipped. The sheriff can’t change Mr. Simms’s mind, so Mama has to whip them while the Simms family watches.

For the rest of the summer, David and Hammer work on the Simms farm during the day and do their own chores at home early in the morning and late at night. Their work for the Simmses is exhausting and is exacerbated by steady harassment from Charlie and Ed-Rose. David and Hammer complain to Pa when he’s home from his lumbering work in Natchez Trace, but he tells them that there’s nothing he can do about their situation. Instead, he tells them to learn from the experience and to remember that sometimes their lives are worth more than their pride. Then he gives the standard Logan father advice: “You boys better start learning how to use your heads, not your fists, when it comes to white folks. You learn to outsmart them, ’cause in the end you can’t outfight them, not with your fists” (72–73).

A week after David and Hammer finish their work for the Simmses, the brothers return to the Simms farm. Hammer knocks Charlie down and challenges him to tell Mr. Simms that Hammer did it alone and to “tell him I used my fists, nothing else” (78). Hammer knows that even if Mr. Simms comes after him, Charlie will get a beating for letting a black boy beat him. Charlie is furious. He yells at the boys, “Y’all gonna pay! . . . Y’all gonna sure ’nough pay for this!” (78), but he never tells anyone about the beating he got from Hammer.

Charlie poisons the Logans’ well by dumping into it the chopped up remains of possums, raccoons, and skunks. His racist fury and his own ignorance prevent him from
considering the repercussions of his act. Polluting the well water hurts the Logans, but it also it hurts everyone—including the Simmses—who depends on the Logan water. The story concludes with an ironic twist of justice: Mr. Simms discovers what Charlie did and knocks Charlie down, pulls out his bullwhip, and makes Charlie and Ed-Rose climb into the well to clean it out while the Logans and others watch.

Discussion

Students might compare and contrast *The Well* with *Song of the Trees*. Several commonalities are obvious: the Logans from *The Well* have the same personal qualities as the Logans of the next generation, and the conflicts of both books result from racist white people. Other details from *The Well* parallel *Song of the Trees*: the story is set on Logan land in Mississippi, Pa is absent most of the time, a grandmother lives in the home, and white people covet a Logan possession, in one story, their trees, in the other, their water.

In addition to their similarities, the two books have enough differences to make them distinct. *The Well* is a longer and more complex story. *Song of the Trees* is narrated by Cassie, and as the narrator, she’s the most prominent character. The other Logans are developed with much less detail. *The Well* has a male narrator of about Cassie’s age, but the other Logans and the villainous Simmses are developed into rounder characters than are the characters in *Song of the Trees*. Because *The Well* is longer, Taylor is able to include essential family history that is only alluded to in previous books. For example, readers now hear a more detailed account of how Rachel’s name was stolen from her. And, foreshadowing one of the most dramatic scenes in *The Land*, Pa (Paul-Edward Logan) tells his sons how his white father severely beat him for hitting one of his white
brothers. *The Well* also provides readers insight into the causes of the deep-seated hatred the Simmses have for the Logans and important insights into the character of David and Hammer. Students will also notice that the racism of *The Well* is much more graphic, much more painful than that of *Song of the Trees*. It might be interesting to ask students to trace how *Song of the Trees* led to *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* and how *The Well* led to *The Land*. After considering those connections, they could explore common traits among all four books.

**Prereading Questions and Writing Topics**

(Also see the prereading activities in Appendix C of *Teaching the Selected Works of Mildred D. Taylor*.)

1. Think of things that you (or your family) have been blessed with. List these.
2. Have your parents ever punished you for something you didn’t do? Why did it happen? How did it make you feel?
3. Have you been involved in any fistfights? What caused them? Is fighting a good way to solve a problem?
4. Describe a time when your generosity has been abused. How did it make you feel? How did you react?
5. If people all around you were starving and you had plenty of food to share, what would you do? Why?
6. The worst bullies in town have been tormenting you for months, and when you finally get even with them, they cry to their parents that you’ve been unfair and mean. Their parents talk to your parents, and your parents believe the story and punish you by
making you do the bullies’ chores all summer long. How would you feel? What
would you do the next time you saw the bullies?

Questions for Writing and Discussion

1. Of the well, David says, “Most folks said our land must’ve been sitting on an
underground lake, if there is such a thing. Well, I don’t know about that. All I know is
that well of ours never went dry” (9). Research wells and underground lakes. Is it
possible that the Logans’ well is on an underground lake? What else could account
for the Logans’ well never drying up while their neighbors’ wells all did?

2. In what ways does Hammer’s temper get him in more trouble than he would have
been in otherwise?

3. Find some examples of occasions when Caroline’s and Paul-Edward’s religious
beliefs affect the choices they make.

4. Why was Ma Rachel so affected by what happened to her name when she was a
child?

5. How have parents’ methods of punishment changed since the early 1900s? Would
whipping be an acceptable punishment today? Why not? What happened to cause a
change in the way children are disciplined?

6. Research the Natchez Trace. What kind of lumber work would Paul-Edward,
Mitchell, and Kevin have been doing along the Natchez Trace?

Making Text-to-Text Connections to Other Stories

1. Paul-Edward tells David and Hammer, “You boys better start learning how to use
your heads, not your fists, when it comes to white folks. You learn to outsmart them,
’cause in the end you can’t outfight them, not with your fists. They got the power, but
we got our heads” (72–73). In the other Logan family stories, find examples of how
David, as an adult, outsmarts white folks.

2. In this story, Ma Rachel tells her family how important her name is to her. Names are
also important in The Friendship. Compare and contrast the role of names and
naming in the two stories. Are names important to you? In what ways?

3. Identify three examples of storylines or characters from The Well that appear in other
Logan stories. Explain how they differ from story to story.

4. Compare The Well with The Land as prequels to the Logan stories. Consider what
these stories add to your reading and understanding of the Logan saga.

5. Compare and contrast The Well with Song of the Trees. Consider using a Venn
diagram to map your findings.

Additional Resources


“Mississippi Bridge and The Well: Literature and Author Study for Black History
schroedermississippibridge.htm

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