

A Guide to Teaching Joyce Carol Thomas's and Floyd Cooper's

I HAVE HEARD OF A LAND

In this uplifting tribute to African-American pioneers, author Joyce Carol Thomas explores the little-known history of the Oklahoma Land Runs. In the late 1880s, the Oklahoma Territory was made available free of charge to anyone, regardless of gender or skin color, who could get to it first. To many newly freed slaves, this was a remarkable opportunity finally to make their own living and enjoy a life of freedom. Thomas's lyrical text and Cooper's rich illustrations explore the joys and hardships of these ambitious settlers, who yearned to experience a life "where what is dreamed one night is accomplished the next day."

READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

Identify Problems and Solutions, Identify Steps in a Process, Interpret Illustrations, &

Recognize Point of View

THEMES

American History, Meeting Challenges, The Past, Personal Journeys

IDENTIFY PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Have students consider and discuss problems that pioneers might have faced when building their homes from the ground up. Additionally, what problems might have been specific to women and to African-Americans during this time period? Once you have a list of problems, use the illustrations and text to help you think of solutions the pioneers might have used. You may wish to enrich this activity by having each student select a problem to research.

INTERPRET ILLUSTRATIONS

Floyd Cooper won a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Award for his drawings for *I Have Heard of a Land*. Have students look at the illustrations in the book and consider what qualities they have that enhance and complement the text. Discuss the colors and textures of the drawings, as well as the mood they evoke. Invite students to take these qualities into account as they make their own illustrations for *I Have Heard of a Land*.

MAKE JUDGMENTS AND DECISIONS

To head out into the open Oklahoma Territory and begin life from scratch required a great deal of courage and preparation. Have your students consider the characters in *I Have Heard of a Land* and discuss what circumstances may have motivated them to make the decision to head west.

RECOGNIZE POINT OF VIEW

Have students identify the point of view of the narrator: Is this story told in the first person or in the third? Then discuss how having the text written in the first person enhances the history and the story being told.

READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES SETTING THE SCENE

Joyce Carol Thomas's author's note at the end of the book provides plentiful background information on the Oklahoma Land Runs, and it also details the personal family history that drew Thomas to this subject matter. Share and discuss this with students to enrich their reading of the text.

Art

— Read the second paragraph of the author's note, in which Thomas describes the posters about the Land Runs to students. Have students decorate their own posters. Ask them to think about words and images that would make these Land Runs appealing. Hang the posters around your classroom.

Language Arts

— *I Have Heard of a Land* combines both personal and historical details. Instruct each student to ask a family member to tell him or her an interesting true story from an earlier time. Students can do some research on the time and place of their relatives' stories. Then ask each student to write a narrative describing the experience, in the voice of the person who described it to them. Have the students work on capturing the voice and personality of the storyteller in their writing. Gather these tales into a book for the classroom.

— Ask students to think of something they dream about and hope for, and then express those dreams in a poem. You may wish to ask that students model their poems after the form of *I Have Heard of a Land*. Then have students illustrate their poems, and display the results around the room.

Math

— In the Oklahoma Land Runs, people could have large amounts of land free of charge, as long as they were the first people to claim it. Have students research the price of ten acres of land in an area of their choice in the following years: 1850, 1900, 1950, and today. Then have students make a chart of their findings.

Science

— Thomas's characters had to make their living off of the land around them. Have students research the land in their area: If they settled there in the late 1800s, what would they be able to grow to eat? What animals could survive in the climate, and what foods could the animals eat? Of these crops and animals, which (if any) do they actually see near them today?

Social Studies

— The Oklahoma Land Runs are only one small event in African-American history. Have students use the Internet and the library to research other key events and arrange these events into a time line for the classroom. Then have each student select a topic from the time line and prepare a detailed report on it for the class.

— Have students research the early settlers in your neighborhood. What brought people to your town, and when? What were the experiences of the early settlers like? Have students incorporate their findings into some fictional journal entries.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

— Consider the following quote from *I Have Heard of a Land*:

“The stake is life and the work that goes into it.” What do you think Thomas means by this?

— Thomas's character sleeps in a sod hut, using a saddle for a pillow. Why do you think she looks so happy in the illustration?

— In the author's note, Thomas explains that “the Oklahoma Territory was one of the few places where a single woman could own land in her own name.” Why is this significant?

— What impressions do you get from the illustrations about how these characters are feeling? Why would they be feeling this way?

— Think of some of the things that the narrator of *I Have Heard of a Land* dreams about that we might take for granted. Why are they so appealing to her? What is different about our society today that allows us to take these things for granted?

— Why do you think the Oklahoma Land Runs were so significant to African-Americans?

Meeting the Author: An Interview with Joyce Carol Thomas

Q: How did you go about researching this relatively unknown part of history?

A: *To research my great-grandma Judy Graham's role in I Have Heard of a Land, I read articles on Oklahoma and the Land Runs in history books and encyclopedias. I also watched relevant movies, which provided a historical overview of black women in Oklahoma, from the early 1800s to the 1920s.*

Q: You explain in your author's note that you got the idea for *I Have Heard of a Land* from your own family's experiences. What are some of the things in the book that came from what you learned from your family?

A: *Another important part of my research came from spoken memories, including those of my elderly aunt Corine Coffey, my mother's sister. Aunt Corine filled in many important details of my great-grandma Judy's wagon train crossing from the South to the West. From Aunt Corine's stories, many of which her grandmother had shared with her, I was able to further explore great-grandma's run for the land a hundred years ago.*

Q: What do you tell young people who want to be writers?

A: *For young people who are interested in writing, I say that writing can be an utterly fulfilling and very challenging endeavor. If a student has a talent for creating fiction or nonfiction, that gift can be shaped, refined, and polished.*

Meeting the Illustrator: An Interview with Floyd Cooper

Q: How did you become an illustrator?

A: *My interest in art and illustration was a gradual process that began in high school. My art teacher showed me some magazine illustrations that she kept in a file, and I thought they were fantastic. I really began to get into the idea of doing illustration, and decided to pursue it when I went into college. I moved to New York, willing to take any illustration work I could get. I got involved with illustrating picture books because my agent was connected to the children's book industry. From my point of view, the opportunity to illustrate picture books dropped in my lap!*

Q: You have family in Oklahoma as well. Did they have stories or experiences that helped you with this book?

A: *Oh, yes. My great-grandparents told us many stories about when they came to Oklahoma from Texas. We were quite young at the time, but I remember their stories of coming to the homestead, and I'm quite sure their descriptions worked into the pictures. I surprised myself with some of the things I could recall. It was very helpful*

having a background in Oklahoma for many reasons; the main one is the personal connection I had with the story.

Having a personal connection to your work is always great for an artist.

Q: What do you tell young people who want to be illustrators?

A: *The most important thing is just to keep a sketchbook and to draw all the time. It's also important to get a well-rounded education. If you like drawing people, for example, study anatomy. Having every discipline represented in your studies, and not focusing solely on art, will help you become a better artist.*

Barefoot

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