



Under a Living Sky

Joseph Simons

Interest level: ages 8–11

978-1-55143-355-9

112 pages

AR Quiz # 102846

Consider the following question as you read *Under a Living Sky*:

How can an apology change your life?

Story

Mary is certain that her parents are giving her new shoes for Christmas, but the Depression has hit her Saskatchewan farming family hard. Mary tries to hide her disappointment when she receives a crude homemade doll instead. She ends up liking the doll more than she expects, but the doll fuels rivalry between Mary and her older sister, Judith. Then, when the doll mysteriously disappears, Mary and Judith's relationship changes once again.

Author

Joseph Simons was an avid reader as a child and remains one to this day. He is intimately acquainted with farm life, right down to the calluses on his hands. He loves Saskatchewan, where he lived in the early 1980s, except for the winters, which, he says, "Demand another kind of thinking about one's place in the world." Still, even in those winters, Joseph rode his bike to work every day. He based *Under a Living Sky* on a story his late father-in-law told him, a story that he could not shake. *Under a Living Sky* is his first book.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Language Arts

- Mary's parents make their living off the land. Sometimes—like during the Depression, when dust storms and drought led to crop failure year after year—this way of life can be scary. Discuss with students how frightening it can feel when there isn't enough money coming in to support a family. Then have them choose between writing a journal entry or a letter. Writing as Mary, have students explain how she feels about the weather and the fact that it's making life so hard for her family.
- Using images from one of the sites listed below or other Great Depression–related sites, have students select a photo to create a poem about. Illustrate these and display them around the classroom.
- Have students consider how their lives would be different if they were living during the Depression. Brainstorm both negative and positive responses. Using this information, have students write a persuasive article explaining which time period—then or now—is most appealing to them and why.
- There were many expressions people used during the Depression to encourage the conservation of goods. “Use it, wear it out, make it do or do without” is an expression made famous during the Depression by US president Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Other sayings of the time included: “waste not, want not,” “make do” and “a penny saved is a penny earned.” Challenge students to find examples of these expressions being followed in *Under a Living Sky*. Discuss the meaning of these sayings, and then have students create a poster for one which illustrates its meaning.
- Newspapers provide current information on a wide variety of topics and issues. Using an event or topic from *Under a Living Sky*, have students write a newspaper article about it. For example: when Papa talks about the stock market crash or when he is fiddling with a wireless radio. Have them find out more information for their article and write it using the inverted pyramid format. Then have them put together a newspaper called *The Leader*, after the one in *Under a Living Sky*.

Social Studies

- The Great Depression had an impact across the entire world during the 1920s and 1930s. Have students read about how people were affected in both the United States and in Canada. How were European countries affected?
- Using an online photo collection of the Great Depression, have students create a timeline of significant events beginning with October 29, 1929.

- One evening, Mary's parents listen to Nellie McClung speak on the radio. As a class, research Nellie McClung and the Famous Five. Have students write a paragraph explaining how the work of these activists changed the course of history for Canadian women.

Science

- Today, a popular expression we use is "Reduce, Reuse and Recycle." This is meant to encourage people to care for their local environment as well as the world in general. Using the posters they created in the lesson above, have students make connections between their pictures and "Reduce, Reuse and Recycle."
- On the first page of *Under a Living Sky*, Mary is conducting a science experiment to see how she can melt the ice on her window. Discuss what condensation is and how it occurs. Demonstrate or have students read about experiments involving condensation.
- In chapter 8 of *Under a Living Sky*, Papa describes an impending storm. Read the paragraph aloud to your class and have them illustrate the storm. Once they have created a picture, have them find out more about types of storms and how they form.
- Mary has a hole in her heart. Provide students with diagrams of a human heart and learn the various parts and their functions. Research different heart conditions which Mary might have had.
- Guglielmo Marconi and Reginald Fessenden are two inventors who were involved in the invention of the wireless radio. Have students find out more about each of them and how their invention worked.
- Lightning strikes our earth about 100 times a second! It is caused by friction in clouds between particles of water. As a class, find out more about the different forms lightning takes and the incredible power it generates.

Math

- Prices for goods during the Depression were much different than they are today. Online, research the differences between today's prices and those of the Depression era. Have a discussion about the results. Create a bar graph to visually compare the prices for common items.
- Chinooks are a unique weather feature of the Rocky Mountains. They can change temperatures quite significantly in a short period of time. Have students learn about how Chinooks work. Using data found online, have students graph temperature fluctuations as a result of Chinook winds.

Health

- Mary is most disappointed to get a doll and not a pair of shoes for Christmas. Have students draw a portrait of Mary to show her feelings. Discuss feelings and how one may deal with things when they don't turn out as planned.
- Disappointment is something we have all experienced at one time or another. It is how we deal with it that helps us through. Divide the class into groups and have them share how they would have dealt with Mary's disappointment.
- Saying you're sorry for something you've done can be the hardest thing to do. Judith apologizes to Mary for stealing and burying Jessy. Then Mary apologizes as well. Have students act out possible resolutions to this situation.

Art

- Superhero comic books first appeared in the early 1930s. Have students research the first superheroes and draw a comic strip using one of these characters.
- Have students design a doll that Mary would have loved from the start. Encourage them to use creative, textured materials (porcelain, velvet, lace) that would have been used in doll-making during the early twentieth century.
- Select a site such as *Photographs of the Great Depression* and have students look through images of the time. Each student will choose a photo that is particularly appealing or typifies the time. Have them write a paragraph describing the scene in the photograph.

Drama

- Divide the class into groups and have them create skits for parts of *Under a Living Sky*. For example: the scene at Christmas when everyone is opening their presents or the impending storm and what the family must do to prepare for it.
- Children's games and toys look much different now than they did in the Depression. Give students some simple items such as a small pile of rocks, wooden blocks or some marbles. Challenge them to create a new game using one group of items. Then have them find out about actual games that children played during the Depression and share them with the class.

Connecting to the Text

- Ask students to define *setting*, and to describe the setting of *Under a Living Sky*. How important is the setting to the story in this case? Is setting always this important to a story? Invite students to think of other stories that do and do not depend on setting to the same extent. Have them create a diorama of Mary's home, including her house, the valley—and of course, the living sky.

- Make an overhead of the following list. Discuss with students some of the things that make for a good story:
 - ◆ a plot that is exciting, suspenseful, baffling or extraordinary
 - ◆ interesting situations that are well explained and believable
 - ◆ characters you care enough about to make you want to keep reading
 - ◆ characters you can relate to and who change and grow as they make decisions to solve problems
 - ◆ descriptions that make you feel like you're there
 - ◆ a variety of settings
 - ◆ a fast start—action, danger, humor
 - ◆ situations that provide an emotional response and give you something to think about
 - ◆ a good ending with problems solved and characters getting what they deserve

Using these criteria, have students write a critical review of *Under a Living Sky*. Students should ensure their review touches on a number of the criteria with examples and reasons for their assessment. Share these reviews with the class.

- Like many authors, Joseph Simons uses similes to add texture to his writing. Following are two similes from *Under a Living Sky*: “Bound by layers of clothing, Joseph waddled like a penguin and spun on the wet floor...” and “The hail cascaded down all at once, as if someone had tripped and spilt a barrow-load of ice marbles onto their farm.” Pair students off and have them find several other examples of similes from the book. How do similes help enrich description? Assign each pair to write four similes, using *Under a Living Sky* as inspiration.
- In chapter 2, Simons uses descriptive language to paint a picture of the way Mary's father sets down the milk bucket on the floor of their house. Discuss with students how the author's choice of words helps the reader to use different senses to “see” the scene. Have students find a passage of their own writing and rewrite it using vivid descriptions. Instruct students to think about using their five senses in their descriptions, and to write the scene as though it were being filmed for a movie. What would the viewer see?
- Have students create a timeline of the story arc to show the major events in the book.
- *Under a Living Sky* is told in the third person. Have students rewrite the scene where Mother, Mary and Judith all forgive each other, from Judith's point of view. Then have them rewrite it from Mother's point of view. Share the students' responses. Discuss: how does point of view affect the way the story is told?

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. At the start of the book, Mary is constantly annoyed by her big sister, Judith. Do you have a younger or older sibling? Would you say he or she can be annoying sometimes? Why or why not?
2. For Mary, the valley she lives in is very important. It's the first thing she looks at when she gets up in the morning. It's *her* valley. Do you have a special place on Earth that belongs just to you? Explain why it means so much.
3. As you see it, why does Judith treat Mary the way she does in the beginning of the book? What motivates her behavior?
4. Mary has learned from experience that it's not worth it to argue with her mother. She never wins. Think about the way you relate to people in your family. Are there patterns that repeat themselves that you have learned from? What do you know about other people that helps you get along with them?
5. Traditions are an important part of family life. Mary's family shares some very special traditions around Christmastime. Going to church and putting the star on top of the tree are two of them. Think about your family. What traditions do you celebrate, and for what occasions?
6. Mary's dad tells her about the crash of 1929 and about how things began to go wrong for their family at that time. He tells Mary that although he knows it's wrong, Judith reminds him of all the things that went badly at that time. As you see it, is this a reasonable thing for a parent to tell a child? Why or why not?
7. After Jessy goes missing, Mary's father tells her to "do some good clear thinking about the last things you did together. Then you'll know where to look." Has this strategy ever helped you? Do you think it could help you if you lose something in the future?
8. As you see it, what was the connection between Jessy's disappearance and Judith's new behavior toward her sister?
9. When Mary discovers Judith's nasty secret, she somehow finds the strength to forgive her sister for burying Jessy. Do you think you would be able to do the same thing? Why or why not?

Author's Note

Dear Gentle but Perceptive Reader,

Some stories come from a small idea that gets stretched out into a big tale. Some stories are invented deliberately by the author, who may want to explore a time or place. Other stories are made to answer a mystery. This story of mine is more like that—a mystery, at least to me. But then it is also like a rock, just lying around for ages, waiting to be picked up and handled, waiting for me to come along.

In the early 1990s, when my father-in-law told me this story, he only needed about eight or ten sentences to do the job. During the Great Depression, my father-in-law was a boy on a Mennonite farm. He and his father were working the land in the traditional way. (But they were the first folks in the county to have a tractor. He always said horses were used too hard, and a tractor was the horse's best friend.) As he worked he heard of this dirt-poor family a few farms over. When Christmas came, the parents had nothing to give their kids, one boy and one girl. They found a solution, though: the girl received a homemade doll; the boy got I don't know what. I assume the boy didn't like his gift because he buried the doll on the prairie during a mid-winter heat wave. Then he helped his sister turn the farm upside down looking for her lost treasure. In the spring the oats within the buried doll sprouted, and the green shoots reached for heaven. The boy's evil deed was secret no more. The moral: "Be sure your sins shall find you out."

I have to admit his story gave me no rest. It really bugged me, and not because of the sins bit. I didn't see why any boy would do such a thing. I wondered what kind of family this might be. After obsessing about this situation for the entire summer, I decided the kids couldn't be brother and sister. They had to be two sisters. Not because only a sister can be so cantankerous and mean (I'd never say that, since I have five of them and would have to go into hiding), but because only sisters know the true value of dolls, especially homemade dolls. Who better to realize how much it would hurt to lose one? I did throw a brother into the pot just to liven up the stew.

The story has not given me much rest since then either. I have worked on it for years, trying to figure out who said what and why. It seems I was trying to understand real people, not just characters I invented. These people kept getting up and moving around, wiggling into other parts of my life, making me see them in new ways and insisting on fair treatment as I recorded and decoded their lives. I also had to learn about Saskatchewan history during the Great Depression, what the weather was like, what might have been on the radio (the CBC had only been operating a year or two), and what people were talking about at the time. What do Canadians of any age talk about? The weather? Yes, of course, but I mean the other things we talk about: politics, animals, family life, crops, neighbors, flowers, and hopes for the future.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy Judith and Mary as much as I do. But please, try to enjoy Joseph too—you may have noticed that he's named after me!

Sincerely,
Joseph Simons

Resources**Books***Fiction*

- Booth, David. *The Dust Bowl*
 Chambers, Veronica. *Amistad Rising: A Story of Freedom*
 Coerr, Eleanor. *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*
 Collins, Pat Lowery. *Just Imagine*
 Cooper, Susan. *Dawn of Fear* (bombing in London during the war)
 Curtis, Christopher Paul. *Bud, Not Buddy*
 Hesse, Karen. *Out of the Dust*
 Lied, Kate. *Potato: A Tale of the Great Depression*
 Peck, Richard. *A Long Way From Chicago; A Year Down Yonder*
 Porter, Tracy. *Treasures in the Dust*
 Ringgold, Faith. *Tar Beach*
 Stewart, Sarah. *The Gardener* (Great Depression)
 Taylor, Mildred. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Mississippi during the Depression)
 Westall, Robert. *The Kingdom of the Sea* (WWII England)

Nonfiction

- Brown, Deb Austin. *Growing Character* (372.5)
 Clements, Gillian. *The Picture History of Great Inventors* (609)
 Farrell, Jacqueline. *The Great Depression* (973.91)
 Gallagher, Kelly. *Deeper Reading* (372.4)
 Howell, Laura. *The Usborne Internet-linked Introduction to Weather and Climate* (551.6)
 Hughes, Susan. *Canada Invents* (609.1)
 Janeczko, Paul B. *Teaching 10 Fabulous Forms of Poetry* (372.64)
 Kindleberger, Charles P. *The World in Depression, 1929-1939* (330.9)
 Libby, Wendy M. L. *Using Art to Make Art* (372.5)
 Mennil, Paul. *The Depression Years: Canada in the 1930s* (971.062)
 Neering, Rosemary. *The Depression* (330.97)
 Pearce, Q. L. *Lightning and Other Wonders of the Sky* (551.5)
 Rensberger, Susan. *A Multicultural Portrait of the Great Depression* (973.91)
 Swartz, Larry. *The New Dramathemes* (372.66)
 Shannon, David A. *The Great Depression* (338.54)
 Stanley, Jerry. *Children of the Dust Bowl* (973.91)
 Tolley, Kimberley. *The Art and Science Connection* (372.3)
 VanCleave, Janice. *Janice VanCleave's 201 Awesome, Magical, Bizarre & Incredible Experiments* (507)

Online

Chinook Winds

www.mountainnature.com/climate/Chinook.htm

Visions in the Dust: A Child's Perspective of the Dust Bowl

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/dust/intro.html>

Brother Can You Spare a Dime?

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/dime/intro.html>

Photographs of the Great Depression

<http://history1900s.about.com/library/photos/blyindexdepression.htm>

Holnet London at War 1939-1945

www.lgfl.net/lgfl/accounts/holnet/upload/learn_tea/index.htm

The Great Depression and Children's Books

www.carolhurst.com/subjects/ushistory/depression.html

The History of the Telegraph and Telegraphy

<http://inventors.about.com/od/tstartinventions/a/telegraph.htm>

Great Depression of Canada

www.yesnet.yk.ca/schools/projects/canadianhistory/depression/depression.html

Twelve Great Lessons for Teaching the Great Depression

www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson147.shtml

Then and Now Prices: Comparing Prices During the Great Depression to Prices Today

<http://killeenroos.com/5/1930prices.html>

Dust Bowl Days

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=300

Good Character

www.goodcharacter.com/MStopics.html