

Literature Circle Guide to LOCOMOTION by Jacqueline Woodson

Book Summary

Since his parents died, eleven year-old Lonnie Motion has had to adjust to many changes in his life: living with his new foster mother, attending a new school, and coping with being separated from his little sister Lili, who lives with her new mother. Miss Edna, Lonnie's new foster mother, seems uncomfortable with the noise and energy Lonnie brings to their small apartment, and she is constantly telling him, "Hush, Lonnie." At school, Lonnie has to find a way to relate to students who don't know him or his background. Through his transition, Lonnie is comforted by memories from his past when his parents were alive, by visits with Lili in her new home, and also by the encouragement of his teacher, Ms. Marcus. Through Ms. Marcus, Lonnie finds a way to express himself in his writing. In a series of poems, Lonnie begins to remember his past, to record his grief, and to cope with his future. In the end, Lonnie comes to accept his new life, and to appreciate the people who support him, especially Ms. Marcus, Miss Edna, Miss Edna's grown son Rodney, and his sister Lili.

Author Information

Jacqueline Woodson grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, and Brooklyn, New York. After graduating from college with a B.A. in English, she became a drama therapist for homeless children and runaways in New York City until she decided to begin writing full time. Woodson is a Coretta Scott King Honor Book winner, and many of her novels have been named ALA Notable Children's Books and ALA Best Books for Young Adults. She enjoys writing about characters from a variety of races, backgrounds, and classes, introducing readers to the kinds of people they might not otherwise meet. Besides writing, Woodson enjoys political discussions, sewing, reading emergent writers, and encouraging young people to write. She lives in Brooklyn and has one daughter.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. What is Lonnie's full name, and how did he get his name?

Lonnie's full name is Lonnie Collins Motion. His mother's favorite song was "Locomotion," and she gave her son a name to represent the song: *Lonnie Collins Motion* (p. 21).

2. Lonnie writes about sometimes going to the drugstore to smell the honeysuckle talc powder. Why does he do this?

When Lonnie is missing his mother, he goes to the drugstore, and asks the ladies working at the cosmetics counter if he can smell the honeysuckle talc powder, the kind his mother used to wear. Smelling the powder helps Lonnie feel for just a few seconds that his mother is still alive and brings back memories of what she was like (pp. 7-8).

3. Though Lonnie doesn't live with his sister anymore, he often writes about her. What kind of brother is Lonnie to his sister Lili? How do we know?

Lonnie is a devoted, kind brother to Lili. He often feels great sadness when he thinks of Lili, mostly because he misses her. Yet he feels proud and happy for her, when he sees her dressed up with her hair braided, because she has a new mama and a lovely new home. Lonnie feels fiercely protective of his sister and will do anything to make her happy, even reading his Bible and praying as she asked him to do. His greatest joy is spending time with Lili, and he is thrilled to be able to spend two weeks with his sister at the same summer camp (p. 100).

4. Why do you think Lonnie is so irritated with Ms. Marcus – his favorite teacher -- when she assigns the class to write about their families?

For Lonnie, Ms. Marcus is a sympathetic soul, and her class is a place of refuge. Lonnie usually enjoys the freedom he feels in her class to write about what is in his heart. But when Ms. Marcus asks the class to write about their families, he can hardly bear sitting there in her class and feels deeply angry toward his teacher. He wants to yell, "What family?" Lonnie's parents are dead, burnt in an apartment fire, and Lonnie lives with a foster mother, separate from his little sister Lili. His present "family" is only Miss Edna, the foster mother he feels ambivalent toward, and Ms. Marcus's assignment causes Lonnie to feel rage over his loss.

5. Miss Edna is overjoyed because her son Rodney is coming back to the city to live. How does Lonnie feel about Rodney, and what role does Rodney end up playing in Lonnie's life?

When Rodney returns to the city and enters Lonnie's life, Lonnie begins to feel more comfortable living at Miss Edna's house, and for the first time it feels like home to him. Rodney calls Lonnie "Little Brother Lonnie," and Lonnie is delighted to think of Rodney as a big brother. Rodney takes an interest in Lonnie, spending time walking and playing basketball at the park. Over time, Rodney becomes like a true big brother to Lonnie, acting as a confidant and friend to him.

6. How does Lonnie react when he hears that Eric, his classmate who has often been mean to him, is hospitalized with sickle cell anemia? What can we tell about Lonnie from the way he responds to this news?

Lonnie feels deep grief for his classmate Eric. He tries to get thoughts of Eric out of his head, but he feels overwhelmed with sadness and fear for his classmate, and his mind is flooded with all his memories of Eric. Lonnie's response shows that even though he has had more experience with grief than most, he remains a tender-hearted, compassionate boy, quick to forgive and feel sympathy for others.

7. When his friends are trying to outdo one another with tall tales of the strange things they've seen, Lonnie just says, "Never seen nothing." Why doesn't he talk about his family tragedy with his friends? Do you think he should be more open? Can you imagine how you would be, in Lonnie's shoes?

Lonnie isn't ready to be open with his new friends. When the boys try to impress one another with their tall tales, their talk seems silly and immature (pp. 26-7). In

comparison, Lonnie has experienced a terrible tragedy, something to which the other boys have no way to relate. Though Lonnie isn't ready to talk with his friends about his experience, through his writing for Ms. Marcus he does find a way to express his grief.

8. Lili gives Lonnie her Bible and often talks about God to him. Why do you think it is so important to Lili for her brother to "find God"? Do you think Lonnie does "find God" as his sister hopes?

Lili tells her brother: "You find God, Lonnie, then maybe me and you can be together again (p. 47)." Lili hopes that if Lonnie finds God, then maybe her new mother will take him in, too. Or maybe she hopes that God will hear her prayers to be with her brother, if he finds God. Lonnie wishes he had faith in God; he sits on Miss Edna's roof waiting for God to show himself. When he and Lili get to spend two weeks together at the same summer camp, Lili attributes their blessing to answered prayer, and Lonnie decides to just let her think that is true, though he doesn't believe it himself (p. 100). But Lonnie does begin to see God around him in the kindness of others and feel that God is with him after all (p. 99).

9. Lonnie writes four poems about Clyde, the new boy in his class. Why do you think he is so fascinated by Clyde? Do you think he relates to Clyde in any way?

Lonnie notices that Clyde has a little sister Lili's age with braids like Lili used to wear. When he notices Clyde standing with his arm around his little sister, he feels a connection as he remembers his own little sister. He relates to Clyde because he too has a sister he cares deeply about, and he would love to be able to protect his sister like Clyde does. Lonnie also relates to Clyde as he learns about Clyde's life in Georgia. Both boys have previous lives very different from their current ones. Both are outsiders in different ways with pasts that no one knows much about.

10. When Lonnie is in church with Miss Edna, he writes the word *HOPE* on his hand. What do you think this means? Why does he do this, and what does this have to do with the other experiences he has?

Lonnie's sister has encouraged him to read his Bible and to find God, and by writing *HOPE* on his hand, Lonnie makes a step in that direction. Through his experiences, Lonnie is beginning to look forward to the future, rather than just reliving his past. Through new friends, like LaTenya at school and Miss Edna's grown son Rodney, Lonnie has begun to feel optimistic about life once again.

11. Through the book, Lonnie's idea of home starts to change. What does home mean to Lonnie at the end of the book? How do his ideas about this seem to change as he stays longer with Miss Edna?

Lonnie gradually comes to accept his new circumstances, as he gets used to living with Miss Edna and visiting Lili in her new house. While he still remembers his parents, he begins to see home as his apartment with Miss Edna. Near the end of the book, he thinks to himself, "I can't even imagine moving away from here, from Rodney's arm around my shoulder, from Miss Edna's Sunday cooking, from Lili in

her pretty dresses and great big smile when she sees me. . . Can't imagine moving away (p. 88).”

12. Besides learning about all kinds of poems, from haiku to epistle poems, what does Lonnie learn about writing from Ms. Marcus?

Ms. Marcus encourages Lonnie to write about his life, and she praises him often: “Good, Lonnie,” she says. As Lonnie says, “Not a lot of people be saying *Good, Lonnie* to me,” so the praise from Ms. Marcus keeps him going. Ms. Marcus also encourages Lonnie to write fast, not worrying about getting all the line breaks and grammar right, since the ideas are most important. She also teaches Lonnie to choose his words carefully, and to revise often before he’s done (p. 20). Through Ms. Marcus’s encouragement, Lonnie comes to think of himself as a writer.

13. Imagine Lonnie’s life five or ten years after the end of *Locomotion* and make some predictions about his future. Who or what does Lonnie care about? Who are his friends? Does he still write? What kind of person is he?

Students’ answers will vary. Students may respond that Lonnie is still writing, publishing his poetry, and contemplating a career as a writer. Always loyal, Lonnie is likely to remain close to his sister and his new friends. He keeps in touch with Ms. Marcus, since her encouragement has been so important to him. He is the kind of person others look up to, since he has survived tragedy and come out stronger and sympathetic toward others.

14. Do you think Miss Edna is a good foster mother to Lonnie? Did your ideas about her change as you read the book? Give examples from the story to support your answer.

Most readers will respond that though Miss Edna isn’t perfect, she is a good foster mother to Lonnie. We witness Lonnie growing to appreciate Miss Edna as the story goes on. At first, Miss Edna gives Lonnie many mixed messages. She at once tells him to be quiet in the apartment, but then she tells him that he needs to laugh and smile more, make a little noise. We also see how Miss Edna cares for Lonnie: She prays for the grief he still feels about his parents’ deaths and buys him Twinkies when they go on sale. When Lonnie gets the news that Miss Edna’s son Rodney is returning to the city to live, we witness for the first time how much he has grown to appreciate her when he prays, “Please Lord don’t let Miss Edna’s mind be gone ‘cause I was just getting used to living with her. . . she’s all I got right now (p. 73).”

15. As you read, did you admire Lonnie in any way? What do you like best about Lonnie? Would you want him as your friend?

Lonnie is a remarkable boy for many reasons. He is deeply loyal and protective of his little sister, the only surviving family member he has. As a survivor of great pain, he is still able to feel compassion and sympathy for others. He is also able to appreciate the small things in life: a kind word from a teacher, Twinkies with his foster mother, a hug from his sister. Lonnie is a thoughtful, insightful boy, as shown in his writings. He struggles with his feelings of anger and bitterness, and as the book goes on he grows to enjoy his new life and have hope for the future. Most

students will also respond that Lonnie would make a good friend, since he is loyal, thoughtful, and sympathetic.

Activities

1. Throughout the book, Lonnie is encouraged by his fifth grade teacher Ms. Marcus who really makes an impact on him. Imagine that Ms. Marcus is writing an e-mail or letter to another teacher friend in which she describes her fifth grade class, including Lonnie. What would she say about Lonnie and about his class? How does she view her job as a teacher? Write a letter as though you are Ms. Marcus, and share your thoughts and feelings about your job, your class, and Lonnie.

Ms. Marcus told Lonnie that he had the “soul of a poet.” She appreciates his honesty, his insight, and his transparency in writing about his past. She would admire Lonnie’s tender heart and the way he has coped with tragedy. About her class, Ms. Marcus would express both compassion and confusion. She is devoted to teaching minority students in a city school, but at times she feels the gap between her own middle-class lifestyle and her students’ lifestyles.

2. Lonnie’s story in *Locomotion* is not told in chronological order; instead Lonnie tells his story as the memories come to him. Create a time-line of his life, starting with his birth and going up to fifth grade, using as many of the events from the novel as you can in the order they happened. Illustrate your time-line with small pictures or symbols for each event, and use a color key to show what each experience meant to Lonnie. For example, you might write his painful experiences in red, his happy experiences in yellow, and his learning experiences in green.

This activity asks students to summarize the major events of Lonnie’s life and is a helpful way to review the novel. Also, since Lonnie’s story is not told chronologically, with this activity students are challenged to put the events of the story in sequential order.

3. Try to imitate Lonnie’s poetic style. Choose a memory or story of your own, and write it like he does in a few, carefully chosen words. Try to pay attention to spacing and line breaks, and give your poem a title. When you’re finished, illustrate your poem, using colors to show the mood your poem portrays.

This activity gives students the opportunity to experiment with free verse poetry like Lonnie writes. Students should be encouraged to keep their stories short, like Lonnie’s, using only the most precise, vivid words. When completed, students should share their memories with their classmates.