

Literature Circle Guide to
A LONG WAY FROM CHICAGO by Richard Peck

Book Summary

What happens when Joey and his sister, Mary Alice -- two city slickers from Chicago -- make their annual summer visits to Grandma Dowdel's seemingly sleepy Illinois town? August 1929: They see their first corpse, and he isn't resting easy.

August 1930: The Cowgill boys terrorize the town, and Grandma fights back.

August 1931: Joey and Mary Alice help Grandma trespass, poach, catch the sheriff in his underwear, and feed the hungry -- all in one day. And there's more, as Joey and Mary Alice make seven summer trips to Grandma's -- each one funnier than the year before -- in self-contained chapters that readers can enjoy as short stories or take together for a rollicking good novel. In the tradition of American humorists from Mark Twain to Flannery O'Connor, popular author Richard Peck has created a memorable world filled with characters who, like Grandma herself, are larger than life and twice as entertaining.

Author Information

Richard Peck was born in 1934 in Decatur, Illinois, a town he describes as quiet and safe. His mother, Virginia, was a dietitian and his father, Wayne, was a merchant who often rode his Harley Davidson to work.

Richard went to college in Exeter, England and then served a stint in the army. He then became a junior high school teacher. He taught in Illinois and in New York City. In 1971 he left teaching to become a full time writer. He advises young people who want to become writers to get to know people who don't conform to the group. This is a common theme in many of his novels. Disliking much of modern technology, Richard Peck does not have a computer. He types his manuscripts on a regular typewriter. For some time, he had his friend Paula Danziger's voice on his answering machine. Because of his anti-technology stance, you'll find information about Mr. Peck and some of his speeches on the Internet put out by others but you won't find his website, for he has none.

Suggested Answers to the Literature Circle Questions

1. Where did Joey and Mary Alice go for the summer? Why?

They go for one week every August to visit their grandmother (pg. 1). The kids live in Chicago where their parents do not have a car and their grandmother does not have a phone, so they go to spend time with her.

2. Is it true that Grandma Dowdel doesn't 'give two hoots about the town?' Why or why not?

Grandma Dowdel enjoys her privacy and does not enjoy anyone gossiping about her, but she loves the town and the people within it. She demonstrates this by bringing the Cowgills to justice, baking her gooseberry pie to represent the town, and getting her old enemy Mrs. Effie Wilcox's house back from the bank that possessed it.

3. Who won the blue ribbon for the best gooseberry pie? Explain.

Rupert Pennypacker received the blue ribbon for the best gooseberry pie, but Grandma was actually the one who baked it. Grandma was afraid that her pie would lose to Mr. Pennypackers and she wanted the blue ribbon, so she switched nametags on the pies (pg. 78).

4. Who is the 'One Woman Crime Wave'? Why is she described this way?

Grandma is the 'One Woman Crime Wave.' She is described this way because she brews beer even though it is the Prohibition, she illegally traps catfish in fish traps, (pg. 45) and she feeds the drifters that the Sheriff has told to get out of town (pg. 58).

5. How do Joey and Mary Alice change during *The Day of Judgement*? What do they believe at the beginning of the chapter? What do they believe at the end?

At the beginning of the chapter, they believe that Grandma would do anything to win a challenge, but in her quest to win the blue ribbon for the best gooseberry pie she lost the blue ribbon that she actually won and deserved by switching name tags with a competitor. At the end, they see that you need to believe in yourself and your best effort. They also come to see that Grandma will do anything to help them get what they want out of life. For example, Grandma, without seeming to, gave Joe the winning ride in the airplane.

6. List all the things (activities, money, tools, etc.) that were different in the 1930's from today. Then make a list of things that are the same.

Different: Milk was delivered, few people had telephones, few people owned cars, many people grew their own food, few women worked outside of their homes, less money could purchase much more, and it was illegal to drink alcohol.

Same: Kids jumped rope, people fished, people traveled by train, people went to the movies for entertainment, people gossiped, neighbors helped each other out, and town fairs and talent shows were held.

7. When do you think Joe stops thinking of Grandma Dowdel as a bad influence? Why? Does Mary Alice have different ideas about Grandma Dowdel? Why?

Joe stops thinking of Grandma Dowdel as a bad influence after the gooseberry pie contest. He realized that Grandma was going to do anything to get him the ride that he wanted in airplane. Joe came to see that most of the crazy things Grandma did were to benefit her friends and family, and in her own rough and gruff way she was constantly telling them how much she loved them. By 1932, their fourth summer with Grandma, Mary Alice has begun to really enjoy and look up to Grandma. She recognizes Grandma's warmth and caring, but loves that Grandma is independent, smart, and will find a way to get what she wants. She sees her as a unique and wonderful woman.

8. Describe how Grandma Dowdel goes about getting justice from the Cowgills? What do you think would be Grandma's definition of justice?

Grandma Dowdel knew that the Cowgills knocked down her mailbox and Effie Wilcox's privies. So when her milk was next delivered she left her gun out to show the Cowgills what they could steal, lied to Ernie Cowgill that she was leaving town, and lied that she had found a dead mouse in her milk. As expected, the Cowgills came to her home to steal her gun. She caught them and had their parents brought to her home to show them what their sons were up to. Then she demanded that the Cowgills pay for the screen that the boys cut and buy her a new mailbox. Then she showed the Cowgills the bottle of milk that she had added a mouse to and claimed the boys had done it. She said that she would spread rumors that the boys often did this to hurt the Cowgills business. Grandma did not think it was right for the boys to prey on old widows and demanded that the boys be whipped by their father. I think Grandma would define justice as 'an eye for an eye.' If the Cowgill boys thought they were going to hurt her by destroying her mailbox, then she was going to hurt them right back using their parents to punish them (pgs. 19-35).

9. Do you notice any different rules or expectations for men and women in Grandma Dowdel's town? Are there things men can do that women can't? Are there things that women can do that men can't? How do you think Grandma Dowdel would have behaved differently if she were a man?

In the 1930's, men and women typically had more distinct and different roles. Men would earn money for their families while women tended to the business of a home like raising children, cooking, and cleaning. It would have been strange for the women to work as bankers and the men to stay at home. But as Grandma Dowdel shows, she is completely self sufficient and does the jobs of both a man and a woman. She farms, cooks, cleans, takes care of her family and friends. Grandma Dowdel does as she pleases and does not worry about what other think of her behavior, so her behavior wouldn't change much if she were a man.

10. How does Joey feel about Grandma Dowdel's fish trap? Does he have any problems with it? What does he like about it?

Joey doesn't know what to feel about Grandma Dowdel's fish trap because he knows that using a fish trap was illegal and could carry a five dollar fine. His father was also a member of the Conservation Club who tied his own flies and valued good sportsmanship (pg. 45). So because of his father, Joey feel the trap might not be right to use, but he liked the fishing was done all at once (pg. 46).

11. Even though they never appear in the story, what do you think Joe's and Mary Alice's parents are like? What clues can you find in the story to their personalities?

Joe and Mary Alice say that their parents would not let them do see John Dillinger's body, they were city people, their father loved fishing (pg. 45), and they paid for Mary Alice to take dance lessons. It sounds like they are conservative and don't want to take too many risks by illegally fishing or letting their children view a dead body (pg. 103). But one of them had Grandma Dowdel as a parent, so she probably instilled in her children a sense of adventure and love of life.

12. Explain what Grandma Dowdel means by ‘apart from its historical significance’ on page 117.

Grandma manufactured historical artifacts that she claimed were found in Effie Wilcox’s home. She made a quilt look like it belonged to Mary Todd Lincoln (pg. 113) and a stovepipe hat look like it belonged to Abraham Lincoln (pg. 114). The townspeople believed in these artifacts and Grandma was able to claim that Lincoln once spent time in Mrs. Wilcox’s home and that it should not be torn down by the bank. Thus Grandma was saying that the home had no value apart from its historical significance, a significance that was fabricated by Grandma.

13. Who is the better role model for the kids: O.B. Dickerson or Grandma Dowdel? Why? What is a role model supposed to provide?

Grandma Dowdel is a much better role model. The sheriff, O.B. Dickerson, pretends to uphold the law, but instead he gets drunk with his fishing pals (pg. 49) and tries to run starving drifters out of town so that they don’t bother the townspeople (pg. 58). Whereas Grandma often breaks the law, but she always does in order to benefit a person in need or to demonstrate the error in a person’s ways. A role model should be a model of good behavior that young people can turn to as a guide. Grandma makes a wonderful role model because she is smart, resourceful, just, generous, and consistently works to benefit and enrich the lives of other people in her town.

14. Look at young Weidenbach’s song at the end of the book. What is its message? Is it the same message of the book?

The message of young Weidenbach’s song is that it is much better to be a boy than to be a girl. This is not the same message of the book. The two main female characters, Grandma and Mary Alice, are more brave, honest, and resourceful than most of the men and boys in the story. For example, the Cowgill boys knock down Grandma’s mailbox and tear down Mrs. Wilcox’s privies. The sheriff gets drunk on the job even though it is illegal. Mr. Weidenbach, the head of the bank, tries to tear down Mrs. Wilcox’s house. Whereas Grandma saves Mrs. Wilcox’s house, gets the Cowgill boys punished, and bakes pies in an attempt to win the town a blue ribbon in the fair.

Activities

1. Each chapter covers a summer’s trip to Grandma Dowdel. After WWII do you think Mary Alice and Joe will return to visit her? Write the next chapter of the book after the last one.

Teachers should provide students with resources to research the WWII period so that their ‘next chapter’ will be historically accurate. Teachers should also discuss historical fiction, and the way in which authors weave historical facts into a fictional story.

Students who have relationships with their grandparents would believe that they would definitely return to visit Grandma Dowdel. If they returned in 1945 after WWII, then Mary Alice would be 23 and Joe would be 25. I think this last chapter would include more dialogue in which Grandma shares stories about her husband and Mary Alice and Joe share stories about what has happened in their lives in the past ten years. May Alice might be married, and Joe would be back from the war with many tales to tell.

2. This story takes place during the Great Depression. Do some research on the Depression and find out what else was happening in America during this time and how this may have influenced the events in the story.

Teachers should provide resources for the research and again discuss the purpose of historical fiction, how is different from nonfiction.

The Great Depression definitely influenced the story. Grandma was thrifty by nature, but she had to be extra thrifty in order to take care of her friends in town. The drifters in the story represented the many men out of work during the Depression who traveled the country looking for jobs. The bank foreclosing on Effie Wilcox's house demonstrates how difficult it was for people to keep up payments on their homes or even just regular bills. Grandma's picked vegetables and fruits show how she would not waste a bit of food, but would store it so that it would last. And rather than buy soap, Grandma made her own.

3. Every family has its stories—and some are as hilarious as Mary Alice's and Joe's about their grandmother. Talk with older relatives in your family and collect some family stories to share with the class.

This is a wonderful way for teachers to bring the student's families into the classroom. The students could not only orally retell the stories, but write them down and create memory books detailing the history of each unique family and their journey.