

## Literature Circle Guide to THE RIVER BETWEEN US by Richard Peck

### **Book Summary**

Tilly Pruitt and her family live in a muddy Illinois river town on the banks of the Mississippi. Everyone in the family seems to fear the coming of the Civil War except Tilly's twin brother, Noah, who makes Mama nervous by marching in town with the other boys, all of them anxious to fight to preserve the Union. One evening a steamboat docks at the landing and two mysterious women come ashore: a commanding and glamorous young lady in a hoop skirt and her darker silent servant. Mama invites the strangers to board with her family and life for the Pruitts is changed forever.

### **Author Information**

Richard Peck is the first children's writer to have been awarded a National Humanities Medal. The author of 30 novels, he has also won the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in young-adult literature, the Newbery Medal (for *A Year Down Yonder*), a Newbery Honor (for *A Long Way from Chicago*), and numerous other awards and honors. His most recent book, *Fair Weather*, was included on more than a dozen best-of-the-year lists. Richard Peck has also been an English teacher and a soldier stationed in Stuttgart, Germany. Mr. Peck lives in New York City.

### **Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

Use the questions and the activities that follow to get more out of the experience of reading *The River Between Us* by Richard Peck.

1. What state do Tilly and her family live in? What state lies on the other side of the Mississippi River? Briefly explain how the town of Grand Tower got its name.  
**The Pruitts live in Grand Tower, Illinois. The state of Missouri is on the other side of the Mississippi River. The origin of the name Grand Tower is explained early in the book on page 12. "Across the river on the Missouri side another stone outcropping rose straight out of the water. This was Tower Rock, and it gave the town its name." Answers should reference Tower Rock by name.**
2. What does Noah do in town that makes Mama afraid he will leave home?  
**Noah and his friends meet after work to march and drill like Union soldiers. Mama fears that Noah will soon be drawn into the war and she knows she cannot stop him if he chooses to sign up. Answers should indicate that readers understand current events, especially the tense situation between the North and South.**

3. List three items Delphine and Tilly bring to Camp Defiance from Grand Tower. Explain how they use each item to help the soldiers.

**Delphine and Tilly bring an assortment of items to Camp Defiance: jimson and bloodwort for medicinal purposes, homemade soap, biscuits and jars of food, winter clothes, and warm quilts. Readers should be able to deduce how each item is used. The cures are used to heal wounds and numb pain. Fresh food is used to nourish. Warm quilts fill a shortage of blankets and soap is used to sterilize the soldiers and the camp in the hopes of suppressing disease.**

4. What book does Tilly see beside Noah's cot at Camp Defiance? Why does Tilly's heart sink after seeing this book?

**Tilly sees a copy of *Hardee's Tactics*, which she describes on page 116 as "a text about soldiering and great battles and how they were waged." She adds, "My heart sank. Noah was too weak to lift a bucket of water and still he was studying the arts of war, and yearning to let fly with grape and canister."**

5. In his letter to Tilly, Curry explains that "Egypt is no place for them of my convictions." What does Curry mean by this? How do Curry's convictions differ from Noah's convictions?

**Curry means that he is loyal to the South while Grand Tower and much of southern Illinois, a free state, remain loyal to the Union and President Lincoln. Noah and his family are among the majority who support the Union. As Tilly explains on page 73, "The battle of Bull Run made Yankees out of all of us." Tilly offers several other hints about her family's convictions. On page 20 she says, "...Lincoln was an Illinois man, one of us." On page 44 she adds, "[Mama] took a dim view of slavery, and didn't care who knew it." Answers should indicate that readers are able to infer Noah's convictions from these and other hints.**

6. Describe the friendship between Calinda and Cass. What do the two characters have in common? How does Cass change after Calinda's arrival?

**On page 65 Tilly says, "Calinda was the sister Cass needed." Calinda enlists Cass to help her prepare Prawlens to be sold to steamboat passengers. Tilly says of their relationship, "Her and Calinda spoke a language I was deaf to, a language of prophecies and cures, of visions..." Readers should mention that both girls have visions in which they see or sense other people suffering. Finally, Tilly notes how Cass grows through her relationship with Calinda, becoming much more outgoing and comfortable around strangers until she is even willing to be made up for a dance.**

7. Imagine you were compelled to leave home like Delphine and Calinda and could not bring everything you owned. List three to five items you would take with you and explain why you would bring each item.

**This question should encourage readers to imagine what it would be like to be leaving home for good at a point in time when important possessions were often not easily replaced.**

8. Mama says Noah left home “like a thief in the night.” What do you think she meant by this? Imagine you are Noah and you want to leave a note explaining your reasons for joining the army. What would you say to help your family understand your decision?

**The first part of this question is designed to test the reader’s understanding of Mama’s metaphor. In her mind, Noah is taking away her sense of security. He is the man of the house and the one person Mama says she can not spare.**

**Answers regarding the note should convey an understanding of Noah’s reasons for joining the war (see question 2) and his feelings about his family, including his father. Look for answers which speculate whether Noah understands the impact his departure would have on Mama or whether he understands what he is getting into.**

9. Reread the description on page 120 of the officers’ quarters at Mrs. Hanrahan’s house. Compare the officers’ living conditions to the living conditions of the soldiers at Camp Defiance. What reason might there be for these differences? Do you think this is fair or unfair? Why or why not?

**Tilly briefly describes the relative comfort in which wounded officers recover while common soldiers lie in squalid conditions in the hospital tents at Camp Defiance. Answers should convey an understanding about what those conditions were and why they were so perilous. The question is an opportunity for readers to form a value judgment about the different conditions for officers and non-officers. Look for answers which attempt to address why such differences exist and whether there is any justification for them.**

10. Delphine tells Tilly, “But New Orleans prefers its custom to the law.” In your own words, state the difference between a custom and a law. Name one law and one custom that plays a role in your life and explain why you think each is important.

**The quote from page 128 refers to a time in New Orleans history when social morals in the city tolerated placage, the arrangement by which wealthy white men fathered children with mistresses, specifically free women of African American descent, even as they maintained legally sanctioned marriages to white women. Readers should infer that while laws are typically created and enforced by governments, customs are often unwritten, traditional practices followed by a group of people or a religion.**

11. Dr. Hutchings writes Tilly regularly until they are reunited after the war ends. Imagine you are Dr. Hutchings sitting down to write a letter to Tilly. What would you say to her? What would you ask her about life back in Grand Tower?

**This answer should challenge readers to imagine what sort of experience an Army doctor might have had during the Civil War. Readers should also be able to pose questions to Tilly which reflect specific aspects of her life. Questions should reference people and places important to her and be consistent with the**

**relationship between the two characters, most importantly that they admired one another and would someday be married.**

12. Tilly, Mama, and Delphine are all impacted by the outbreak of war. How does each character contribute to the war? How does each suffer as a result of the war? How are their war experiences different from the experiences of the men in the story?

**Answers will vary but readers should be able to synthesize information from various sections of the story. Look for specific examples. War forces Cass and Calinda to leave New Orleans. War takes Noah from Mama and creates conflict between her and the other ladies of Grand Tower. War takes Curry from Tilly but brings her closer to Dr. Hutchings, whom she eventually marries. General themes to mention include suffering, disruption, loss, sacrifice, and new beginnings. The women contribute goods, time, skills, and labor while exposing themselves to significant risk at hospitals. One important difference to note between the experience of men and women is simply that women did not go into battle. While men in the story are said to fight for glory or allegiance, women are shown to be motivated by a sense of compassion or humanity.**

13. At the end of the story, we learn that Delphine's son may go to Europe to be a doctor in the Great War. Based on what you learned about war in this story, would you support his decision to go to Europe as a doctor? Be specific, using evidence from the text to support your argument.

**Readers should understand that while medics who go to the front lines face great peril, they play a critical role in alleviating suffering by tending to injuries and checking the spread of disease. Answers should include specific references to Dr. Hutchings's contributions at Camp Defiance.**

14. Who is narrating the story at the beginning and at the end of the book? What is this character's relationship to Tilly? Did you like the way the author split up the story into two time periods? Why or why not?

**The narrator is Howard Leland Hutchings. He is revealed to be the grandson of Delphine and Noah, though his father was raised by Tilly and Dr. Hutchings.**

15. Why do you think the author chose Grand Tower as a setting for this story? Do you think it was a good choice? Make sure to use what you learned about the Civil War in the story and in the author's note in your answer.

**Answers should convey an understanding of how geography shaped the experience of Grand Tower before, during, and after the Civil War. Illinois was a border state and the home state of President Lincoln. Grand Tower's proximity to the slave states (Missouri lay just across the river) meant that feelings over slavery and secession were divided and impassioned. Furthermore, Grand Tower's position on the Mississippi left the town vulnerable to military blockades.**

*Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-13; Evaluation: 14-15*

## **Activities**

1. Draw a map of the Mississippi River from New Orleans to St. Louis. Note other key towns from the story on your map, including Cairo, Grand Tower, and Carbondale. Then trace the trips of these characters: Howard Leland Hutchings, Delphine and Calinda, and Noah Pruitt.

**This activity is designed to help the reader visualize where the Pruitts lived and why this location was so important early in the Civil War. Successful maps will convey that readers grasp the relative positions of key towns along the Mississippi.**

2. The story you just read includes many important historical dates. Using a reference book, look up the dates for the following events: Lincoln's Inauguration, The Battle of Bull Run, The Battle of Belmont, and the attack on Ft. Sumter. Then, construct a timeline showing the order of these events. Fill in the timeline with three to five events from the story.

**Lincoln was inaugurated on March 4, 1861. Ft. Sumter was attacked on April 12, 1861. The Battle of Bull Run was fought on July 21, 1861. The Battle of Belmont was fought on November 7, 1861. Possible events from the story to use include Noah's departure from home, the arrival of Delphine and Calinda, Tilly and Delphine's trip to Cairo, Mama's meeting with the ladies from town, and Noah's return.**

3. At the end of the story, we learn Calinda chose to leave Grand Tower for California. Imagine you are Calinda writing a letter to Delphine and the Pruitts. Describe your journey westward and discuss what you are doing in California. Be sure to mention what you miss most about Illinois and what you like most about the West.

**This activity will encourage readers to imagine what the enigmatic Calinda might sound like in a letter. Readers are told that after the war, Calinda goes west to California where she hopes to pass herself off as Spanish. Her fate is unknown to the other characters so readers have an opportunity to be creative. Possible topics to include in letters include life in the West, her feelings about racism, and possible thoughts of her brother in France.**