

Literature Circle Guide to RUBY HOLLER by Sharon Creech

Book Summary

Ruby Holler is a beautiful and mysterious place, deep in the country, a "basin in the hills. . . where cool breezes drifted through the trees, and where the creek was so clear that every stone on its bottom was visible." An older couple, Tiller and Sairy, live in the holler and are looking for new adventures, each of them hoping to set off on a trip. When they invite the "trouble twins," Dallas and Florida, to join them, all of their lives take new turns.

Author Information

Sharon Creech was born in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. She discovered in college that she loved storytelling, and afterwards found a career teaching high school English and literature in England and Switzerland. She wrote later that teaching and traveling both provided the perfect training ground for writing her novels. Her first two novels (published in England) were written for adults, but all of her subsequent work has been written for children. After *Walk Two Moons* won the Newbery Medal in 1995, Sharon Creech stopped teaching and devoted herself to writing full-time. She now lives in Pennington, New Jersey, with her husband, a school headmaster, and has two grown children.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

Use the questions and activities that follow to get more out of the experience of reading *Ruby Holler* by Sharon Creech.

1. What are some of the rules of Boxton Creek Home? What are some of the punishments Dallas and Florida receive for breaking the rules?

Creech writes on page 5 that there were "general rules and kitchen rules, bathroom rules and stairway rules, basement rules and outside rules, upstairs rules and downstairs rules, clothing rules, washing rules, cleaning rules, rules upon rules upon rules." Specific rules mentioned include "No leaning out of windows," "No stupid running," "Keep your hands to yourself," and "No talking."

Punishments include going to the Thinking Corner, floor scrubbing, pot scrubbing, weed pulling, wearing "I've Been Bad" shirts, shoveling manure, peeling potatoes, washing windows, and hauling boxes and broken furniture.

2. What did the twins do that made the Hoppers bring them back to the home?

Described on pages 18-19, the Hoppers mistakenly believe the children are stealing money after they see Florida innocently pick up a ten-dollar bill on the kitchen counter and find Dallas playing with a jar of quarters, which Florida then smashes when Mr. Hopper yells at Dallas.

3. When Dallas is sent to the Thinking Corner, what does he think about? What does Florida think about?

Dallas pictures fields and trees, woods where he can play, and himself as a baby (pp. 6, 23). Florida thinks about people she's seen who could have been her mother and father (pp. 23-24).

4. Why is Dallas more eager to go with Tiller and Sairy than Florida? What is he excited about?

Florida anticipates another bad experience, but Dallas is excited about the prospect of going on a trip to Kangadoon, imagining a pirate adventure (pp. 26-30).

5. When Florida and Dallas first arrive in Ruby Holler, they ask Tiller and Sairy a lot of questions about their new home. What do the questions reveal about other places they've lived?

The twins ask Tiller and Sairy if they'll be staying in a hog pen, a snake pit or a "cobwebby attic" (p. 37). Florida asks if she'll be forced to work in return for water (p. 51), and Dallas asks if all the provisions for their trips will be bought at the Salvation Army (p. 53). Later, Florida asks about "whuppings," being "thrown down in the spidery cellar," (p. 60), and getting smacked (p. 67). On page 72 she asks, "What are you going to do with those knives? You going to stab somebody?"

In other places they've lived, the twins have become accustomed to unpleasant foster parents who are quick to anger and to punish. They are not used to being treated well or having new things.

6. Even though Dallas and Florida are twins, in some ways they are very different. Make a list, comparing and contrasting the twins. Make the same list for Tiller and Sairy.

Dallas is dreamier and more optimistic, while Florida sees the worst in everything, frequently using adjectives such as "putrid" and "maggoty." Tiller is the "grumpy" pessimist, while Sairy sees the best in everyone. Lists would reflect these differences.

7. How do Dallas and Florida feel about not knowing what their parents look like? Are there any positive aspects that either sees about not knowing?

On pages 44-45, the twins see the resemblance between children and their parents and wonder what they themselves might turn out to be as adults. The twins are ambivalent. Florida thinks that if their mother was a "big ugly mean person" it might be better not to know.

8. How does Florida change over the course of the novel? Find examples of things she does or says at the end of the book that she wouldn't have done at the start.

Florida begins to see the good possibilities in her life rather than immediately jumping to the negative, becoming much more optimistic and trusting.

Statements on page 307 include “I don’t want to leave, I like it here.” She becomes willing and eager to chop wood or haul water, seeing them as helpful chores rather than punishments.

9. Compare the Trepids and Tiller and Sairy. What is each like as a couple? How are their views on children different? What kinds of secrets do they keep from one another?

The Trepids are selfish, petty people. They don’t show affection for one another and have no patience with children. When they believe they are going to be rich, each sneaks out to stores to look at clothes, jewelry and cars without the other knowing.

Tiller and Sairy, on the other hand, are very affectionate towards one another and while children sometimes baffle them they always try to see their point of view. Their big secret is a sort of fun game between them, hiding money from one another out in the “understone funds” in the holler.

10. Z is a very mysterious person. What kind of person do you think he is? What clues does Creech give you to his character? Do you think he will become closer to the twins in the future?

At first Z seems a sinister character in the employ of Mr. Trepid for nefarious deeds, as we first meet him in a dark alley and later he’s sent to search for Tiller and Sairy’s money. It is revealed, however, that Z is a neighbor and friend to the couple, and he turns the tables on Mr. Trepid by disclosing the plan.

On pages 249-250, Z discovers he may be the twins’ father. It is implied he will move closer to this role as Tiller and Sairy may become more like grandparents.

11. Would you like to live in Ruby Holler? Explain and discuss the positive and negative things about living in a holler.

The holler is described as a beautiful place with flowers and trees, far from the noise and garbage of the big city. As Florida and Dallas discover when they sleep in the woods, however, there are also bugs and animals and “creepy crawly things” that they don’t always enjoy. There are many adventures to be had, but it can also be dangerous, as when Florida and Tiller capsize their boat in the river. Answers can reflect these aspects.

12. If you could give the twins one piece of advice, what would it be? How would it change the story? What if you could tell the Trepids one thing?

Perhaps Florida and Dallas might be advised not to act out so much and become known as “Trouble Twins” and thereby get along better in the houses they stay in, but as the other foster parents are not described as very good people this would not be the most useful to them. They might be advised to be more open to Tiller and Sairy when they meet, and while they might more quickly settle into a happy existence at the holler, they would not learn the lessons about trust and perhaps Z would never learn he might be their father.

The Tepids will likely be offered harsher advice, as it's clear they have no business caring for children and don't appear to be very bright. If it's believed that any advice would have made them better people, to be less selfish or more caring for children, then the twins might possibly never meet Tiller and Sairy.

13. Creech includes a lot of the characters' dreams in the novel. Why do you think she does this? Discuss how dreams affect the story and different characters in it.

Dreams are sometimes used as an escape in Dallas' case, or as a method to work out problems in Tiller's case. When the characters are nervous about their upcoming trips, they all have nightmares. These dreams can be seen as helpful and useful, and also as a window into what the characters are really feeling inside.

14. Trust and honesty are important themes in this book. Who do you think the most trusting characters are? Who is the least? Who is the most dishonest? Do you think anyone in the book is unwisely trusting and honest? When and why? How does being trusted change the twins?

Sairy is the most trusting character, always seeing the good in everyone. It's a mistake when she trusts the hunters to watch the backpacks (p. 245). Tiller may grumble and worry, but he can quickly be brought around to a positive view. Of the twins, Florida is initially untrusting because she has had such bad experiences in the past. Dallas is somewhat more open to the good possibilities in others. The Tepids are the least trusting, afraid even to tell each other what they really think.

Tiller worries that the children shouldn't know about the understone funds, and while the honesty of the children is proven, Dallas does make the mistake of trusting Mr. Trepid with this information—a most unwise action. Mr. Trepid in turn trusts that Z will search Ruby Holler for the understone funds, and although perhaps this trust is misplaced the dishonesty of the plan is foiled by Z's virtuous behavior. There is room for discussion of ethics here.

As the children learn they themselves are trusted, they learn to trust others. They become more confident and capable of doing things without becoming angry or upset. They are much happier.

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-7; Analysis: 8-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-14.

Activities

1. Draw a map of Ruby Holler. Then try mapping an area of your town like Z mapped the holler. Choose to mark down all the stones, trees, flowers, or what ever you choose.

Maps of Ruby Holler can include Tiller and Sairy's house, their barn, Z's house nearby, plus the location of the tree the twins cut down, the bear bush, tickle-violets and the picnic tree. Maps may also incorporate the neighboring town of Boxton with the Trepids house, the dress shop, jewelry store and Cadillac dealership. Where is the river Tiller and Florida take the boat? Where is the hillside Sairy and Dallas hike?

When students are mapping an area of their own town, where might they put their own understone funds? What other things might they want to hide?

2. Pick any two characters and write a diary entry that each might have written the same day.

Which characters would write diary entries with the same point of view? Which ones would see things the most differently? Could two characters experience the same event as to disagree completely as to what happened?

3. Illustrate a timeline of Dallas and Florida's life before they lived in Ruby Holler, creating a picture for each place they've been.

Timelines may include being found in the box on the Trepids doorstep, and then variously the foster homes they stayed in (the Hoppers, the Dreeps, the Cranbeps, the Burgertons) until they come to Ruby Holler. Pictures might reflect an incident from each home, or perhaps illustrate the feelings the twins had in each place.