

Literature Circle Guide to
A YEAR DOWN YONDER by Richard Peck

Book Summary

Mary Alice's childhood summers in Grandma Dowdel's sleepy Illinois town were packed with enough drama to fill the double bill of any picture show. But now she is fifteen, and faces a whole long year with Grandma, a woman well known for shaking up her neighbors-and everyone else! All Mary Alice can know for certain is this: when trying to predict how life with Grandma might turn out . . . better not. This wry, delightful sequel to the Newbery Honor Book *A Long Way from Chicago* has already taken its place among the classics of children's literature.

Author Information

Richard Peck, the acclaimed author of more than twenty-five novels, has won the prestigious Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in young adult literature. He was born and raised in Decatur, Illinois. Peck studied in England prior to his first writing job ghostwriting sermons for chaplains as a soldier in Germany. He now lives in New York City, which he describes as a "third-world sort of island."

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Why does Mary Alice have to move to Grandma Dowdel's?

Mary Alice is growing up during the time of the Great Depression and the recession that followed. Her father lost his job and her parents planned to move into a "light housekeeping room" where they would do household chores for reduced rent, but there's only room for the two of them so Mary Alice is staying with her Grandma until her parents get back on their feet.

2. The privy pirates pay dearly for their Halloween pranks. What plan does Grandma devise to outwit the boys? Who is the major victim of Grandma's prank? What gives him away?

Grandma knows boys have been making Halloween mischief all over town. On the night Mary Alice finds her cat with a tin can tied to his tail, it's time to make some mischief of her own. Grandma makes homemade glue – "Best glue you ever used, better than store-bought. It'll bond wood to wood, metal to metal, and stay stuck till kingdom come," she says (p. 24) – and she and Mary Alice stretch a length of picture wire about five inches off the ground in front of the privy. Then they wait in quiet. When the pranksters come along, the first boy trips over the wire and receives a heaping topping of glue. The rest of the boys trip over him. Later, at the Halloween party at school, the principal's son – Augie Fluke – shows up with a telltale shaved head that's rubbed raw. Grandma realizes the significance of the initials A.F.J.R. (August Fluke Jr.) on the knife she found after the boys ran off and cuts Augie's piece of pie with his own knife. (pp. 21-38)

3. The author uses humor and exaggeration to create characters and events that are larger than

life. Find a passage or a scene in which the author uses these techniques. Practice reading it out loud, then share it with your group. Discuss what the author does to make the passage work. **Two examples of scenes that are larger than life are the Halloween scene and the snake scene. In the Halloween scene, Mary Alice helps Grandma prepare to surprise the boys who are hoping to create a mischievous surprise of their own. First Grandma makes glue, then Mary Alice helps her stretch picture wire for the boys to trip over. Then they wait. Mary Alice thinks “It was so quiet, you could hear Bootsie [the cat] chew.... we were silent as the tomb.” (p. 26) It's this quiet moment that makes the mayhem even more exaggerated once the boys arrive and fall into their trap.**

In the snake scene, Mary Alice is very nervous because she has invited Royce, the cute new boy from school, over to tutor her in math. Mary Alice thinks, “Sweet, silent Sunday afternoon seemed to unfold before us, and I could swear I heard violin music from nowhere.” Suddenly, “A bloodcurdling scream from over our heads cut Sunday afternoon in two.”

(p. 105) We find out a huge snake lives in the attic that Arnold Green uses for painting. Maxine Patch, the postmistress, was posing for him when the snake dropped down onto her and created chaos. Again, the hilarity of the situation is further heightened by the quiet, nervous moment that comes before it.

4. Describe Mary Alice's Valentine's Day scheme and its effect on Carleen Lovejoy. **No one knows who writes the “Newsy Notes from Our Communities” in the local paper, but everyone takes notice when it reports “the high school looks forward to an exchange of Valentine cards.” (p. 79) Everyone in class gets one flimsy valentine from the teacher, Miss Butler, but news travels fast that Ina-Rae received three additional cards. As she examines the three very different specimens, including a lovely card seemingly from the new student, Royce McNabb, snooty Carleen Lovejoy explodes in indignant jealousy. Though the reader finds out that Mary Alice is behind both the Newsy Notes and the creation of the valentines in a plan with Ina-Rae to put Carleen in her place, we can surmise that Carleen never learns the truth behind that Valentine's Day.**

5. Throughout the novel Grandma and Mary Alice never state that they love each other. Cite examples from the book that show their feelings.

Grandma always comes through for Mary Alice when she needs her, but usually not in a way Mary Alice might expect. When Mildred Burdick demands a dollar from Mary Alice – a week's wages, Grandma says – Grandma tricks Mildred into leaving her alone by freeing Mildred's horse with Mildred's boots tied around the horse's neck. (pp. 14-20) She comes to Mary Alice's school Halloween party and her Christmas pageant, even though Mary Alice doesn't expect her at either. (pp. 35 & 71) She even surprises Mary Alice by letting her pick out a pair of shoes for Christmas. (p. 66) She shows Mary Alice she's thinking about her with kind gestures such as making a homemade halo for her. (p. 68)

For Mary Alice's part, she shows her Grandma love by helping her. She accompanies her fox hunting even though it's a cold winter's night. (pp. 59-64) She questions her Grandma's methods, but never betrays her. Of the fox hunting she says, “I began to

want to be there with her, to make sure she'd come home safely." (p. 64) When it comes time for Mary Alice to move back to Chicago, she says, "I'd fuss about her if I wasn't here to see how she was."

(p. 127)

6. If Grandma came to your town today, what is one thing she might do to start trouble? What might she want to fix?

Grandma has her own sense of justice that she displays when she frees the horse Mildred Burdick's father stole. (pp. 14-20) She also sets up a situation whereby snooty Mrs. Weidenbach learns that she is the long lost sister of Effie Wilcox. (pp. 83-92) When Grandma sees a situation that doesn't seem right to her, she steps in whether it is helpful to other people or not.

7. Mary Alice feels like an outsider in Grandma's town. She says, "I was still spending my school days on the sidelines." Describe a situation in which you have felt like an outsider. Then compare your experience to Mary Alice's.

Mary Alice finds it hard to break into the clique at school. She says, "Carleen Lovejoy was still looking straight through me, and she set the tone for the rest of the girls." (p. 56) However, she does make friends with Ina-Rae and, eventually, with Royce McNabb, whom she later marries. (pp. 129-130)

8. Toward the end of the novel the narrator writes, "Sometimes I thought I was turning into [Grandma]. I had to watch out not to talk like her. And I was to cook like her for all the years to come." Compare and contrast Grandma and Mary Alice. In what ways are they similar, and how do they differ?

Grandma is more outspoken than Mary Alice. When she sees something she doesn't like, she takes action. Mary Alice follows in her footsteps when she conspires to make Carleen think Ina-Rae received three special valentines. (p. 79) But Mary Alice is not as combative as Grandma. When Grandma and Mary Alice rescue Old Man Nyquist after the tornado, Mary Alice is startled by the argumentative nature of their communication. (pp. 119-120)

9. The shadow of war pervades the story. Mary Alice's father participated in the Great War. Her brother Joey flies a B-17 in World War II. Given the author's description of Armistice Day and Mrs. Abernathy's son, what do you think his attitude is toward war?

Grandma's town celebrates Armistice Day with a turkey shoot and a dish called burgoo. The turkey shoot actually consists of firing at paper cutouts. Burgoo is "a stew with whatever you had on hand. White meat and red meat and maybe squirrel" that "was served at every outdoor event, from an auction to a hanging." (p. 44) Though the event is lively, when the moment of silence is called to commemorate the end of World War I, everyone observes it with reverence. Later, Mary meets Mrs. Abernathy's son who was "gassed in the trenches." (p. 53) He is wheelchair-bound, blind, and very weak. It is likely that he would have a more realistic and less glamorized view of war than someone who had not experienced it.

10. Imagine that you are Grandma. Create mottoes or bumper stickers that reflect your

philosophy of life.

Grandma is not one to sit meekly on the sidelines. Whether she is hustling up more change for the burgoo in order to help the Abernathy family (pp. 43-52) or tricking the boys who have come to play a Halloween prank on her (pp. 24-27), Grandma acts definitively, but always in accordance with her view of right and wrong.

11. Grandma is a fur trapper, and you are an animal rights activist. Compose a list of reasons you will use to convince Grandma to stop trapping foxes.

Grandma sets traps for foxes and then sells the fur to a fur broker. It's one way she is able to keep a little money in the house. When a fox has been trapped, but has not yet died, Grandma shoots it. The first time Mary Alice hears a trapped fox she describes a scream that sounds human. While Grandma has few sources of income, an argument can still be made for humane treatment of the foxes. (pp. 59-64)

12. The Christmas story "Away in a Manger" is in the middle of the book. In what way is this story the heart of the book?

Before and during the school Christmas pageant, Mary Alice is met with surprises. First, she is touched by her Grandma's gift of a halo made of bailing wire. Next, she is surprised to see Grandma enter the auditorium, since she hadn't thought she was coming. But most surprising of all is when what was supposed to be a doll standing in for baby Jesus turns out to be a real, live, crying infant. No one knows what to do, but, as usual, Grandma is able to take control of the situation. Despite how individuals may view Grandma's rough ways, she is a strong force in the community as this event shows. The final surprise of the evening is that Grandma has arranged for Mary Alice's brother, Joey, to come visit for Christmas, which proves how much Grandma loves her granddaughter and wants her to be happy. (pp. 68-74)

13. As Grandma shakes the pecans from Old Man Nyquist's tree and plucks the Pensingers' pumpkins for the Halloween pies, Mary Alice asks, "Grandma, that wasn't stealing, was it?" Evaluate Grandma's actions. Do you think she was stealing? Why or why not?

An argument can be made that Grandma was stealing. While Old Man Nyquist said she could take as many pecans as were on the ground, he certainly did not say she could ram his tractor into the tree to make sure more fell. Additionally, Grandma has no such permission to take pumpkins from the Pensingers. However, the issue is complicated because the pies Grandma makes feed the whole community at the Halloween party and she probably could not have afforded to buy the ingredients. The good that Grandma produces with the pecans and pumpkins may outweigh the questionable nature of helping herself to those items.

14. At the DAR "cherry tart" gathering for George Washington's birthday, Mrs. Weidenbach discovers (thanks to Grandma) that she is a Burdick, and Effie Wilcox's sister. In your opinion is Grandma seeking vengeance or justice here? Are her actions justifiable? Why or why not?

One function Grandma serves in her community is to help right the balance of power. Mrs. Weidenbach sets herself above others because she is president of local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). By inviting Effie Wilcox and Aunt Mae Griswold to the tea, Grandma is able to reveal Mrs. Weidenbach's past (she is Effie

Wilcox's long lost sister and a member of the Burdick clan). While she doesn't reveal Mrs. Weidenbach's secrets directly, she shows her that no one should think of themselves as better than others.

15. Assess what you would do if you were Mary Alice. Would you go back to Chicago? Provide reasons to support your decision.

Mary Alice announces to her Grandmother that she wants to continue living with her and not go back to Chicago where her father has found a job and her parents have moved into an apartment. But her Grandmother urges her to go. Mary Alice has come to love her Grandmother and will worry about her from far away, and she has found a life and friends in her Grandma's town. We learn from the final chapter that Mary Alice doesn't lose her connections to her Grandma's town. She is married to Royce McNabb in the front room of her Grandma's house.

Activities

1. Pretend that you are Mary Alice and write a diary entry that tells how you would have reacted to the news that you, "a city girl," had to attend a "hick-town" school and live below a spooky attic in a house that had no phone, a privy, and a Grandma even your mother fears. **At the beginning of the book, Mary Alice explains she has spent time at her Grandma's house, but only for a week over the summer with her brother there, too. It's a very different proposition to live there, attend school, and really be a part of the community. The moment Mary Alice steps off the train, her Grandma enrolls her in school. Her Grandma continues to surprise her, but perhaps the biggest surprise is how Mary Alice begins to fall into life with her Grandma and enjoy her time "down yonder."**

2. With a partner, dramatize one of the scenes in the story or write and perform an advertisement for one of Grandma's products, such as Dowdel's Super Glue. **In the book, there are many scenes that lend themselves to dramatic interpretation, including the Halloween scene and when Augie accidentally shoots out the Legionnaire's car tire during the turkey shoot on Armistice Day.**

Additionally, there are several opportunities for original advertisements; including Grandma's pies (Old Man Nyquist's Pecan and Pensingers' Pumpkin) and tarts (cherry for Presidents' Day, of course). As well as the burgoo that Grandma squeezes every penny out of. (pp. 44-48)

3. In *A Year Down Yonder*, the author creates larger-than-life characters. Look for their descriptions in the novel. Then choose one of the characters and draw a caricature of him or her based on the description in the book. Beneath your caricature, write the name of the character and the quotation from the novel that inspired the drawing.

Some examples of larger-than-life characters are Grandma when "Moonlight struck her snow-white hair and she looked eight feet tall" during the Halloween incident. (p. 26) Ina-Rae is described as "a starved-looking girl with big eyes." (p. 12) Grandma points out Mildred Burdock as "that big girl with the dirty hair." (p. 10)

Other Books by This Author

Strays Like Us

A Long Way from Chicago

Fair Weather

Ghosts I Have Been

Something for Joey