

Classroom Guide

Classroom Guide to *Lunch-Box Dream* By Tony Abbott

Introduction

Set in 1959, *Lunch-Box Dream* is a story of a family's road trip from Cleveland to Florida in Grandma's Chrysler automobile. For readers, it is a journey to explore history – two periods of United States history, in fact. For, as Bobby and his family travel South, we also learn what American life is like in the middle of the twentieth century, but with stops along the way at Civil War battlefields, we learn much about *that* defining era, one hundred years earlier. In that same summer, we meet an African American family – the Thomas's – living in Atlanta and Dalton, Georgia. As the novel progresses, the two stories come together. And both families are changed. Your students will be, too.

In his remarks at the dedication of the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial in Washington, D.C., in October, 2011, President Barack Obama noted that during MLK's era – the Civil Rights era – laws changed, and so did hearts and minds. Learning history from books of historical fiction offers your students a close up on a time and its events, making history more immediate and personal. *Lunch-Box Dream* will touch their hearts and minds –and help them understand a part of American History and its continuing importance and relevance in their lives.

This guide offers you ways to enrich the experience of reading *Lunch-Box Dream* and to connect the novel to a range of curriculum areas: Language Arts, Writing, Oral Communication, Literature, Social Studies, History, and

Geography.

Discussions and Activities

Literature/Oral Performance

Tony Abbott begins *Lunch-Box Dream* with a poem by Langston Hughes. Talk about the ideas introduced in the four lines:

- Jim Crow
- Travelling on trains
- Dreams of a better life
- Disappointments

All of these are part of the novel. Ask the children to keep a list of the events in the novel that explore these ideas.

This is also a great opportunity to introduce the class to the work of Langston Hughes, simple and often profound poems that will help them understand the perspectives of the African American characters in the novel. Hughes explored the idea of holding on to hope for a better life in many poems. Share this poem with the class:

A Dream Deferred
by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

Have the children find other poems by Langston Hughes, and ask each child to select a favorite to recite to the class. Along with the poem, each reader should tell what the poem means to him or her and why he or she chose it.

Social Studies/History/Research/Oral History/Speech And Communication

- *Lunch-Box Dream* offers glimpses into some of the small, every-day aspects of life in America in 1959.

[Page 80]

At a restaurant at one of their stops, Bobby *wasn't at all hungry, but his mother told him to eat, so he ordered the Sputnik Special...*

[Page 123]

Cora has to call her family in Atlanta, and goes to the store to use the phone. *I held the telephone to my ear while he looked at the numbers on the paper and pushed his finger around the dial...*

Sputnik? What's that? A telephone with a dial? Has any of your students ever seen one?

As they read *Lunch-Box Dreams*, ask your students to find other examples of cultural or technological realities in 1959 that are now, if not totally forgotten, thought of as old-timey antiques.

- Dig further into life in 1959: Divide your class into four groups to

research aspects of life in the United States in 1959.

One group should get a sense of 1959 fashion and style. What did cars look like that year? What did people wear (from hair-dos to shoes)?

A second group should look at current events and government leaders in 1959. What were the major news-making stories of that year? Who was president?

The third team should examine movies and television. What were the most popular TV series? Which movies scored highest at the box office? Who were the major celebrities?

The fourth group should examine 1959's books and music.

The following websites will be useful starting places:

<http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/1959.html>

<http://www.imdb.com/year/1959/>

<http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade50.html>

<http://www.348-409.com/1959flash.html>

- Take the research a step further. People who were about your students' age in 1959 are in their sixties now. Your teams should interview neighbors, family, community leaders who recall that year and can provide primary source information to them. Many will have photographs and other souvenirs of that time.

Give each team time to put a presentation together, and then hold a THIS IS 1959 day in your classroom. Each presentation should include

visuals – posters, charts, videos, slide-shows. Kids should really get into the spirit and dress in clothes from that time. You might serve a few foods/snacks that were popular then.

- The whole class should research the cost of living in 1959. What was the average price of every day Items? Things to include should be: gasoline, candy bar, loaf of bread, ice cream cone, milk, first-class postage stamp. They should research at least twenty items. Results can be entered in the chart below.

The websites above will be helpful.

Comparing the Cost of Living in 1959 with Today (in dollars)

Consumer Item	1959	Today
Gallon of gasoline		
Candy bar		
Loaf of bread		
Ice cream cone		
Gallon of milk		
Postage stamp		

SOCIAL STUDIES

In many ways, *Lunch-Box Dream* is all about Jim Crow life in the United States. Tony Abbott offers a good explanation of just what this means in his author's note (pages 175-177). Have your students read this carefully, and open a discussion of the Jim Crow practices they saw in the novel.

Ask the class to talk about “the rules,” and how they made people behave.

Jim Crow is a phrase associated with the South, but at the same time many Northern states kept the races separate in more subtle ways.

The following questions will help you focus this discussion.

[Page 9]

They called them chocolate men...

- The neighborhood in Cleveland where Bobby and Ricky live is not integrated. The boys didn't even see Black people *except once or twice a week*, when the sanitation men came to pick up the garbage. It is out of living in separate – segregated – communities that their ignorance grew. Have a discussion with your class about how prejudice follows. If Bobby had known any African Americans, do they think he would call them “chocolate men?” What other attitudes, perceptions, and fears do your students see in not only Bobby's behavior, but also in that of his brother, mother, and grandmother? Have the class identify specific events in the novel that show these feelings and viewpoints. How do they think living in an integrated community might change this?

[Page 38]

Cora Baker says: *Don't look at a white person the wrong way or any way.*

- Cora is fifteen and has grown up in Georgia where segregation was the law in 1959. Black Americans went to separate schools; had to sit in the back of public buses, or wait at the bus stop for an all-Black bus to come by; had separate drinking fountains and bathrooms. Their separation from Whites led to attitudes, perceptions and fears as well. Ask your class to talk about events in the novel that show these feelings and viewpoints in members of the Thomas family, including the Bakers and the Vanns.

[Page 53]

Another time a man stole my jacket in the train station. ... I saw [the] man swipe it off the seat and run off outside. He was a white man ... When I got home ... Weeza took my hands into her lap and pulled my head down on her breast and held it there while I cried.

- Hershel is powerless to get his jacket back. If he runs after the thief, he'll miss the train, and *Negroes didn't want to be in that town at nighttime*. This is one touching and very personal reality of Jim Crow life. What other stories can your students find in *Lunch-Box Dream* that show not only what discrimination is, but how it feels?

Geography

[Page 11 and Page 13]

Bobby and Ricky's mother tells them: *"We're going to drive Grandma home to Florida." "And on the way, we're going to stop at battlefields. The Civil War battlefields in Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia."*

Marion prepared for the drive with a "TripTik®" from the AAA – Automobile Association of America. Now, most families would rely on GPS to create their route. Provide each student with a map of the United States and ask them to plot out the trip so the family could visit Civil War landmarks and other interesting historical sites along the way. Then ask them to create a route for a trip they'd like their own family to make – a trip that begins in your hometown and takes them to a destination of their choosing, with stops at National Parks, Historic Monuments, and Cultural Centers.

You can print out a map of the U.S. with Interstate Highways included from:

www.onlineatlas.us/interstate-highways.htm

History

[Page 41]

The road sign said “Mount Gilead.”

“So?” said Bobby.

“... Mount Gilead. And Cardington and Ashley. We’re passing through them all.... The Lincoln train passed through every one of these towns.”

... Bobby had heard of the Lincoln train.

- Like Bobby, many of your students have heard of the Lincoln funeral train, but here’s your opportunity for a full-class focus study on this event and its impact on our nation.

Websites offer photographs, maps, schedules, and even day-by-day accounts of the journey Lincoln’s funeral train took from Washington to Illinois. Begin with the websites noted here, check for others, and look at some of the books available for children on the subject.

<http://rogerjnorton.com/Lincoln51.html>

http://www.palincoln.org/lincoln_in_pa/lincolns_funeral_train.dot

After the class has studied the journey, have each student pick a stop on the route or a town the train passed. Each student should write an article for that town’s newspaper about the event. Encourage creativity: your students should name their newspaper and create its identifying masthead. Some might write editorials; others can create political cartoons; some can write news reports and some can interview people who watched the train.

[Page 59]

*Perryville (KY) was twenty-five miles off the TripTik® route ...
Ricky ... perched forward in his seat, casting looks out every window until
he spied the sign –
PERRYVILLE BATTLEFIELD...*

- Your students can make virtual visits to many Civil War battlefields on the Internet. A great site that offers photographs, information, and maps and makes the various sites accessible by name, by year, and by state is: <http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/>

Send your students arm-chair travelling, and ask them to imagine themselves soldiers, as Bobby does (page 96) when the family visits Lookout Mountain. Each student can pick a battlefield mentioned in the book or others listed on the site. Have them make a diary entry that tells where they are; when they are there; what the landscape is like. They should also note how they imagine the soldier feels. Students can create backstories for their soldiers: Where did he come from? Why did he enlist? How old is he? You might mention to the girls that there were a few women who dressed as men in order to join the army.

Literature: Theme

Tony Abbott explores several universal themes in *Lunch-Box Dream* – ideas that go beyond time, situation and place to the human condition.

Family

- The cast of characters listed at the start of the novel is broken into three locations, but lists two family groups. Bobby and Ricky's father is not included. Neither is Jacob's birth father, but his brother-in-law Hershel, whom he calls Poppa, is. Have the class talk about family relationships in the two family groups. How are they the same and how are they different? Both families are facing very difficult moments: the marital problems between Marion and her husband and the crisis when Jacob is missing. How do the two families cope with these issues?
- Bobby and Ricky behave the way most brothers do. They get along generally, and they care about each other. Ask the class to list instances when the brothers work together and show kindness to each other. Still,

being the younger sibling, Bobby is jealous of Ricky. When Bobby makes a fuss to prove that Ricky's battlefield treasure is not authentic, who is the one who is more hurt and embarrassed? How are these siblings like your students' brothers and sisters?

Death and Loss

[Page 14]

Bobby's grandfather died four months before *Lunch-Box Dream* begins. *It was Bobby's first death. That was something.*

- Bobby thinks about the death of his grandfather, President Lincoln, and the soldiers who fell on the Civil War battlefields he visits. Why has he become obsessed with this?

He also thinks about the Black family on the bus who may have lost a child. What has he learned about loss that helps him understand how they are feeling?

Coming of Age

- Making decisions, choosing between right and wrong, being responsible, and looking after others when they need your help are all parts of becoming an adult. Children and teens reach these stages in small steps. Ask each student to pick one of the young people in *Lunch-Box Dream* -- Bobby, Ricky, Cora, or Jacob -- and describe the small (and large) steps they take toward maturity in the course of the novel.

This guide was create by Clifford Wohl, Educational Consultant