



RACHEL
A MIGHTY BIG
IMAGINING
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TEACHER'S
GUIDE

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PENGUIN
CANADA



HISTORICAL FICTION IN THE CLASSROOM

Through the power of narrative, historical fiction brings history alive, making it a valuable tool for reinforcing student learning in social studies and history.

To prepare students for Our Canadian Girl books, teachers might first discuss the historical fiction genre in general by comparing examples of historical writing and fiction. A discussion of how authors use fictional characters to give life to real events will also be useful in helping students understand why sometimes troubling events occur within the stories. If students have a good conceptual grasp of the relationship between the history and the fiction, the Our Canadian Girl books will provide a much more meaningful learning experience.

CURRICULUM CONNECTION

A Mighty Big Imagining brings to life the little-known history of early black immigrants to Canada and provides a unique opportunity for cross-cultural work in social studies, history, and language. It touches upon these social studies expectations:

- pioneer settlement and early communities in Canada
- the history of human rights and slavery
- the story of the Loyalists' settlement after the Revolutionary war
- interaction between early settlers and Native Canadians
- the history of cultural diversity in Canada

PLANNING STRATEGIES

A Mighty Big Imagining is the first of four Rachel books in the Our Canadian Girl series. The others are *The Maybe House*, *Certificate of Freedom*, and a fourth as yet untitled book.

The books are ideal for reading aloud, especially with grades three and four, because they are short in length yet they contain complex themes. Twenty minutes a day for a week and a half would be ample time to read and discuss a book. Daily response journal entries can be used to check for listening comprehension and to help students relate the novel to their own lives and understanding of black history.

For more advanced readers, independent study or literature circles would be valuable in conjunction with full-class social studies work on black history or early settlement in Canada. One strategy might be to use the first book as a whole-class study and then make the other books available for independent, follow-up reading.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: BLACK LOYALISTS, SLAVERY IN CANADA, AND THE MICMAC PEOPLE

One of the consequences of the American Revolution was the influx into Canada of thousands of British Loyalists. Many of these Loyalists settled in what are now the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. Included among them were hundreds of Africans who, in exchange for their freedom from slavery, supported the British in their war effort against the rebels.

At the end of the war, in addition to passage to Canada, the British promised many of these freed slaves farmland and citizenship. But land and work were slow to materialize in Canada. Many black Loyalists suffered from discrimination and all too many were forced to live in pit-cabins, essentially holes in the ground, before they could afford proper shelter.

Recently, the original pit-cabins inhabited by black Loyalists were uncovered during archaeological digs in Birchtown—a community just outside the fishing village of Shelburne that was briefly, in 1784, the largest free black settlement in North America. It is here that Rachel and her mother live when they arrive in Nova Scotia.

At the time in which *A Mighty Big Imagining* is set, slavery was legal in Canada, though not nearly as widespread as it was in the southern U.S. In 1784, a year after Rachel and her mother arrive in Nova Scotia, an act was passed in Upper Canada making it illegal to import people into the country for the purpose of slavery, but it wasn't until 1834 that the British parliament formally abolished slavery in Canada and the British Empire.

A Mighty Big Imagining also introduces the Micmac people who were native to Nova Scotia and the northeast coast of North America. They were among the first of the American native groups to come into contact with European settlers. Relationships between the settlers and the Micmac at the time of the novel were fairly good as a result of a series of treaties, signed in the 17th and 18th centuries, that guaranteed the Micmac access to hunting and fishing grounds in exchange for loyalty to the British government.

PLOT SUMMARY

We first meet ten-year-old Rachel and her pregnant mother, Sukey, both former house slaves in the southern U.S., in 1783. They are in New York City, having escaped from their master's plantation, and are about to board a ship to Nova Scotia in order to join Rachel's stepfather, Titan, who is already in Canada. The British government has promised the family freedom from slavery, and possibly even ownership of land to farm, in exchange for their work during the Revolutionary War.

The voyage, though cold and unpleasant, is uneventful with the exception of one incident—their ship is momentarily followed by privateers. Both Rachel and Sukey are fearful that the privateers will bring them back to the plantation, but the British warship warns the ship off and they are delivered safely to Birchtown, Nova Scotia.

There they meet Titan, who takes them not to the proper home they're expecting, but to a pit-cabin. It is here that Rachel must live with her mother, stepfather, and baby brother, Jem, who is born near Christmas with the help of Nanna Jacklin, an older black woman from Birchtown. At this time, Rachel meets Nanna's grandson, a young boy named Corey.



To escape the stale air of the pit-cabin and her new brother's crying, Rachel frequently braves the cold to explore her surroundings. During one of her outings she meets Nathan Archelaus Crowley, a white boy from the nearby village of Shelburne. Nathan makes fun of Rachel because she can't read, but Rachel turns a difficult situation to her advantage by learning some new letters from him. Another time she meets Ann-Marie, a native Micmac girl. When Sukey and Jem fall ill, Ann-Marie's aunt, a Micmac healer, nurses them back to health. To thank them, Rachel begins to tell Ann-Marie about her life.

VOCABULARY

Being historical fiction, *A Mighty Big Imagining* needs to stay true to the language usage of the time but still balance modern sensibilities. While the word Negro is used a few times in the novel, the author-invented term Nigra is used much more often, usually in direct speech. The author's explanation for using Nigra follows:

I wanted to use the word *nigger* as it was used by the blacks themselves at that time, with no negative connotation. It was how they pronounced Negro (which is Spanish for black, I believe) as they had difficulty, when first coming from Africa, with blended consonants. But the whites picked up the term and began to use it in a pejorative way, and it's a terrible racial slur today, so I made up the term *Nigra*, which is pretty close to how the word would have been pronounced, half way between *nigger* (or *niggah*, as southern people would have said it) and Negro.

Rachel herself has some insight into the use of the term:

Rachel had long understood there were two ways of saying "Nigra." When Mamma and other Negroes said it, it was soft and open, like part of a lullaby. In some white men's mouths, though, it was harsh, painful, sounding like an insult. This boy, with his careless swagger and sharp, high voice, made it into the nastiest insult of all. He made it sound like she were an animal. (pg. 42)

There is some debate about the origin of the two words. Most scholars believe they are derived from the Spanish and Latin terms for black, but there is an argument that says they originated with the word used to describe the people living around the river Niger, and that perhaps even the Latin word has its root in Greek contact with those people. In any case, usage of the term has evolved considerably in the last century to the point where *nigger* is now often referred to as the "n-word."

Students should get a sense of how the origins, meaning, and use of the terms all affect how it is perceived in a given language context and that these perceptions can change in powerful ways over time.

Nigger never appears in the novel, though teachers should be prepared for questions involving this term as well.



COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS AND RESPONSE JOURNAL TOPICS FOR EACH CHAPTER

CHAPTER 1



Comprehension Questions

Why does Mama say, “Boats are bad”? Why do you think the author chooses to open her book with this sentence?

Why does Rachel not want “Roberts” to be her last name? Why does she choose the name “Sparrow” instead? (*This can be a critical symbolic touchstone for readers in the younger grades.) What is it about the bird she sees that Rachel identifies with herself? How does Rachel feel after the man writes down her new last name?

What is the “mighty big imagining” Rachel refers to at the end of the chapter? Why do you think the author chose this for the title of the book? What does it tell us about Rachel?

Response Journal Topic

What kind of character is Rachel? In what ways is she similar to or different from you?

CHAPTER 2



Comprehension Questions

Research the term “privateer.” Why does the man next to them say, “We are the cargo”? Why would the privateers think that the people on board could be valuable to them?

What do you think Rachel expects to find in Nova Scotia? What kind of town would she like to live in?

Response Journal Topic

Describe a time that you took a trip somewhere you had never been before. How did you get there and what did you think of the place when you arrived?

CHAPTER 3



Comprehension Questions

What does Rachel mean when she says she will have to “learn [Titan] all over again”? Have you ever been away from someone for a long time and forgotten what they are like?

What are some of the differences in weather and climate between the southern United States and Nova Scotia? How will these differences affect Rachel’s family’s life in their new home?

Response Journal Topic

Describe a time when you were very disappointed by something you were looking forward to.

CHAPTER 4



Comprehension Questions

In what way do you think Rachel's life was better as a slave than as a "free Nigra" in Nova Scotia? In what way was her life worse as a slave?

What does Rachel mean when she says she is having "disloyal thoughts"? Who is she being disloyal to?

Why is Rachel "stunned" when the Micmac girl gives her the moccasins?

Response Journal Topics

Have you ever received a gift from someone that was a total surprise? What happened and how did you feel when you got it?

What kind of relationship will Rachel have with the Micmac girl? Will the girl become an important character in the book?

CHAPTER 5

Comprehension Questions

What happened to Rachel's father?

How did Titus lose his toes?

Why does Mamma say that Indians are "not our kind"?

Why is Rachel concerned about the colour of the baby's skin and eyes?



Response Journal Topic

How does Rachel feel about having a baby brother? Do you think her feelings will change over time?

CHAPTER 6

Comprehension Questions

What words would you use to describe Nathan Archelaus Crowley?

What does Rachel mean when she says there are two ways of saying "nigra"?

Why does Rachel stand up to Nathan?

What does Rachel notice about Nathan that makes her think he is "just the same as everyone else"?

Why is it so important to Rachel that she learns to read?



Response Journal Topic

Have you ever been bullied or seen someone being bullied? What happened and how did you feel about it?

CHAPTER 7

Comprehension Questions

What reason does Rachel give for not loving Jem?

Why is Rachel ashamed of how she feels when Jem gets sick?

Do you think the Micmac girl's aunt will be able to help Rachel's mother?

Response Journal Topic

When have you ever felt mixed emotions about a brother, sister, or someone else in your family?



CHAPTER 8

Comprehension Questions

What kind of medicine do you think Ann-Marie's aunt used to make Rachel's mother better?

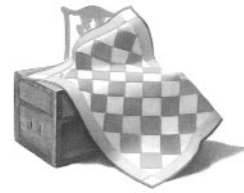
How do you think the Micmac medicine is different from medicines we use today?

How does telling the story of how her mother got her scar change Rachel's own understanding of that story? What does she realize after she has told the story to Ann-Marie?

Do you think Rachel will be able to trick Nathan Archelaus Crowley into teaching her to read?

Response Journal Topic

What do you think might happen to Rachel and her family in the next Rachel book, *The Maybe House*?



WEB RESOURCES

Supplementary information can be found online at the following websites.

For information on black Loyalists, Birchtown and the pit-cabin archaeological dig:

<http://museum.gov.ns.ca/arch/sites/btown/>

<http://museum.gov.ns.ca/arch/sites/birch/cellar.htm>

<http://www.blackloyalist.com/>

For information on the Micmac of Nova Scotia:

<http://museum.gov.ns.ca/arch/infos/Micmac1.htm>

<http://www.umaine.edu/hudsonmuseum/ve5.htm>

<http://www.nativetech.org/lacey/>

<http://www.Micmac-assoc.ca/>

<http://www.native-languages.org/mikm.htm>

For information on related topics, such as the Underground Railroad and racial terms in the classroom:

<http://www.freedomtrail.ca/>

<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/expand/act/activity.jsp?cid=421>

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ACTIVITY 2: A MIGHTY BIG IMAGINING **NAME:** _____

Like most people, the way Rachel speaks—the kinds of words she uses and how they sound—changes depending on whom she is speaking to. Read the following examples of Rachel’s speech and answer the questions.

1. With the Englishman at the dock in New York:
“If you please, suh ... We don’t want his name. He never did anything for us. He only whipped us and called us bad Nigras. We don’t want any reminders of him at all. If it please you ...” (pg. 3)

Why does Rachel repeat the word “please”?

2. To Mamma:
“Well, he looks awful. And he sounds even worse,” Rachel went on, as the baby began to squall. “Crying all the livelong day and driving me crazy ... I don’t need him. I already have a friend,” Rachel muttered rebelliously. (pg. 38)

What does this passage tell you about Rachel’s relationship with her mother?

3. To Nathan Archelaus Crowley:
“I’m not stupid and I’m not filthy,” she said in a stately voice. “I may be poor but I’m as clever and as good as you. Probably cleverer and better, in fact.” (pg. 44)

Would Rachel have talked this way to someone like Nathan if she were still living on the plantation as a slave? Why or why not?



ACTIVITY 3: A MIGHTY BIG IMAGINING **NAME:** _____

“Could it possibly be better to be a slave than a free girl? She was beginning to have worrying, disloyal thoughts.” (pg. 23)

In the novel, we get some sense of what Rachel’s life was like as a slave, but we don’t know the whole story. Using the chart below, compare Rachel’s life in the book with what you imagine her life was like as a slave.

	LIFE IN BIRCHTOWN	LIFE AS A SLAVE
Food	_____	_____
Shelter/Weather	_____	_____
Clothing	_____	_____
Work	_____	_____
Danger	_____	_____
Free Time	_____	_____
Family Life	_____	_____
Friendship	_____	_____

In what ways is Rachel’s new life better than her old? In what ways is it more difficult?

