



RACHEL  
THE MAYBE  
HOUSE  
LYNNE KOSITSKY

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

*The Maybe House* 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

*The Maybe House* is the second of a four-book Our Canadian Girl series about Rachel, a black immigrant. The others are *A Mighty Big Imagining*, *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

At the end of the American Revolution, thousands of British Loyalists—many of them black slaves who were granted freedom from slavery in exchange for their support of the British war effort—flooded into Canada and settled in what are now the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia.



Though they were promised farmland and citizenship, many black Loyalists suffered from discrimination and were forced to live in pit-cabins—holes in the ground—before they could afford proper shelter. Some of these pit-cabins were in Birchtown—a community just outside the fishing village of Shelburne that was briefly, in 1784, the largest free black settlement in North America. This is where Rachel and her family are living at the start of *The Maybe House*.

In 1784, the year in which *The Maybe House* is set, Shelburne, Nova Scotia, was the largest town in British North America and was populated mainly by American Loyalists and delisted British soldiers. Unemployment amongst white settlers was high as black residents, who were paid less than their white counterparts, were given preference for scarce jobs. White settlers were further aggrieved by David George, a black minister who had started baptizing white people in the towns.

On July 26, 1784, tensions spilled over into outright violence. White soldiers first confronted George and destroyed his house in Shelburne, then destroyed the entire black settlement in town. Black residents were driven back to Birchtown, doubling its population in a day and severely straining the community's resources. The people who had lost their homes in the riot were never compensated, and in fact, the black population was subsequently cut out of land distribution in the two towns. Many of them, discouraged by the severe discrimination, abandoned Nova Scotia for Sierra Leone in 1792.

## PLOT SUMMARY

*The Maybe House* begins in early spring. Rachel and her mother are at their wits' end having spent a long, uncomfortable winter in a pit-cabin. Despite the British government's promise of land and housing, Titan, Rachel's stepfather, has been unable to secure either for their family. Rachel wants to use her limited ability to read and write to help Titan deal with government officials, but Titan refuses her help—he has other plans.

Titan, in secret, has built a house for them in a small neighbourhood just outside Shelburne. Rachel and her mother are overjoyed when he shows them the one-room house. But just as their lives are improving, they're forced to face a new problem in the form of delisted, unemployed, white British soldiers.

One day, Rachel is confronted by two such soldiers on her way into town to spend a tuppence she received from Titan. They tell her that Titan is stealing jobs from them. Rachel is so scared by the encounter that she runs home, even though she's aching to buy something at the general store with her money. Later, Rachel convinces Ann-Marie, her Micmac friend, to go into town with her. Ann-Marie goes, but she refuses to enter the general store with Rachel. Inside the store, Rachel is shocked when the white store owner cheats her out of her money and tells her never to come back.

Another day in town, Rachel sees a black girl about her age. She learns that her name is Hannah and that she is a slave in the home of Nathan Crowley—a mean white boy who once made fun of Rachel because she couldn't read. Rachel asks Hannah to tell Nathan that she wants to meet him in the woods. Rachel waits for Nathan every day and when Nathan finally shows up, Rachel asks him to teach her to read. After mocking her, he agrees, saying that he's only doing it because it's his "Christian duty."

Soon after, Rachel is at home with her mother, brother, Corey, and his grandmother, Nanna, reading a primer that Nathan lent her when they hear a loud commotion outside. There were frequent fights between black townspeople and the white soldiers, but this is much worse.



Rioting soldiers have entered the black part of town to tear down houses and drive black residents back to Birchtown. Rachel and her family watch in horror as the soldiers destroy their house and everything in it, including the primer from Nathan.

With nowhere to live, Rachel and her family are forced to return to the awful pit-cabin, and Titan promises they will rebuild their lives. The novel ends as Rachel notices Nathan Crowley hiding in the bushes. She thinks Nathan's being there is a sign of hope that things will get better for her and her family.

## VOCABULARY

Being historical fiction, *The Maybe House* 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*.

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

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### Comprehension Questions

- How are Rachel and her mother getting along in this chapter?
- Do you think Rachel would be able to help Titan get them a house?
- Why is Mamma mad at Rachel's imagining?
- Do you think Rachel's family will get a house later in the book?

### Response Journal Topic

Getting a real house is the most important thing in the world to Rachel. Have you ever wanted or needed anything that badly? How were your feelings about that the same or different from Rachel's?



## CHAPTER 2

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### Comprehension Questions

- How has the mood of the book changed in the first pages of Chapter 2 from the first chapter?
- What does Titan mean when he says, "I got fed up waiting for our two hundred and fifty rightful acres and just went ahead"?
- How is this house different from what they were expecting when they first came to Nova Scotia?

### Response Journal Topic

Describe a time when you were very happy, as happy as Rachel was when she finally got her "Maybe House."



## CHAPTER 3

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### Comprehension Questions

- How much is a tuppence worth? What do you think Rachel could buy with it?
- Why are the soldiers angry? Why are they concerned with what Rachel's stepfather does for a living?
- Why do you think no one helps Rachel when the soldiers confront her?
- Do you think anything will happen with the soldiers later in the book?



## Response Journal Topic

What would you have done if you were one of the people watching Rachel and the soldiers from inside one of the houses?

## CHAPTER 4

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### Comprehension Questions

Why doesn't Ann-Marie want to go inside the store with Rachel? What is she afraid of?

Why does the storekeeper treat Rachel differently from Hannah?

What does the storekeeper mean when she says, "It's not that I don't like you. It's nothing personal. I just don't like your kind"? What is it about Rachel that she doesn't like?

## Response Journal Topic

Have you ever been treated unfairly by someone? Describe what happened and why you thought it was unfair.

## CHAPTER 5

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### Comprehension Questions

Why is Rachel interested in Hannah?

Why doesn't Rachel's mother want her spending time with Hannah?

Do you think Nathan will meet Rachel? What do you think will happen if he does?

How could Rachel go about getting "all that knowing out of his head"?

What does Mamma mean when she says the unemployed soldiers hanging around Shelburne are a "recipe for disaster"? What kind of disaster might happen?

## Response Journal Topic

Do you think Rachel made a wise choice by challenging Nathan to meet her? Why or why not?

## CHAPTER 6

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### Comprehension Questions

Why does Rachel want to learn how to read and write?

Do you think Nathan should help Rachel learn? Why or why not?

Why does Nathan change his mind and decide to help Rachel?



## Response Journal Topic

How will learning to read change Rachel's life?

## CHAPTER 7

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### Comprehension Questions

How does this chapter make you feel after reading it? How do you feel for Rachel?

How does the fact that this book is historical fiction help us to understand what happens to Rachel's family in this chapter?

## Response Journal Topic

Describe in your own words what happened to Rachel's family in this chapter and why you think it happened.

## CHAPTER 8

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### Comprehension Questions

Why is the fact that Rachel lost her moccasins in the riot significant? What do the moccasins symbolize for her and for the relationship among different peoples in the novel?

Why does Hannah say "sometimes fo' our kind it better to be a slave"?

Who does Rachel say the great spider represents in her story?

Why does Rachel continue telling the Buh Rabbit story to Corey after all that has happened? How does telling the story change the way she feels at the end of the horrible day?

## Response Journal Topic

How does what happened to Rachel's family in the last two chapters change the way you feel about the book?

## CHAPTER 9

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### Comprehension Questions

Why does Mamma get angry with Rachel? How is Mamma feeling?

How does Titan's reaction to what happened differ from Mamma's? In what way is Titan better able to deal with their new circumstances?

Why is the fact that Nathan Crowley appears in Birchtown so important to Rachel?

## Response Journal Topic

What do you think will happen to Rachel's family in the next book?



## WEB RESOURCES

Supplementary information on the black Loyalists, David George, and the race riots of 1784 can be found at the following websites:

<http://museum.gov.ns.ca/blackloyalists/index.htm>

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

<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/blackloyalists/>

[http://www.multiculturaltrails.ca/level\\_3/number111.html](http://www.multiculturaltrails.ca/level_3/number111.html)

Information on pit-cabins and Birchtown can be found here:

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

<http://museum.gov.ns.ca/arch/sites/birch/cellar.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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Lacey, L. *Micmac Medicines: Remedies and Recollections*. Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Ltd, 1993.

Lunn, Janet. *The Story of Canada*. Toronto: Key Porter, 1992.

Sylvester, Theodore L. *Slavery Throughout History Almanac*. Detroit: UXL, 2000.





**ACTIVITY 1: THE MAYBE HOUSE**

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

In both *A Mighty Big Imagining* and *The Maybe House*, Rachel’s mother Sukey has a habit of confusing Rachel with her strange way with words. Here are three of “Sukey’s Sayings.” Try to guess what she means and write out your “translation” for each saying, then try to come up with one of your own.

“Trip is just an arm long, you can reach clean across it.”

(*A Mighty Big Imagining*, pg. 8)

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“You can’t take no more on your heels than you can kick off with your toes.”

(*The Maybe House*, pg. 4)

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“Imaginin’ be a big conch shell on sand when tides gone out, full o’ empty sea noise.” (*The Maybe House*, pg. 11)

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Your saying:

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What it means:

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## ACTIVITY 2: THE MAYBE HOUSE

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

*The Maybe House* features four young characters, all roughly the same age, and all representing different social groups in late-eighteenth-century Nova Scotian society (free black people, enslaved black people, white settlers, and Micmac people). Yet often the beliefs and values of these characters do not represent those of their parents or the social groups they come from. For each of the four characters, answer the following questions about their views:

### CHARACTER:

**RACHEL**

**ANN-MARIE**

**NATHAN**

**HANNAH**

With whom should I socialize?

\_\_\_\_\_

Are all people equal?

\_\_\_\_\_

Do my parents believe that  
all people are equal?

\_\_\_\_\_

Are my beliefs changing over time?

\_\_\_\_\_



**ACTIVITY 3: THE MAYBE HOUSE**

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

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.

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

