



YANKEE GIRL

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TEACHERS' NOTES

SYNOPSIS

When Alice moves from Chicago to Mississippi, she assumes it will be just like every other one of her moves. With a father in the FBI, she is used to making new friends, but in Mississippi it doesn't seem that easy.

Labelled Yankee Girl by her classmates and ignored at school by her only friend, Jeb, for being a girl, she soon learns what it's like to be isolated.

When new girl Valerie starts, Alice assumes that they will become friends. After all, 'There was somebody who really needed a friend.' But Alice soon learns that being friends with a black girl in Mississippi is a sure-fire way to being ostracised, and as Valerie puts it 'Just 'cause I go to school with white kids don't mean I hafta talk to them.'

Desperate to belong, Alice sets her mind to becoming friends with the most popular girls in school – the Cheerleaders. But being friends with them comes at a cost, and to do so, means that Alice must drop all her notions of doing the 'Right Thing', and keep quiet even when she knows that what they are doing is wrong.

As the bullying and discrimination of Valerie increases, Alice justifies keeping quiet in the belief that she's powerless to change anything, and that to do so would cause her to lose her friends (even if they don't seem like friends worth keeping).

But when Valerie's father, the black rights activist, Reverend Taylor, is assassinated, everything changes for Alice. She realises that she needs to make a stand and do the 'Right Thing'. She needs to finally stand up for what she believes in.

THEMES

This is a story of growing up, and of learning to stand up for what you believe in, even if the rest of the world seems to believe in something different. It is about race and prejudice, and about the difficulty of doing the right thing. It shows us that appearances can be deceiving, and that good people can learn from their mistakes to build a better future. Finally, it teaches us about the power of belonging, and the need to be inclusive of other, regardless of their background.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS ACTIVITIES

SYMBOLS

- There are several recurring symbols that across the novel. What do you think each of these suggest? Are there any others that you think are important?
 - Blue Rover (the bike)
 - Transistor radios
 - Alice's current events scrapbook
 - The Beatles
 - The cheerleading uniform
 - The Valentines cards
 - Boys' ID bracelets
 - Emmett Till
 - The pink Cadillac
 - 16 Magazine
 - Old Spice

FAMILY

- At the start of the novel, Alice says 'I pictured Mama yelling at the movers. I pictured how much stuff was still in the van for Mama to yell about. I kept pedalling.' p6. What are your first impressions of their relationship? Does this impression change as the novel continues? Why? Why not?
- How has Alice's relationship with her father changed since they moved to Mississippi? How does he try to protect her from the world they now live in? Find quotations to support your points.
- What are the similarities between Alice's father and Valerie's? How do both impact their daughters' lives?
- Why is there tension between Alice's parents as the novel continues? Are her mother's views justified?
- Chapter 15 ends with Alice saying:
'I realize now we have something else in common, Valerie. We're scared for our daddies. Because eleven-year-old girls have no say in what happens to their daddies. No matter what kind of promises those daddies make.'p186
What does Alice mean by this? How are her and Valerie similar? How are their childhoods impacted by the work of their fathers?

- After the funeral, Alice's mother is horrified that Alice went and put herself through the redneck trauma. Alice says 'I looked at Mama, and I didn't see just her. I saw a grownup who didn't know the answer and didn't know the question. Because she didn't want to. Because it was unpleasant. Mama never wanted to see anything unpleasant.' p228. What has Alice realised about her mother? How is this different to how she saw her at the start of the novel?

FRIENDSHIP

- At the start of the novel Alice comes across the Cheerleaders and says 'this was my chance to make some friends. We moved a lot because of Daddy's job, so I was used to making new friends every couple of years. I never missed my old friends, because I figured I'd never see them again. They'd forget about me and I'd forget about them.' p6. What does this suggest about Alice's views on the importance of friendship? How is Mississippi different? Why does Alice struggle to make friends there?
- Is Alice's friendship with Jeb real? Find examples that agree and disagree with this.
- Alice struggles to find friends at school and describes herself as 'invisible'. Why do you think the other children isolate her? What could this reflect about the wider Mississippi society?
- Why does Alice want to make friends with Valerie? Why does she say that 'making friends with Valerie Taylor would take some doing.' p69
- In chapter 5, Valerie and Alice have their first proper conversation. Why does Valerie think that she can't be friends with Alice? Do you think she wants to be?
- Alice says 'I thought about Valerie the rest of the afternoon. I never thought somebody wouldn't be my friend because I was white.' p84. What does this tell us about Alice's views? How does it reflect Valerie's situation?
- At the end of chapter 5, Alice says 'There was no way for a Negro girl and a white girl in Mississippi to be friends. No way.' p87 Why has she come to this conclusion?
- Is Mary Martha a friend to Alice? Why doesn't she get involved in tricking her with the football game? Is Mary Martha a friend to Valerie?
- Valerie says to Alice 'I told you I don't need white friends.' p121. Why is she so adamant not to be friends with Alice?
- Who do you think Alice's true friends are in the novel? Why do you think this?

RACE

- How do you think Alice's father being an FBI agent involved in defending black rights influences and shapes her opinions?

- In the first chapter Alice says:

'What a dumb idea, white people thinking they were better than black people. But that was all Down South, far away from me. It wasn't my problem.

Then we moved to Mississippi. Suddenly it was my problem. And I was scared.' p8

What does this early quotation show you about Mississippi? How does fear shape Alice's actions throughout the rest of the novel?

- 'WELCOME TO MISSISSIPPI – THE HOSPITALITY STATE' p9. Why does this state sign seem ironic? Find 5 examples throughout the novel that shows that this statement isn't true.
- Jeb shows Alice an ingrained sense of racism throughout the novel 'Mama says as long as nigras work for nothing, she ain't about to scrub her own floors.' p21 Find 5 other examples of this in the novel. Does he mean to be racist? Does he change his views as the novel progresses?
- In chapter 2, Alice starts to learn more about race relations in Mississippi. What does she notice that is different? How does Jeb explain it?
- Mrs Mateer says that 'Nigras have no more notion who to vote for than Jeb' p34. Why does she believe this? Why does Alice's mama have to change the subject when she says this?
- 'If you want to get along around here, don't ever stand up for Martin Luther King or anybody coloured' p50. Why does Jeb say this to Alice? Why does she listen to him?
- How does The Nativity Play in chapter 9 start to change the characters' opinions on race and equality? Who sees it as unfair? Who feels that Debbie is the bigger victim?
- 'I felt very, very white, just like that day at the football game. Unlike that day, though, everyone was too sad to notice a white girl in school clothes carrying carnations.' p221 When does Alice become aware of her own ethnicity? How is it different to Valerie's awareness of hers?

MUSIC

- What is the significance of music in the novel?
- What do the different bands mentioned show about the characters?
- Why does Alice not listen to the same music as Valerie? Why has she never heard of some of it?
- Valerie's singing voice is beautiful and gets her the role of the angel in the Nativity Play, in spite of the protestations of the other students. How is music shown to have power in the novel? Where is it shown to have limitations?
- What is the significance of the 'King Cotton March'? Why do you think it's played at the

start of the school day?

- 'We listened, smiling. If Rebel Radio could play the Supremes, maybe things could change. Just maybe.'p242 How has the music that the characters listen to changed since the start of the novel? How does this reflect the society they are living in?

PREJUDICE

- There are multiple examples across the novel, where Alice and her family are prejudiced against because they are 'Yankees'. Find 5 examples of this, and explain why you think the locals of Mississippi felt this way about them.
- Why can't Jeb be friends with Alice at school? How is this an example of prejudice? Why does Alice say 'It was stupid, but I got it'p32? Why does she get it?
- On her first day at her new school, Jeb tells Alice not to talk to him unless he talks to her first. She replies with okay, then says 'It wasn't but I couldn't do anything about it.'p46 How does this reflect other things that happen in the novel? Was Alice really powerless to do anything about it?
- Alice says about Valerie Taylor that 'If I talk to her, then nobody will talk to me.'p73 Is Alice being prejudiced? Does she have a choice?
- After the trick that the cheerleaders played on her, Alice's mother asks her why her new friends would be so unkind, Alice replies 'Because I'm a Yankee.' Rather than giving her sympathy, he mother replies 'Then just think how much worse the Negroes have it. Stop feeling sorry for yourself.'p107 Do you think her mother should have been more sympathetic? Does Alice have a right to complain about the way she is being treated when Valerie has it so much worse?
- When Debbie's mother complains about her not being the angel, the teachers decide to have two students playing the angel – Debbie to mouth the words onstage, and Valerie to sing from backstage. Miss LeFleur says 'We think this will satisfy everyone.'p130 Will it? Who will miss out as a result of this decision? Who are they trying to please?
- What is interesting about Jeb's concerns about the Secret Gift Buddy on page 133?
- Which sixth grade teacher is more prejudiced? Why is this surprising for Valerie?

BELONGING

- There are lots of times in the novel where Alice feels like she doesn't belong in Mississippi. Find 5 examples of these.
- On her first day of school, Alice says 'I felt like a freak, A sweaty, frizzy-haired freak.'p56. Why does she feel like this?
- Alice constantly seems to be wearing the wrong thing. How does this affect her sense of belonging? Why does what she wears matter? How do appearances impact on belonging

throughout the novel?

- 'Living in Mississippi was so confusing, it might as well have been Cuba.' p71 – What does Alice mean by this?
- Mary Martha tells Alice that 'It's YMCA cheerleaders and anyone who wants to can be one.' p90 Do you think this is true? Could anyone be a cheerleader?
- When Saranne tricks Alice to stop her going to the football game, Alice says 'The Y said they had to let me be a cheerleader...but the Cheerleaders didn't have to let me cheer.' p105. Why won't they accept Alice? Where does Alice belong?
- After the trick, Alice ends up hanging out with the cheerleaders, but 'Nobody but Mary Martha ever talked to me. She wasn't exactly friendly. More like polite. After being invisible, polite felt like friendly. I didn't care. I belonged. Sort of.' p109 Does Alice belong? Why does she accept this low level of friendship?
- In chapter 8, Alice debates going home and never talking to the cheerleaders again but then she says 'I thought about how good it felt to belong.' p113. Can you blame her for her decisions? Would you have acted differently?
- 'I was all mixed up about Valerie. I felt crummy about how the Cheerleaders treated her. But hanging out with the Cheerleaders felt good. Sort of. They still weren't all that friendly to me. I wanted friendly.' p120 How does the need to belong change Alice? How does it shape her actions across the novel?
- 'One of them? That's what she said. One of them. I'll do anything not to be Yankee Girl again.' p148 Does this feeling justify Alice's later behaviour? How has she changed since the start of the novel? Or has her priority always been to be a cheerleader whatever the cost?
- 'I wasn't sure I even wanted a boyfriend, but if all the Cheerleaders had boyfriends, then I needed one, too. Jeb would do.' p156 Alice's decisions for the majority of the novel seem to be based on what everyone else is doing. How does this change at the end?

INFLUENCE

- Why are the cheerleaders so influential? Find 3 examples of where others change their opinions because of them.
- Why does Alice want to be friends with the cheerleaders even though they are unkind to her?
- When Jeb tells Alice not to drink the water after Valerie has, she listens to him because 'Jeb was my friend after all. He talked to me in front of his friends! He was right. I could wait half an hour for lunch.' p65. How does Jeb influence Alice to change her actions across the novel? Why do you think he's able to do this? Does Alice influence him to change any of his actions?
- Throughout the novel, Alice suggests that she is powerless to do anything to change her situation. Why does she think she lacks any influence over anything? Do you think she's



right? Why do you think we see more of her thoughts (in the italics) as the novel progresses?

- Do you think Mary Martha knows that bringing Valerie to the front for her bow after The Nativity Story will bring about her isolation? Why does Alice say 'The Cheerleaders could even make Mary Martha Goode invisible.' p143. Why is Mary Martha unable to positively influence the opinions of others?
- In chapter 11, Alice says 'In Chicago it was easy to say that Southerners were stupid and wrong. Easy to think that you would do things differently. Not so easy in the Russells' living room. Thinking about what other people should do was one thing. Doing it yourself was another.' p150. What has Alice realised about living in the South? How has she been influenced to act and think differently? Can we blame her for this change in her behaviour?
- Why is Saranne so influential over Alice? Does Alice even like her? Agree with her?
- In the last chapter, Saranne is left sitting at the back of the bus with just Cheryl for company. Carrie says 'I'm sick to death of ol' Saranne telling me what to do. Saying I was weird for liking Ringo. Who made her boss? She isn't even a cheerleader any more. At Belson, kids vote on cheerleaders.' p242 How has Saranne's level of influence changed since the start of the novel? Why is she now less influential?

DOING THE 'RIGHT THING'

- In chapter 5 Alice says 'There were things that parents just didn't get. Daddy would say that making friends with Valerie was the Right Thing to Do. There was the Right Thing and the Wrong Thing. No in-betweens.' p74 Do you think Alice's parents are too strict? Is there ever an action in-between? Should Alice be allowed to decide for herself what the 'Right Thing to Do' is?
- Why does Alice go to Saranne's house in chapter 8 even though she knows what they're planning to do to Valerie? She says 'I thought about what I was being invited over for. I decided to go anyway. After all, I didn't have to do anything. Just be there.' p112. Is there anything wrong with what she's saying? Is not doing anything, when she knows what they're doing, wrong? Is she as guilty as they are?
- After the Valentine's incident, Alice says 'And I knew. Knew it hadn't been enough to not follow the crowd. I should've done the Right Thing. I should've sent her that card.' p165. Can Alice be blamed for her behaviour? What would you have done in that situation? Is doing nothing when you know something bad will happen as bad as doing the bad thing?
- Alice is constantly asked to do the 'Right Thing' by her parents. Is this always fair? Should an 11 year old always have to do the right thing? Find 3 examples of doing the 'Right Thing' in the novel and explain whether you think these expectations of Alice were fair.
- 'Mary Martha's eyes looked sad. I knew she wanted to come with me. She knew it was the Right Thing to Do. She just couldn't.' p218. Why is Alice able to do the 'Right Thing' when Mary Martha can't?

- After the funeral, Mary Martha says 'The thing about manners is they're easy. It's easier to be nice to people than nasty. If you're nice, people think you're a good person. But sometimes manners aren't enough, I guess.' p230 Do you agree with Mary Martha? Do you think it has been easy for her being nice to Valerie? Is she underestimating herself?

GROWING UP

- When Alice first meets Pammie, she says 'Seventh grade? Seventh graders down here wore lipstick and eye goop?' p19. Why is she shocked by Pammie's behaviour? How is life in Mississippi different to Chicago?
- On her first day of sixth grade Alice feels self-conscious about wearing the wrong thing. She says 'Next to Pammie's short blue linen shift and dyed-to-match pointy-toed flats, I looked like a big, fat baby. Pammie even wore nylons!' p44. Why is Alice so focused on appearances? Is Pammie actually grown up?
- Jeb frequently suggests that certain things are for 'little kids'. Which parts of the novel suggest to you that Jeb is still a 'little kid' himself?
- Which characters seem to be the most mature in the novel? Which the most immature? Find quotations to support your opinions.
- There is lots of pressure throughout the novel for Alice to grow up too soon. Why do you think the children in Mississippi seem to be so much more grown-up than the ones in Chicago? Are their actions grown-up?
- In chapter 16 at the Class Day, Alice says about Valerie 'I didn't have to ask why she went all the way to New Orleans for a dress.' p204 How does this quotation show that Alice is growing up?
- At the end of chapter 16, when she finds out that Reverend Taylor has died, Alice says: 'I crawled under the covers, turned up my transistor, and cried. Cried for the little girl I'd never be again. Cried because Daddy couldn't make everything right.

And I cried for a girl who would never see her daddy again.' p208

What does this quotation suggest about her childhood? Why does Alice think she'll never be a little girl again after hearing this?

- After finding out about Miss LeFleur, Alice says: 'All year I had told myself that bad people were easy to spot. They were stupid like Leland, or mean like Karla. But Miss Le-Fleur was a grown woman. A teacher. Nice to everybody.

Everybody but Valerie. I remembered the Lysol in Miss LeFleur's desk. She don't mean anything by it, Jeb had said.

But she had.' p235

How has Alice's perspective on the world changed since the start of the novel? What has she realised about people and appearances?

- At the end of the novel, Alice decides that her currently scrapbook will be her last, because 'Keeping a current-events scrapbook was such a kid thing to do.' p237 Do you agree with her? What does giving up her scrapbook symbolise?
- What is significant about the end of the novel? How have Jeb, Mary Martha and Alice grown and matured across it?

CREATIVE WRITING ACTIVITIES

USING A STIMULUS

- Pick one of the newspaper headlines (from the start of each chapter) and write an article to go with the headline.
- Write the script for a TV news bulletin about the arrest of Reverend Taylor at the Alabama march.

BEYOND THE TEXT

- Create a poster that supports integration and equal rights.
- Write a speech promoting equal rights.

DIARY ENTRIES

- Write Valerie's diary entry for her first day at Parnell School.
- Write Mary Martha's diary for the evening after The Nativity Story event.

CHANGING THE PERSPECTIVE

- Re-read Chapter 5 from p78 and retell it from Valerie's perspective.
- Re-read Chapter 18 and retell it from Inez's perspective.

PROMOTING THE NOVEL

- You work in the marketing department for Usborne publishing. Plan a marketing campaign to promote Yankee Girl. Include:
 - A poster to go up in school libraries
 - A bookmark to be given to secondary school students
 - A review of the book (can be written or recorded)
 - An advert in a newspaper or magazine
 - Merchandise to be sold in bookshops
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