

*Thunder on the Sierra* by Kathy Balmes is set in Northern California in 1852. It is the time of the Gold Rush, and danger seems to lurk around every corner for the recently orphaned 14-year-old hero, Mateo. His beloved palomino, Fandango, is stolen by the notorious bandit Joaquín Murieta. Swearing to track down his horse, Mateo becomes an *arriero*, leading pack mules through gold rush camps to sell supplies to the miners. Along the way his pack is struck by lightning storms in the Sierra, and robbed by crazed miners. But on his adventure, he learns a lot about himself, rescues Fandango, and meets good friends, one a lawyer-turned-miner who Mateo saves from a death of scurvy. Later this lawyer helps Mateo save his father's old rancho from Yankee squatters and reassures him that Joaquín Murieta will never steal from him again—he tells Mateo that Murieta's head is floating in an alcohol-filled glass jar in San Francisco!

### PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Before reading *Thunder on the Sierra*, discuss with your class what they already know about the Gold Rush. After sharing responses, read the title and tell them the story takes place in 1852, four years after California became part of the United States and gold was first discovered. Some questions for discussion might be:

- If this story takes place in 1852, what else was happening in America around the same time? Where does it fit in chronologically with other events already studied? Who was president? What laws were passed around this time?
- Look at the cover illustration. What do students notice in the picture? What might “thunder on the Sierra” refer to?
- Look at the map on the inside cover of the book. Read the names of the cities and towns that will be visited in the story. Have any students been to these places? What are their impressions of these areas today?
- Before asking students to begin the book, read the introduction aloud as a group. Share comments and answer any questions students have about the history of California leading up to where the story begins.

### CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

**Literature • Social Studies • Art • Writing • Health Science**

1. After reading all or part of the book, discuss historical fiction as a type of literature, a mixture of fact and fiction. Some of the characters in the story may have actually existed and many of the events really occurred. Even those characters that are created by the author probably shared some of the experiences and feelings of real people. Discuss how the reader can distinguish between what is fact and what is fiction. Groups of students might try researching events and characters in the

story using sources such as the internet, encyclopedias, almanacs, atlases, historical documents, newspapers, etc. Have a mini-lesson about how to use these sources and a class debriefing. What names and events could they read about in other sources and which were most likely created by the author?

2. This story exposes children to what life was like for one child living during the Gold Rush, but there is so much more to learn about this interesting time in American history.

- This story takes place in 1852, towards the end of the Gold Rush. What can you learn about the preceding years including the war between Mexico and the United States, California becoming a state, and the rush of “forty-niners” to California? Consult a variety of sources, including books, encyclopedias, old newspapers, and the internet.
- Mateo was a young *vaquero* living on a *rancho* and later became an *arriero*. There are many Spanish words and phrases in this book, since many *Californios* spoke Spanish in 1852 and still do today. Keep a Spanish dictionary nearby and use this opportunity to learn *español*!
- When Mateo visits San Francisco at the end of the story, he sees no women! Where were the women and children related to the gold miners during these years?
- Choose any aspect of the Gold Rush to investigate further. Brainstorm a list of possible topics as a class.

3. Mateo's horse, Fandango, was a *palomino*. The horse Mateo's father rode was a gelding and he was roping a wild mare when he was killed. As an *arriero*, Mateo led pack mules through the camps. Some students may enjoy putting together an illustrated guide to horses and/or mules. They may wish to include pictures and definitions of the gear riders use (such as those listed on pages 4 and 10) as well.

4. Grizzly bears, mountain lions, and wolves still roamed California in the summer of 1852. Do some investigating to find out what wild animals are now extinct or on the verge of extinction in California. What made these animals die or move from their natural habitat? Encourage students to share what they learn with other classes via posters, pamphlets, speeches, bake sales, etc. If possible visit a local zoo or museum to learn more about these endangered animals and their habitats.

5. Chapter One ends with this sentence: “I had no idea things were about to get much worse.” Either as a class or individually in writing journals, ask students to stop here and predict what will happen to Mateo and Fandango. What leads students to these guesses? At the end of the chapter/book, revisit predictions and discuss if and how they differ from what actually happened in the story.

# STUDY GUIDE

## THUNDER on the Sierra

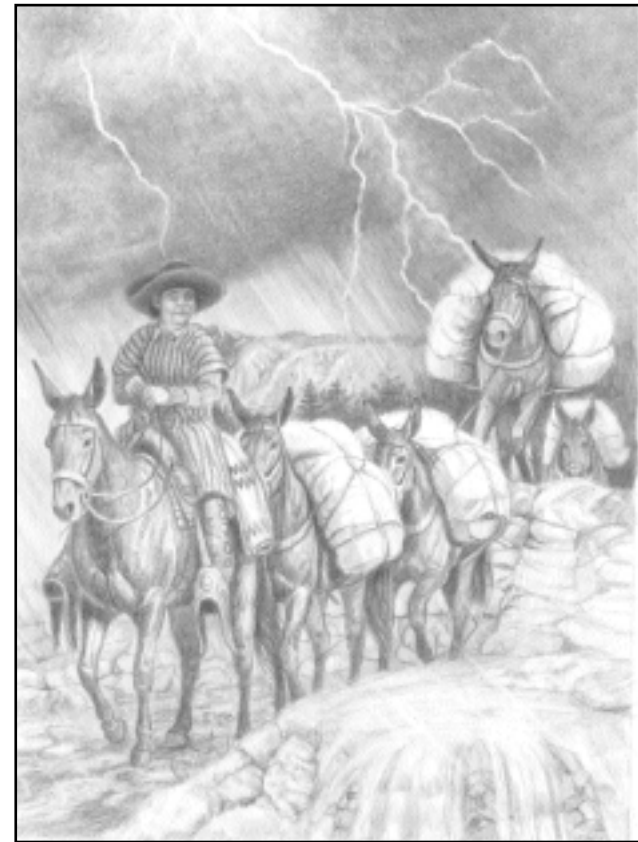
6. This book provides a great starting point for a unit on healthy foods. In the gold rush camps, fresh fruits and vegetables were hard to come by, and many of the miners got sick and died. Reread pages 47-48 which describe the disease that Señor Sosa suffered from. Look up scurvy in a medical encyclopedia and read about other diseases that are a result of bad nutrition. Encourage students to reflect on what they eat, and revisit the food pyramid to see what health experts recommend in a healthy diet.

7. No Go Pedro had mules with strange tastes. Fabio would not cooperate unless he had a wad of tobacco in his mouth! No doubt students will enjoy sharing funny habits or likes/dislikes of pets they own or know. Make a silly class book or computer slide show highlighting pet personalities.

8. Mateo knows it will take five days of hard riding to reach San Francisco from the rancho. Estimate the riding distance to other places on the map on the inside cover of the book. What factors (weather, bandits, mountains, horse vs. mule . . . ) might change the amount of time required? Take out a more detailed map of Northern California and determine the distance in miles. Approximately how many miles did Mateo travel in a day? How fast did he ride? etc.

### STORY EXTENSIONS Celebrate the Gold Rush!

While delivering supplies to miners, Mateo meets a Yankee boy who shows him how to pan for gold (page 40). Create a "gold panning" station in your classroom using big plastic tubs or a sand or water table borrowed from the kindergarten. Invite students to prepare a "stream" with rocks, sand, water, and a few small, shiny, painted "nuggets" and to bring in some pans and "rockers" to sift for gold. After trying it out, invite younger students in small groups to have a turn at panning for gold. While they're visiting, older students can teach them a little history about the Gold Rush.



by Kathy Balmes

