

Making Tracks, by Adrienne Wolfert, is the story of Harry James Harmony, a fourteen-year-old foster child who hops trains from Bridgeport, Connecticut, to Chicago, Illinois in search of his father. The year is 1934, and America is in the midst of the Depression. Harry's mother is in a sanatorium recovering from tuberculosis, and his musician father, like most men around the country, is out of work. Harry is sent to live with a caring foster family on a farm. But when his foster family takes on boarders and Harry becomes more of a house servant than a farm hand, the trouble begins. He gets into a fight with one of the young boys staying at the farm and runs away. He hops onto a train and into a whole new world, meeting many boys and men who spend their lives hiding away in train cars. He befriends a street-smart boy named Poke, who teaches him how to hide from policemen and social workers who are constantly on the lookout for runaways. Ironically, after a short stay in a small town where Harry and Poke receive room and board from Harry's musical talent on the piano and Poke's help in the kitchen, Poke is caught by a policeman, while Harry escapes on the next train out of town. In the end Harry reaches Chicago, with his dream of a reunited family turning into a reality. Along the way he learned many important lessons, including that good people can do bad things and that sometimes you can love something so much that the kindest thing is to give it away.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Before reading ***Making Tracks***, discuss with your class what they already know about the Depression. After sharing responses, read the title and tell them that the story takes place in 1934 in the midst of the Depression.

Some questions for discussion might be:

- If this story takes place in 1934, what else was happening in America around the same time? Where does it fit in chronologically with other events of American history already studied? Who was president? How did people travel around the country? What music was popular? How has day to day life changed since then?
- Look at the cover illustration. What do students notice in the picture? What might "making tracks" refer to in this story?
- Look at the map at the beginning of the book. It shows Harry's journey from Bridgeport to Chicago. Consult another map to see how many miles of track Harry covered. How long would that take on a train today?
- Have any students traveled across parts of America by train? What special memories do they have of their trips?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Literature • Social Studies • Art • Writing

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 people mentioned in the story 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 people mentioned in the story using sources such as 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? Which were most likely created by the author?

2. This story exposes children to what life was like for one foster child living during the Depression but does not tell the whole story. Encourage them to dig a little deeper into the past to discover more information:

- This story took place in 1934, right in the midst of the Depression. What else can you learn about the Depression? Consult a variety of sources, including books, old newspapers and magazines.
- What do students know about foster care? How has it changed since 1934? Invite a social worker in to speak to your students about the foster care system and its history in America.
- Many famous people from the 1930's are mentioned in this book including Charles Lindberg, Bing Crosby, Jack Benny, Mickey Rooney, and Carl Sandburg. Invite students to read more about these legends from the past.
- Choose any aspect of the Depression to investigate further. Brainstorm a list of possible topics as a class.

3. Harry's mother had tuberculosis, and the boarders on the Baron farm were there to escape the poliomyelitis that was scourging the city. Today American infants are immunized against these diseases, although world-wide there is a TB epidemic among the poor. Students may wish to read more about these and other diseases: What are the symptoms? How do they spread? How do vaccinations work? What is being done to immunize people in other countries against these diseases? Your students could share information about what they have learned with the school and host a fundraiser to help prevent the spread of TB.

4. While Harry is hopping trains to Chicago, he manages to learn a bit about how steam engines run. No doubt some of your students will be interested in learning more about different types of trains and how they operate. As a class make a timeline of when different trains were invented and used. Send groups off to learn more about a particular type of train (how it works, how fast it goes, who invented it, etc.)

Display the information in an interesting way—large posters, a class book, or clay models. If there is a steam train in operation nearby, take a ride for a fun field trip and ask the engineer to show your students how it runs.

5. Listen and learn about the music of the 1920's and 30's. Harry learned to love music from his parents and played jazz and swing tunes on the piano. Read more about the famous musicians from this era and how the music developed and changed. Host an afternoon of jazz and swing. Invite students and families to bring in their favorite albums. Dance, draw, or just sit back and listen to the music.

6. At the bottom of page 84, the author describes Chicago as “a brawling bully of a city on the outside, but a gentle singing one inside.” Refer back to this quote to teach students about personification, using human qualities to describe non-living things. Look for other examples in literature, and then ask students to think of some of their own. Encourage them to try this out in their writing and share good examples with the class when you encounter them.

STORY EXTENSIONS

Oral Histories

There are probably many people your students know who lived through the Depression. No doubt they have a wealth of memories and stories from this time. But these people are getting older. Now is a great time for students to gather oral histories of older family members or neighbors who were children during the Depression.

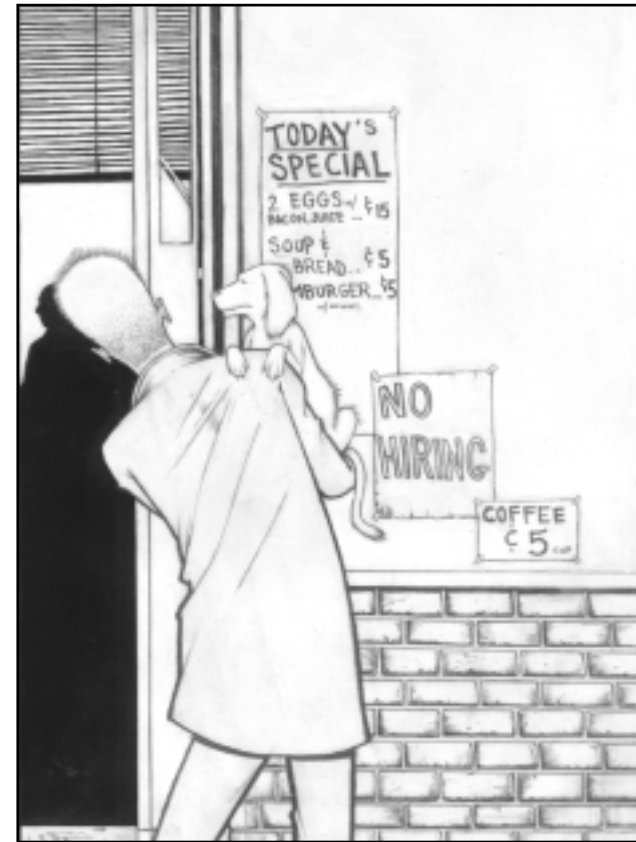
Gather as a class to talk about oral history—a way of collecting stories through the oral tradition. Students will plan and prepare interview questions for a person who lived during the Depression. Brainstorm a list of questions such as:

- What was life like for you during this time?
- Were your parents ever out of work?
- Were you scared?
- How has it changed the way you have lived your life?

Students should record their interviews on tape and write an account of what they have learned. As a way to share the stories, have students bring in labeled cassettes of their interviews and set up a class listening center of the oral histories. If possible, invite the people your students interviewed, for a class tea and continue listening to their stories!

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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