

A Thief on Morgan's Plantation, by Lisa Banim, is the story of 11 year-old Constance Morgan who is sent to live with her uncle's family on a plantation in Maryland. Constance, a "Yankee" from Philadelphia, encounters the unfairness of slavery first-hand, and is shocked by what she sees. Her aunt and uncle own slaves, and while some members of her family treat the slaves with respect, others, particularly her cousin Melanie, are arrogant and cruel to them. When her uncle's watch is stolen and a young slave is blamed, Constance is determined to find the real culprit. Her search lands her in the middle of a battle over whether Maryland should join her southern neighbors and secede from the Union.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Before reading a ***A Thief on Morgan's Plantation***, discuss with the class what the students already know about the Civil War. After reading the title, ask them to guess whether the story takes place in the North or the South. Use the following questions to help the students prepare for the mood of the book.

- Why did the Civil War take place?
- What were the names of the two armies that fought?
- Why might Maryland be divided about leaving the Union?
- If someone is referred to as a "Yankee," what does it mean?
- What countries do you know of today that are in the midst of a civil war? Why are they fighting?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Literature • Social Studies • Art • Writing

1. After reading the story, discuss historical fiction as a type of literature, a mixture of fact and fiction. Some of the characters in the book actually existed and many of the events really occurred. Discuss how the reader can distinguish between what is fact and what is fiction. You might have groups of students research names and events from the book. While they will find information about Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, the Civil War and Fort Sumner with the help of various reference materials, they will not find Constance Morgan, Hattie, or Morgan's Plantation listed. This attempt at fact checking might help students understand the concept of historical fiction more clearly.
2. Some ideas for students to research:
 - What major events related to the Civil War happened during the year 1861, the time of this story?
 - Did Maryland ever secede from the Union? What were the circumstances leading up to the state's decision?
 - What important battles occurred during the Civil War?
 - Find Baltimore and Philadelphia on a map. Figure out how many miles Constance traveled, and estimate the speed of her carriage using the information at the beginning of Chapter One.
 - How were the daily lives of children, women and/or slaves changed during the Civil War?
3. Have the students make posters advertising a demonstration on whether or not Maryland should secede from the Union. The posters should include the time, date, place and speaker at the demonstration. Another option would be for students to make a poster in support or protest of Maryland staying in the Union. Students should include several reasons supporting the opinion they express on the poster.
4. Divide the class in half and stage a debate about whether Maryland should secede from the Union. Some students could be senators, plantation owners, business people, students, etc. Assign each side an opinion and have them work together to come up with reasons supporting that opinion. Explain that it might be difficult to debate a cause that they truly do not believe. The assignment is to come up with reasons why some people at that time period might have felt strongly one way or another.

TEACHERS GUIDE

5. Choose one of the characters from the book and keep a journal for several days, recording that person's thoughts, concerns, and reactions to the events that occur in the story.
6. What if Melanie had to move to Philadelphia instead of Constance moving to Maryland? Write about some aspect of Melanie's visit (her arrival, her reaction to Miss Finch and the lack of slaves, etc.), from either of the cousins' perspectives.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING ACTIVITY

A New Ending

As a class, determine the other suspects in the story who might have stolen the watch. Break up the class into groups of four or five children, with each group rewriting the ending of the book with a different character as the culprit. Each group should address the following questions in their new ending:

- Why did the character steal the watch?
- How did he or she manage to hide the watch and keep it a secret?
- How was the mystery uncovered?

Students could share their new ending in writing and/or by performing it for the class as a play.

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