

TEACHERS GUIDE

Golden Quest

by Bonnie Bader



In order to make their characters seem alive, authors provide details about their appearance, age, and situation, and have them behave in ways and say things that real people do. Students thus can better understand the characters if they pay attention to those character traits, watch for what characters say about one another, and use what they know themselves about people. To help your students focus on character traits, suggest they think and talk about the following questions:

- How does the author describe David? Georgie? The others?
- What does David say about Mr. Hill's eyes? About the kind of person he is?
- What do David's words and behavior reveal about the kind of person he is?
- What do Celia's words and actions reveal about her?
- What ideas do you get about Georgie from his words and actions?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What would you say about this story to a friend who hadn't read it?
- Would you like to have lived during the gold rush days? Why or why not?
- What facts did you find most fascinating about this period in history?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

There are lots of exciting moments in the story that would also make a great cover illustration and blurb. Create your own book jacket for this book.

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Golden Quest, by Bonnie Bader, brings to life the California gold rush days of 1850 and the debate over whether or not California will join the United States as a free state. This historical fiction novel is part of the *Stories of the States* series—historical novels whose intent is to show the diversity and strength of our American heritage and culture. *Golden Quest* concludes with a short “historical postscript” section that tells more about the lives of real people on which the fictional characters are based, and provides a broader framework for the events depicted in the story.

The characters of *Golden Quest* represent the very fabric of American life in a mining camp near the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The Taylors and their two children, David and Celia, had come west from Massachusetts in hopes of finding gold. Not having any success, they opened a dining hall/saloon. Their lives are entwined with Caleb Johnson, the alcalde for the region, who is responsible for keeping law and order; Ben and Tex, miners whose days are filled with back-breaking, painstaking hours of panning for gold and whose nights were spent dreaming of becoming rich; Mr. Hill, the wealthy Texan who had come to the California mining camp with his slaves; and Georgie Winston, an enslaved African-American boy. Emotions are highly charged on both sides of the slavery issue and statehood for California. By the end of the story, David and Celia see California’s statehood realized, and save Georgie and his mother from being taken back to Texas as slaves.

BACKGROUND

The gold rush began in 1848, after gold was discovered by James Marshall, a carpenter building a sawmill for John Sutter. As the news of the discovery spread, treasure hunters began flocking to California. Thousands upon thousands of “forty-niners” dotted the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and many more thousands arrived in 1850. Some achieved their quest for gold, but most did not. They stayed, however, and became farmers, carpenters, and shopkeepers.

The issue of slavery and California statehood created a fierce debate among the people in the mining camps as well as in Congress. Of the thirty United States at that time, fifteen were slave states and fifteen had abolished slavery. The slave states feared that if California was admitted as a free state (which it wanted), a majority of free states might lead to the end of slavery in all states. The Compromise of 1850

brought the debate to an end. California was admitted as a free state; the slave trade was banned in Washington, D.C., and other territories had the right to vote on the slavery issue. In exchange, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act which required everyone—notably northerners—to cooperate in catching runaway slaves.

FACT, FICTION, AND CHARACTERIZATION

Point out to students that *Golden Quest* is a novel of historical fiction, and that this form of literature mixes fact and fiction. In some historical fiction most of the characters and events are real, but the characters’ words are made up. Sometimes, however, the events are real, but the characters are made up. That is, the characters were not ever real people, but what they do and say is based on what actual people of the time did and said.

Engage your students in a discussion about how a reader can tell what is fact (history) and what is fiction. Students should understand that facts can be checked in reference books such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, almanacs, and atlases; in historical documents and other official public records; and in personal accounts such as letters, journals, diaries, and memoirs. Photographs, paintings, and drawings also serve as a record of a certain time in terms of depicting how people and their surroundings looked.

Share with students that authors of historical fiction often tell readers in an introduction or in a postscript whether characters are fictional or real. If they are fictional, authors might give some information about a real person on whom a character is based, as is done with the information about Bidy Mason in the postscript of *Golden Quest*. Bidy Mason was an enslaved African American who was brought to California in 1851. California was a free state at that time. However, like Georgie and his mother in the novel, she and her family were freed and saved (legally, in court) from being taken back to Texas as slaves. Be sure students read about her in the postscript and see her photograph.

Students may or may not be aware that authors sometimes provide information outside a story so that the readers will not be misled about history. Additional facts about events and real people lend authenticity to an author’s work. Help your students understand this aspect of historical fiction.