

# Focus ON READING

*Vocabulary*

READING  
COMPREHENSION

A Long Way  
from Chicago

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**ACTIVATE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE**

**Reproducible Activities**

**I. PROLOGUE—SHOTGUN CHEATHAM'S  
LAST NIGHT ABOVE GROUND (1929)****DURING READING**

## *Check Your Understanding*

### *Multiple Choice*

Circle the letter of the best answer to each question.

- How long each summer do Joey and Mary Alice spend with Grandma?
  - the month of August
  - two weeks
  - one week
- Where is Grandma's house located?
  - near the center of town
  - the last house in town
  - the first house in town
- How old are Joey and Mary Alice when they pay their first visit to Grandma?
  - eight and six
  - nine and seven
  - ten and eight
- Why does Mary Alice say that she can't stand it at Grandma's?
  - because she hates using the privy
  - because she misses her parents
  - because it is hotter than Chicago
- Why does the big-city reporter come to town asking about Shotgun Cheatham?
  - He is related to Shotgun.
  - August is a slow month for news, and Shotgun's story seems promising.
  - He is writing a book on the James brothers, and Shotgun was once part of the James brothers' gang.
- What does Grandma tell Joey and Mary Alice about how Shotgun got his name?
  - He accidentally shot a cow when he was ten.
  - Jesse James gave him the name.
  - General Grant gave him the name.
- What does Grandma tell the reporter about Effie Wilcox?
  - Effie was once married to Shotgun.
  - Effie has recently been in the hospital for the insane.
  - Effie is the smartest woman in town.
- Why does Grandma want a fancy funeral for Shotgun Cheatham?
  - She feels sorry for his family.
  - She and Effie were his good friends.
  - She wants to trick the reporter into thinking that Shotgun was a hero.
- Why does Grandma fire her gun in the middle of the night?
  - She fears Shotgun has come back to life.
  - She wants to kill the tomcat clawing at Shotgun's coffin.
  - She wants Effie and the reporter to think that Shotgun is trying to get out of his coffin.
- What does Mary Alice say about her experience at Shotgun Cheatham's funeral?
  - It made her want to be like Grandma.
  - It gave her nightmares for years.
  - It made her want to be a reporter.

I. PROLOGUE—SHOTGUN CHEATHAM'S  
LAST NIGHT ABOVE GROUND (1929)

## AFTER READING

*Deepen Your Understanding*

“‘And I wasn’t no Annie Oakley myself, except with squirrels.’ Grandma was still at the door, fanning her apron. Then in the same voice she said, ‘Looks like we got company. Take them tomatoes off the fire.’”

In this novel, all of the characters speak informal English. They do not always use correct grammar, and they sprinkle their speech with idioms—special phrases that cannot be taken literally. When Joey says that he and Mary Alice had to go all the way from Chicago before they could “set eyes on a corpse,” he is using an idiom. Obviously, the children are not actually placing their eyes on a dead body; they are just looking at one.

The novel also contains many *similes* and *metaphors*. These are special ways to compare two very different kinds of things. In a simile, the word *like* or *as* signals the comparison. In a metaphor, these words are omitted. When Joey says that Grandma is “tough as an old boot,” he is using a simile. Later, when he says that Grandma “wasn’t no oil painting herself,” he is using a metaphor.

With all of these techniques, the author has tried to create the everyday voices of the rural Midwest in the 1930s. This “real-life” regional language is called *the vernacular*. It helps make Joey’s story about life in Grandma’s town fresher and more believable.

Write a paragraph in which you use the vernacular to describe a colorful character you have either known or imagined. In your paragraph, try to use several idioms, at least one simile, and at least one metaphor.

## II. THE MOUSE IN THE MILK (1930)

## BEFORE READING

*Focus Your Reading**Questions to Think About*

The following questions will help you understand the meaning of what you read. You do not have to write out the answers to these questions. Instead, look at them before you begin reading, and think about them while you are reading.

1. When Grandma says that she doesn't care about the town, how truthful is she being?
2. How does Joey seem to be adjusting to his summer visits with Grandma as time passes?  
What about Mary Alice?
3. Why is Mrs. Wilcox known as Grandma's "enemy"? Is this accurate?
4. Does Grandma ever make any effort to appear "ladylike," to use Mr. Cowgill's word?  
Why or why not?
5. What steps does Grandma take to see that "justice" is served to the Cowgill boys? What does this show about Grandma's character?

## II. THE MOUSE IN THE MILK (1930)

## DURING READING

*Check Your Understanding**Multiple Choice*

Circle the letter of the best answer to each question.

1. What does Mary Alice say is the “loneliest job in the world”?
  - a. jumping rope by yourself
  - b. being the sheriff in Grandma’s town
  - c. being Grandma all alone in the country
2. Why hasn’t Joey done his giant jigsaw puzzle back in Chicago?
  - a. He has been too busy with school.
  - b. His family’s apartment is small.
  - c. His mother hates puzzles.
3. What happens just as Joey is reaching for a puzzle piece one evening?
  - a. Mary Alice sees Mrs. Wilcox hurrying up the path.
  - b. Grandma fires her gun at a prowler.
  - c. There is a flash of light outside.
4. What has happened to Grandma’s mailbox?
  - a. Someone has been throwing rocks at it.
  - b. The mailman’s horse has galloped into it.
  - c. Someone blew it up with fireworks.
5. What does Mrs. Wilcox tell Grandma while Joey and Alice are eating breakfast?
  - a. The Cowgills broke into her house.
  - b. She wishes Grandma would go to the prayer meeting with her.
  - c. Her privy has been destroyed.
6. What do Joey and Mary Alice think when they hear Grandma tell Ernie Cowgill that she is going to visit her cousin Leota?
  - a. They think that Grandma is lying.
  - b. They are excited about leaving Grandma’s because they’re bored.
  - c. They are upset; they don’t like Leota.
7. What does Grandma do with the mouse that Mary Alice finds in the mousetrap?
  - a. She dumps it into a bottle and pours milk over it.
  - b. She throws it outside for the tomcat.
  - c. She calls the Cowgills to take it away.
8. What does Grandma do when she hears the Cowgills in her kitchen late at night?
  - a. She fires her gun into the kitchen.
  - b. She lights a cherry bomb and rolls it into the kitchen.
  - c. She tells Joey to fetch the sheriff.
9. What does Mrs. Wilcox say when she sees Joey at the Holy Rollers church?
  - a. She tells him to get out of church because he isn’t dressed properly.
  - b. She says it’s a miracle to see a Dowdel in church.
  - c. She asks him why his sister and grandmother aren’t there, too.
10. How does Grandma get Mr. Cowgill to punish his four sons?
  - a. She pretends that his boys have put a mouse in her milk and threatens to tell other people about it.
  - b. She tells him that if he doesn’t whip his sons himself, she will get them sent to jail.
  - c. She threatens to sue the Cowgills.

## II. THE MOUSE IN THE MILK (1930)

## AFTER READING

*Deepen Your Understanding*

*A Long Way from Chicago* is written in the first person, or the “I” point of view. This makes the novel appear to be an autobiography, or the story of the narrator’s own life. In this case, the narrator is Joey, who describes his summertime visits to Grandma Dowdel many years earlier. The stories are told with great humor and affection, as Joey recalls the adventures he and Mary Alice had with Grandma in her very small Illinois town.

Write a brief autobiographical essay that tells about an amusing event from your childhood. Be sure to include details that will help the scene come alive for your readers.

## *Focus Your Reading*

### *Questions to Think About*

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The following questions will help you understand the meaning of what you read. You do not have to write out the answers to these questions. Instead, look at them before you begin reading, and think about them while you are reading.

1. How is the Great Depression affecting life in Grandma's town? How is it affecting the whole region?
2. How does Mary Alice's behavior show that she is beginning to grow up a bit? What about Joey?
3. What do Joey and Mary Alice learn about Grandma's past that helps them to understand her better?
4. What is it about Grandma that prevents people from asking her too many questions?
5. Why does Grandma sometimes break the rules? Is she ever justified in doing this?

## III. A ONE-WOMAN CRIME WAVE (1931)

DURING READING

*Check Your Understanding**Multiple Choice*

Circle the letter of the best answer to each question.

1. Why are the freight trains loaded down with men in the summer of 1931?
  - a. They are all going to the inauguration of President Hoover.
  - b. They are working to build a new railroad across Illinois.
  - c. They are traveling around the country trying to find food and work.
2. Why is there a strange smell in the cobhouse on the first afternoon the children arrive back at Grandma's?
  - a. There has been a dead tomcat in the cobhouse for several days.
  - b. Grandma is making very strong cheese.
  - c. The privy has been pulled up and dumped into the cobhouse.
3. Why does Joey find it odd when Grandma tells them that they are going fishing one morning?
  - a. because he knows that she has never learned to fish
  - b. because she is dressed in fancy clothes
  - c. because she hasn't packed any fishing rods or reels
4. Where does Grandma lead Joey and Mary Alice on their long, hot morning walk?
  - a. to a boat hidden by the creek
  - b. to Aunt Puss's house
  - c. to a barbecue near the railroad tracks
5. What happens when a large snake drops into the boat?
  - a. It bites Joey.
  - b. Joey faints.
  - c. Joey hits it with an oar.
6. What does Grandma pull up from the bottom of the creek?
  - a. a box full of gold coins
  - b. a trap full of catfish
  - c. a crate full of bottles of beer
7. Why does Grandma look scandalized as she and the children row past the Rod & Gun Club?
  - a. She is embarrassed by the sight of men in their underwear.
  - b. She is shocked to see the sheriff drinking whiskey.
  - c. She wants the sheriff to think she is upset so that he won't try to stop her.
8. Why doesn't Joey want to go into Aunt Puss Chapman's house?
  - a. He thinks it looks haunted.
  - b. He wants to keep rowing the boat on the creek.
  - c. He wants to fish with the men at the Rod & Gun Club.
9. What do the children learn about Grandma's relationship to Aunt Puss Chapman?
  - a. Aunt Puss is Grandma's aunt.
  - b. Aunt Puss used to cook for Grandma's family.
  - c. Grandma used to work for Aunt Puss.
10. After leaving Aunt Puss's house, what does Grandma do with the rest of the catfish?
  - a. She gives it to the sheriff and the other men from the Rod & Gun Club.
  - b. She and the children have a feast back at home.
  - c. She feeds it to the drifters near the railroad tracks.

## III. A ONE-WOMAN CRIME WAVE (1931)

## AFTER READING

*Deepen Your Understanding*

“Mary Alice said there was nothing to do and nobody to do it with . . .”

When Joey and Mary Alice Dowdel first arrive at Grandma’s, they are in completely unknown territory. These two children from the city don’t know what to make of Grandma, who seems very big, nor do they know what to make of the town, which seems very small. They have trouble getting to sleep at first, because the sounds—and even the silences—are so different from their world back in Chicago. The characters they meet—like Effie Wilcox or even the old tomcat—seem strange, and so do the customs—like using the privy or making soap in a big pot outside.

Write about a time when you made your first trip to a particular place. How did it feel? What sights, sounds, and smells were different? Describe how you felt about being in new surroundings. Be sure to include many sensory details (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) to help your reader understand your experience.

**IV. THE DAY OF JUDGMENT (1932)–  
THE PHANTOM BRAKEMAN (1933)****BEFORE READING***Focus Your Reading**Questions to Think About*

The following questions will help you understand the meaning of what you read. You do not have to write out the answers to these questions. Instead, look at them before you begin reading, and think about them while you are reading.

1. How are Joey's and Mary Alice's attitudes toward their annual visit to Grandma changing?
2. What further signs of the Great Depression can be seen in the summer of 1932?
3. How does Grandma continue to stray from conventional "feminine" behavior?
4. In how many ways does the author show that Mary Alice is growing to resemble Grandma more as time passes?
5. Even though Grandma is a very private person, why does she sometimes let people invade that privacy?