

THE WATER SEEKER

KIMBERLY
WILLIS HOLT

WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

TEACHER'S GUIDE
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

PREREADING ACTIVITY

ARTIFACT BOX

Assemble an artifact box depicting elements of *The Water Seeker*. Artifacts might consist of a map of the Oregon Trail, a forked branch (similar to what a water dowsing might use), a piece of muslin, a moccasin, a photograph of Chimney Rock, a sketchpad, a biscuit, etc.

As a prereading activity, have students conduct an analysis of each artifact considering the following:

- Describe the type of material from which the artifact was made.
- Describe aspects of the artifact such as its shape, size, texture, movable parts, and printed matter.
- Discuss how the artifact has been used. Who might have used it? Where and when might it have been used?
- Discuss how the artifact tells about the life and times of the people who made and/or used it.

Determine if there is an item that is similar today.

READING LANGUAGE ARTS WRITING

POETRY

Each character joining the wagon train in *The Water Seeker* has a backstory that reveals who they are and how they came to be at that place, at that time. Readers

learn about characters' past and present through Holt's carefully crafted narrative. Using a "Where I'm from . . ." structure created by children's book author and poet George Ella Lyon have students write a poem about a selected character. First, ask students to generate a list of traits and behaviors of the character such as:

- Places they have lived
- Parents or relatives and the relationship they have with these individuals
- Nicknames
- Physical features
- Hopes and fears
- Joys or losses
- Memories
- Favorite food, music, or places
- Future aspirations

Taking this information, students then shape the list into a "Where I'm from . . ." poem such as the following:

Gwendolyn

I am from London, Missouri
and the Oregon Territory.
I am from a father who beat me
and left me scarred.
I am from a keen sense of smell
from Agatha Peabody's lilac perfume to Amos Kincaid's scent of water.
I am from a longing for love and acceptance from a boy who doesn't
know I exist.
I am from arriving at a place both physically and emotionally that
I never could have imagined.



RESPONSE JOURNAL

Maintaining a response journal during reading is important because it provides readers with a place to think on paper. Ideas and questions posed in a

response journal can be brought to discussions of the books to spark further understanding and to assist the teacher in gaining insight into a reader's comprehension. Ask students to record their responses to the story as they are listening to it being read aloud or reading it independently by using these suggested prompts:

- I noticed . . .
- I felt . . . because . . .
- I wonder . . .
- The story makes me think of . . .
- I was surprised by . . .
- The character I connect with is . . . because . . .
- If I were . . . I would . . .

LETTER TO/FROM A CHARACTER

There were many times in *The Water Seeker* when one character attempted to understand the actions of another. One strategy for understanding the motivation of a character is to try to think from his or her perspective. Ask students to write a letter from the perspective of one character to another or from their own perspective to a character.

SOCIAL STUDIES

LITERARY ELEMENT: SETTING

Setting is an important literary element of historical fiction. The purposes are to use setting as a mood, to use it as an antagonist, to set a historical background, and to use it as symbolism. Various settings are depicted in *The Water Seeker*, from the solitary cabin of Jake Kincaid to the mission at Pretty Water, to the various landmarks along the Oregon Trail. Ask students to compile a list (five or six per student) of settings using the descriptions found in the book. For example:

Page number 1:

Description of setting: "His cabin sat a hundred steps from Bittersweet Creek and about a mile, as the eagle flew, from the Hurd place."

Page number 259:

Description of setting: "Fort Boise was disappointing. Located on the north bank of the Boise River, the fort was nothing more than a tiny rectangular building surrounded by adobe walls."

Using these descriptions, ask students to do one or more of the following:

POSTCARD

Have students select one of the settings from their list to create a postcard. Bring in examples of postcards prior to introducing this strategy. Students create a picture of the setting on the front. On the back of the postcard, students write the description of the setting in the back left-hand corner, generate their own message below the description, then fill in the address on the right-hand side. The postcard enables students to create an image of the setting they have selected using research to do so.

TRAVEL BROCHURE

Small groups of students can compile their descriptions of settings to generate a travel brochure of the Oregon Trail. Information in the brochure might include:

- Location (include a map)
- Arts and culture
- Historic sites and landmarks
- Food
- Transportation
- Outdoor activities
- Weather



GENERATE A TIMELINE

Holt's book chapters are written chronologically to provide the reader with a sense of time passing in Amos Kincaid's life. Have students generate a timeline of the events in Amos's (or any character's) life or the journey of the wagon train west. This strategy can be done independently, with small groups of students, or by the whole class as the book is being read.

WATER DOWSING

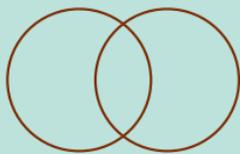
Dowsing is the action of a person—called the dowser—using a rod, stick, or other device—called a dowsing rod or dowsing stick—to locate underground water. Dowsing is not based upon any known scientific laws or forces of nature. Dowsing has been used for thousands of years in all parts of the world. Divide students into small groups which will then conduct research and debate whether water dowsing is truly a method for locating water or simply a belief that such a practice brings the ultimate result of locating water.

SCIENCE

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

In the 1800s, infectious diseases, such as smallpox and typhoid fever, played a role in the lives and deaths of many people. White settlers were often responsible for introducing these diseases to Native Americans, which proved devastating. Historical fiction authors, such as Kimberly Willis Holt, provide insight into and facts about the types of diseases that were prevalent in the past by weaving information into their books. This allows readers an opportunity to gain an understanding about an abstract topic through the lens of human behavior. Students can compare and contrast information about smallpox and typhoid fever by completing a Venn diagram. First, information they learned from *The Water Seeker* about the disease is recorded in one circle. Next, students conduct research about the disease (both past and present) and complete the other circle.

Research might include finding the symptoms of the disease, cause of the disease, mode of transmission, past and present treatments, and ways to avoid the disease. Facts and information can be highlighted in the middle of the diagram that is in both the book and discovered through research.



THE ARTS

CHARACTER WEAVING

Kimberly Willis Holt provides rich descriptions in *The Water Seeker* that bring characters to life. As each layer of the story is uncovered, the reader realizes how interconnected the lives of the characters become. Based on this weaving of characters, ask students to select one character that they enjoyed, disliked, or with whom they found a connection. Have students think about colors and symbols that could be associated with the character as well as words or phrases that were used by or about that individual. Give each student a strip of paper approximately 3 feet long (adding machine paper works best for this strategy). Select a media to use such as crayons, oil pastels, watercolors, or markers—something that can produce bright, bold colors. As students determine the layout of their paper strip, have them think about if one or more colors will be used (have them avoid leaving too much white space), the size and font of the words or phrases being used as well as if the word or phrase is used once or repeated. When all students in the class have completed their paper strip, weave them together by laying half of the strips on a table, then weaving the remaining strips through them.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Jake Kincaid was known as a dowser. However, he preferred being a trapper. Why did Jake try to ignore his gift of dowsing in favor of spending long months trapping animals?

Delilah's image appears to many characters including Henrietta and Rebecca. Who else witnessed Delilah's vision and how did they respond?

When Gil and Rebecca started the mission at Pretty Water, they had hopes that the Otoe would attend the church and the schoolhouse they had built. What were some of the challenges and barriers Gil and Rebecca encountered in life at the mission?

Jameson Block became a central figure in Amos Kincaid's life. How did Amos meet Jameson? What was the artifact that bound them together? And how did their relationship change over the years?

In *The Water Seeker*, birds offered comfort, created an annoyance, or resulted in food for the trappers and pioneers. What was the significance of the birds to characters such as Delilah and Blue Owl as well as to others?

What was a day like in the life of a member of the wagon train on the Oregon Trail? What role did men, women, and children play as the settlers moved west?

There were many hazards on the Oregon Trail. What were these hazards and how did they affect the members of the wagon train?

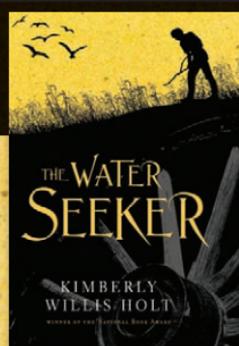
When Amos first encountered Gwendolyn, "he wondered if she was born that way. In his entire life, he'd never seen anyone so horrifying" (p. 145). As the story progresses, Amos begins to view Gwendolyn differently. Did Gwendolyn's appearance change or was it the way Amos viewed her? How did their relationship change over the course of the book?

Many characters experienced the loss of a loved one—Amos never knew his mother, Daisy lost her husband, Homer, in a tragic accident, and darling Eliza became the victim of a terrible misfortune resulting in profound grief for her family. How did these characters respond and cope to the losses they endured?

Readers are introduced to protagonist Amos Kincaid as a baby. How does Amos evolve as a character? What events impacted him as a boy and as a man?

ABOUT THE BOOK

Amos Kincaid was born with a sixth sense—a special gift passed down from his father. The gift of finding water. Through his younger years he would deny it. A gift might be abandoned but it will always be there, waiting to be claimed, especially in times of need. This is the story of the dowser's son who finds pain, hope, longing, and ultimately love amid his journey across the west on the Oregon Trail.



ISBN: 978-0-8050-8020-9

\$16.99 • \$19.99 CAN

Ages 10–14 • Grades 5–9



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Willis Holt is the author of numerous award-winning novels including *Part of Me*, *Keeper of the Night*, *My Louisiana Sky*, and *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*, which received the National Book Award for Young People's Literature. *The Water Seeker* was inspired by a conversation she had with her husband around the

dinner table when he revealed that his father once showed him how to dowse.

For an interview with Kimberly Willis Holt about writing *The Water Seeker*, visit us.macmillan.com/thewaterseeker.

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An imprint of Macmillan Children's Publishing Group

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