

A Day No Pigs Would Die

Instructions: All material is to be read and completed by the first day of school in September. Be sure to read directions carefully and answer questions thoroughly. The introduction is necessary read before the start of the novel. Also, take notes and highlight areas of importance (in your novel) as you read. See you in September!

Introduction:

Since its publication in 1972, this fiction biography has become a favorite of students and teachers, telling with simple eloquence the timeless story of a boy's relationship with his father and that boy's emergence into manhood.

This first novel by Robert Peck, a prolific writer, who has since written 20 or more works, including a musical, is about a way of life that once commonly flourished in the United States and has gradually diminished to become a footnote in history. Like the lifestyle of this small farmer, the credo by which he lived, the Shaker way, has also been relegated to a passing mention in books of sociology and history.

Much of the beauty of this tiny (only 150 pages) classic derives from the use of the 12-year-old as narrator. His youthful exuberance produces affectionate humor. Set in the era of the late 1920s on a Vermont farm near the village of Learning, the book utilizes the colloquial language of New England as well as the simple jargon of the Shakers, or plain people, who live the way of "no frills," to create a vivid atmosphere of that particular lifestyle.

There is wit as well as humor in this narrative. As Rob Peck confronts the world in which he lives with constant query, struggling to understand his heritage and his future responsibilities, he is torn by his natural inclination to cling to a childhood that is less complicated and threatening than his approaching manhood, and his equally natural eagerness to leap into a modern, adult world that he glimpses from time to time.

From his father he learns the ways of Shaker law; from his observation of the earth and its seasonal cycles he comes to an awareness of the beauty as well as the orderly structure of nature.

Though he lives a reserved, almost solitary life on the farm, the daily routine of his schooling offers him social interaction and knowledge, which is sometimes as confusing as it, is enlightening.

Rob struggles to control his passion for baseball, which fascinates him, though he has never seen the game played. One of his challenges to Shaker law is the rule that forbids him to see such a game on a Sunday. Struggling with the historical data about his home state, Rob mistakes Ethan Allan and the Green Mountain boys for baseball players, and assures his father in one discussion that the team "won" at Ticonderoga. Though Haven Peck, the father, can neither read nor write, he recalls that he has heard of the encounter at Ticonderoga.

From time to time, the Pecks are visited by neighbors, relatives and near relatives, such as Aunt Matty. One such visit by this distant cousin, who has been designated an aunt for some long-lost reason, occurs on the last day of school when Rob brings home his report card which carries all "A's" with the exception of one "D," in English. So begins one of the book's most delightful chapters as Aunt Matty attempts to tutor Rob, with the first lesson an exercise in diagramming a sentence.

Another late-night and more dramatic visit by a neighbor to the Peck farm gives Rob new insights into his father's moral character and further demonstrates to the boy the importance of personal integrity.

Students will empathize with Rob from page one, for young readers quickly appreciate both the reason he has skipped school and his shame at running from the ridicule of a classmate.

Rob is filled with rage on that April day, as he pounds on a tree on a ridge above his farm, wishing with all his heart he were striking Edward Thatcher, the offending classmate who has made fun of him, his clothes, and his Shaker ways.

Only the first page offers Rob the luxury of plotting revenge, for as the reader turns to the next page, Rob is caught up in a more pressing situation. He has little time to ponder further what punishment will be meted out at home for his leaving school.

Suddenly, with no warning, he has come upon an angry cow, struggling to give birth to a calf, thrashing about the meadow in torment and pain.

From Rob's encounter with Apron, the cow, on that spring day to the book's last poignant chapter when the young man must, a year and a month later deal with his father's death, the transition from the innocence of childhood to the responsibility of manhood has been made.

That rite of passage is the visual motif of the book, and it is adorned and framed in ribbons of the boy's memory: the wonder of a beloved pet; a first trip to a county fair; the cruel training of a neighbor's dog; the relentless attack of a hawk; the growing awareness of the diversity of human nature. All these are woven into a tapestry of existence that reflects the beauty as well as the inequity of life, portraying the inexorable cycles of natural seasons and human existence in a prose that draws strength from the power of its precisely crafted simplicity.

Values

This novel, the story of a young boy's rite of passage into manhood, emphasizes traditional values of pre-World War II America.

Underscoring those values of thrift, self-sacrifice, and individual independence is the father's determination never to go into debt (except for his farm) and his long work days, tending not only to the duties on the farm, but working as a hog-butcher in a nearby slaughterhouse.

Community kinship is stressed in the narrative describing the caring between the farmers and their respect for each other's land and stock.

Personal self-reliance and responsibility for one's own actions are emphasized in Rob's actions, and his simple narrative describing his thoughts integrates the philosophy of the boy patterning his life after that of his father.

Attention to the ways of the Shakers is given in the novel, stressing the value of spiritual affiliation and adherence to the rules of one's religious belief. This is nowhere more obvious than when the boy's pet, a barren Pig, be killed, not only to feed the family, but because she has become a frill, an anathema to Shaker creed.

A Day No Pigs Would Die Evaluation**Part One: Fill in the missing words.**

1. When we first meet Rob, he is _____ School.
2. The cow that is giving birth belongs to the neighbor, Mr. _____.
3. The neighbor brings Rob home, wrapped in a _____.
4. Rob's mother _____ his wound closed.
5. Rob is still clutching a _____ from the cow's throat.
6. Rob's mother says she would prefer to mend "_____" than a "_____."
7. Rob's Aunt _____ lives with the family.
8. The name of Rob's father is _____.
9. Rob's aunt washes him with water scented with _____.
10. The family lives by the Book of _____.

Part Two: True or False

11. Rob is punished for the incident at school.
12. Rob's father brings him an apple and some spruce gum as a special treat.
13. Rob is nearly naked when he is brought home.
14. Rob's father agrees that fences are a sign of hostility to neighbors.
15. Recovered on a Friday, Rob spends his first day out of bed at school.
16. The twin calves are solid white.
17. Apron had bitten Rob's leg through to the bone.
18. Apron's owner came to repay Rob for his help.
19. At first, Rob's father would not accept the gift as payment.
20. When the neighbor asked for help in the future, Rob's father agreed to let Rob keep the gift.

Part Three: Short Answers

21. What did Rob name his pet?
22. Rob's father designated a building to be used for the pet's home. What had to be done to prepare it?
23. Why was the preparation necessary?
24. When Rob discussed Vermont history, who did he think Ethan Allen was?
25. What was the name of Allen's group and what did Rob think they were?
26. Where did Rob believe they had had a great victory?

27. When asked to name a great hero of Vermont, what name did Rob put down on the test?
28. What did Rob want to do some Sunday?
29. The ox and the cow on the farm had names; what were they?
30. What was the name of the barnyard cat?
31. When Rob and his pet went out to the meadow and played by the pond, what creature did they have fun trying to catch?
32. Who was President of the United States during the period of the book?
33. Why hadn't Rob's father voted?
34. Why did Rob's father say they were rich?
35. What did Rob think the farm had the most of?
36. What did Rob think a tutor was?
37. What did he think of Aunt Matty?
38. When Aunt Matty saw Rob had a "D" in English, what did she try to do?
39. What task did she give Rob?
40. Whom did Aunt Matty say she'd try to teach the next time?

Part Four: Identification--write a brief description of each of the characters:

41. Lucy Peck
42. Benjamin Tanner
43. Ira Long
44. Jacob Henry
45. Miss Sarah
46. Widow Bascom
47. Solomon
48. Bess Tanner
49. Pinky
50. Miss Malcolm
51. Edward Thatcher
52. Sebring Hillman
53. Aunt Matty
54. Clay Sanders
55. Apron