

Lesson Plan

Desert Passage

by P.S. Carillo

Book Summary:

Two fourteen year old boys, Miguel and Ramón, find themselves left at their grandmother's house in the middle of the Arizona desert for the summer. Their father, Rodrigo, is infuriated by the boys' recent bad behavior and leaves them behind as punishment while the rest of the family vacations in Sante Fe, New Mexico. When their grandmother is suddenly hospitalized, Miguel and Ramón decide to travel across two states on an old motor scooter they found in an abandoned shed, to reunite with their family. Although the boys only have a small amount of money for gas and just one sleeping bag to travel with, they have the time of their lives. Both Miguel and Ramón are changed forever by their experience and the people they meet as they travel through the desert.

STUDENT QUESTIONS

PART I

1. The first few chapters of the book describe the volatile behavior of Rodrigo. What have Miguel and Ramón done to make him so mad? Do you feel Rodrigo is being fair to the boys by leaving them behind to do chores all summer?
2. What impact did Grandma Rosa's hospitalization have on the boys' choices?
3. The character Frank is used as an analogy to a fairy godmother. Which of Frank's actions are similar to a fairy godmother's? What is a story where a fairy godmother helped a child along their journey?
4. Why was it important that Miguel and Ramón visit Grandma Rosa at the hospital before leaving on their journey? Do you think Grandma Rosa understood that they were leaving?

PART II

1. Did Miguel and Ramón pack everything that they needed for their trip? Would you have taken anything different?
2. At the diner, Jake, the truck driver, gives the boys advice about life. What did Jake say to Miguel and Ramón that was important?
3. Why did Miguel and Ramón decide to go to the Grand Canyon? How did their Grandfather, Esteban, influence their decision?

4. When Miguel tells the story of the school fights around the campfire, do you think Turner, the camp advisor, gives the right advice? Is violence sometimes necessary to resolve conflicts?
5. Why was Sedona so important to Ramón? What makes Ramón's dream of his father real?
6. In what ways does Miguel help Ramón during the course of their journey? Do you think either of the boys could have made the trip on their own?

PART III

1. Did the boys make the right choice when they decided to stop at the archeologists' campsite? How did the other young men react to the two boys' unexpected arrival?
2. What did Miguel and Ramón experience during their stay with the archeologists?
3. When the boys entered the secret cave, how did Eric explain the meaning of the cave paintings?
4. What is a rite of passage? In the modern world, do we have rites of passage for young men?
5. Do you think the story told by Eric around the campfire was true? How did the story affect Ramón?
6. What have the boys learned about themselves during their journey? Was their journey important for their futures?

PART IV

1. Have Rodrigo and Connie been worried about the boys? How does Rodrigo feel about leaving the boys alone?
2. Why does Rodrigo feel responsible for his nephew, Ramón? How did Esteban's death impact Rodrigo's life?
3. Miguel and Ramón are cousins, but sometimes they are described as brothers. How are Ramón and Miguel more like brothers than cousins? Do you have relationships that sometimes change when you refer to the other members of your family?
4. Does Rodrigo feel like a father or an uncle to Ramón? How does Ramón feel about Rodrigo?
5. Why doesn't Rodrigo speak when he first sees the boys drive up the driveway? Was he surprised to see his old motor scooter?
6. At the end of the story, Rodrigo reflects on how he has a lot to learn about raising sons. Do you agree? Why or why not?

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Suggestions for classroom activities:

1. Using a large map of the United States, chart the road trip taken by Miguel and Ramón through the southwest desert. Estimate the mileage covered and the approximate time it would have taken for the boys to reach Santa Fe.
2. Discuss the expenses of the road trip. Did the boys have enough money for the trip and for all the possible emergencies that could have occurred?
3. Explore the geographical significance of the southwestern desert. Research the plant and animal life that exists in the desert, as well as the history of the Grand Canyon.
4. Research and discuss the history of the Anasazi / Hopi Indians and their contribution to the culture of the American Southwest.
5. Ask the students to create original artwork depicting various points of interest or characters on oversized postcards. (Use a tag board colored with crayon then lightly painted over with diluted water colors for desert landscapes). On the other side of the postcards, ask the students to write a message to their families describing the location and the experience as if they were one of the characters.

For higher level students:

6. Using sand painting techniques (sand paper base covered with crayon or paint, then etched with sharp object to simulate drawing on rock) ask your students to draw a series of symbols depicting modern life. Ask students to swap paintings and decipher each other's work in written form, speculating what their symbols may mean to a society 2,000 years from now.
7. Ask the students to read or watch classic fairy tales, such as *Cinderella* or *Pinocchio*, and write an essay comparing and contrasting themes and symbols in the fairy tales to those in *Desert Passage*.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Recommended Books for Teachers

1. *Indian Cultures of the American Southwest* by Steven L. Walker
A great overview of the ancient pueblo cultures of the southwest with information on tools, agricultural methods and art. It also has wonderful pictures.
Published by Camelback / Canyonlands Venture
ISBN-10: 1-879924-10-2

2. *Great Excavations* by Melinda Elliot

A history of the archeology of the American Southwest during the period of 1888-1939.

Fascinating accounts of how landmark excavations were conducted. This book is too detailed for children, but contains excellent research material for teachers.

Published by School of American Research Press

www.sarweb.org

ISBN-10: 0-933452-42-X and 0-933452-43-8

3. *Arizona Wild & Free* by Stewart L. Udall

A beautifully photographed book with pictures of wildlife that is native to the southwest region.

Children will love the candid pictures of the animals.

Published by Arizona Highways

1-800-543-5432 to order direct from publisher

Recommended for Further Reading

1. *Stiffed, the Betrayal of the American Male* by Susan Faludi

An exploration and critique of the American male's role in modern society.

2. *The Sibling Society* by Robert Bly

This book contains wise words regarding raising children from a notable American poet and author.

3. *The Minds of Boys* by Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens

An interesting perspective regarding various methods for teaching boys.

Recommended Internet Sites

1. www.desertusa.com

This site has a good overview of the history of the ancient cultures that inhabited the American southwest and the natural flora and fauna of the area.

2. www.thenaturalamerican.com/southwest

This site offers general summaries of ancient cultures and has excellent web links for further resources.