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Finding Langston
Lesa Cline-Ransome

- ★ *Booklist*, Starred Review
- ★ *The Horn Book*, Starred Review
- ★ *Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review
- ★ *School Library Journal*, Starred Review
- ★ *Shelf Awareness*, Starred Review

About the Book

In this debut historical novel about the Great Migration a boy discovers Chicago's postwar South Side and the poetry of Langston Hughes.

Set in 1946 in Chicago, eleven-year-old Langston is grieving the death of his mother, and missing rural Alabama where he and his father lived until his father decided there was no longer a reason to stay. They moved into a small one-room apartment in a section of Chicago called the Brown Belt. Langston's father works in a nearby factory, and Langston walks to school. The problem with school is there are bullies who call Langston "Country" and laugh at his overalls and rundown shoes, and his Southern accent. When Langston discovers the Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library, he finds that, unlike the whites-only library in Alabama, he is welcome. He spends every afternoon in the library and with the guidance of the children's librarian, he discovers the poetry of Langston Hughes. Until now, he didn't know where his name came from, but the poetry his mother quoted in secret letters she once wrote his dad reveal that his mother was so inspired by Langston Hughes that she named her son for him.

Pre-reading Activity

Have students read about the Great Migration on the following website: blackpast.org/aah/great-migration-1915-1960. Then read aloud "One-Way Ticket" by Langston Hughes: http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/ows/seminars/tcentury/gmigration/Hughes_OneWayTicket.pdf). Ask students to write a one-page paper that states how this poem reflects the feelings of the people who left the South during the Great Migration.

Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.1; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-5.3



Classroom Discussion

- After Langston's mother dies, he and his father move to Chicago. What does Langston miss most about Alabama? How are the people in Chicago different from those in Alabama? Why does Langston think that the folks in Alabama would call those in Chicago "uppity"? Langston describes his memory of Alabama, "like a candle fighting to stay lit in the wind" (p. 5). Why is it important for him to keep his memories of Alabama "lit"?
- Langston says nothing in Chicago belongs to them, and no one knows his name. At what point does Langston begin to feel a sense of belonging? Who and what help him find his place in the vast city?
- Langston's father explains that Chicago is their home now. Discuss the difference between a house and a home. Contrast Langston and his family's house in Alabama with the apartment in Chicago. Explain how their house in Alabama was a home. Debate whether the apartment in Chicago ever feels like a home to Langston.
- Compare and contrast the way Langston and his father deal with grief. Why won't Langston cry in front of his father? Discuss how tears are often the best way to confront grief.
- Define privacy. What is the difference between privacy and secrets. Langston discovers a box of letters that his mother sent his father when they were young. How does Langston violate his father's privacy by reading the letters? Why is reading someone's mail like stealing?
- What does Langston learn about his parents from reading the letters? Discuss what his father would say if he knew that Langston read the letters.
- How does Langston deal with loneliness? Parts of poems by Langston Hughes are used throughout the novel. Which of the poems speak of loneliness? How do the poems console Langston? In what other ways do Hughes's poems speak to Langston?
- Discuss Langston's encounter with bullies. Who is the ringleader? Describe Erroll's and Clem's roles in the bullying. Debate whether they are afraid of Lymon. What is the first hint that Clem is different from Lymon and Erroll? At what point does Langston stand up to Lymon? Describe his father's reaction to the fight. How does the schoolyard incident help Langston gain respect from the other boys? Debate whether such respect is worth the detention Langston must serve.
- Describe the friendship that develops between Langston and Clem. What do they have in common? Langston doesn't like being called "Country." What is symbolic about Langston telling Clem his name?
- Langston discovers the George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library and goes there every afternoon after school. Why does he lie and tell his father that he is playing with boys his age after school? Explain his reaction when Miss Fullton asks him if he has been spending his afternoons at the library.
- Discuss Langston's thoughts when he discovers the poems of Langston Hughes. Why does he think the poet is like a magician? Discuss why he wants to keep the library and Mr. Langston Hughes to himself. Explain why he finally tells his father about the library. What is the significance of Langston and his father going to the library together at the end of the novel? (p. 104)

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