



TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Weirdo

The

Theodore Taylor

READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

The Weirdo

Theodore Taylor

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

ISBN 978-1-50204-311-5

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Skills and Strategies

Thinking

Brainstorming, classifying and categorizing, interpreting, analyzing, anticipating and retrospecting, evaluating, synthesizing, detecting fallacies of reasoning

Literary Elements

Characterization, setting, conflict, suspense, theme, atmosphere, mood, point of view, figurative language, irony, dialogue

Vocabulary

Synonyms/antonyms, analogies, compound words, context, derivations, dialect

Comprehension

Significant details, main ideas, summarizing, comparing and contrasting, cause and effect, author's purpose, drawing conclusions, fact and opinion

Writing

Narrative, expository, persuasive, procedural, creative

Listening/Speaking

Participation in discussion and cooperative groups, entertainment of others with dramatic activities, debate

Summary

Set in the “Powhatan Swamp” region of North Carolina (modeled after the actual Great Dismal Swamp), this is the suspenseful story of two teenagers who stand up for what they believe in—even though it means risking personal danger and defying an entire town. Samantha Sanders is nine when she discovers the body of Alvin Howell at the edge of the swamp—and sixteen when she witnesses the dumping of another body from her hiding place in a tree stump. Sam befriends Chip, a young man disfigured in a fiery plane crash that claimed the lives of his mother and sister. Chip, the reclusive son of the spillwayman, has been tracking and tagging bears in the National Wildlife Refuge and hopes that his efforts will help extend a moratorium on bear hunting. Sam’s father, like most men in town, is a hunter who resents government restrictions on his sport. Sam soon finds herself caught between her desire to help Chip with the study and her reluctance to anger her father.

About the Author

Theodore Taylor has said that he doesn’t have a tremendous imagination—he is just a reporter describing real life. He certainly has had some true life adventures. His own first swamp experience came when his father took him to the Great Dismal Swamp’s Feeder Ditch at age 11. At age 13, he was already a newspaper reporter. He has also worked as a sailor, a movie producer, and a documentary photographer, and has traveled all over the world.

Taylor gives talks to schoolchildren, many of whom are most familiar with his 1987 Newbery Award winner, *The Cay*. Other writings by Taylor include: *Timothy of the Cay*, *The Bomb*, *The Odyssey of Ben O’Neal*, *The Trouble with Tuck, Marian, Shoebag, Sniper*, and *Walking Up a Rainbow*. He is currently on the faculty at Cal State, Sacramento.

Initiating Activities

1. Prediction: Have students examine the cover illustration and title, then flip through the maps on the first few pages of the book. Why might someone be called a “weirdo”? Where is this story going to be set? What kind of story will it be? What mood is struck by the cover picture? What do you imagine about the person shown? Based on other stories you may have read by Theodore Taylor, what do you expect from a tale by him?
2. Anticipation Guide: Present students with these statements and have them discuss whether they agree or disagree and why.
 - a) No one has the right to interfere with a hunter’s right to hunt.
 - b) Having a disability makes a person stronger.
 - c) Swamps are ugly, dismal, scary places.
 - d) “You can’t fight City Hall.”

3. Prereading Discussion Topics:

- a) Conservation: What is conservation? Who are environmentalists? Who are animal rights activists? In what controversies do they get involved? What is an endangered species? What is being done to protect endangered species? How can you make your opinion in these matters known?
- b) Bears: What do you know about the habits and habitat of bears? What sorts of bears inhabit your region? Why did Native Americans used to hunt bears? Why are bears hunted today?
- c) Disability: What would be the hardest thing about having a facial disfigurement? How would you cope? What are some problems generally encountered by people with disabilities?
- d) Parent-Teen Relations: What are common sources of tension between parents and teens? Do boys and girls face the same sorts of issues with their parents? When should teenagers obey their parents—and in what cases are they entitled to resist? What do parents “owe” their children—and vice versa?

4. “Book Hook”: To generate interest in the book, read aloud the opening chapter (pages 1-3). Have students brainstorm what the chapter tells them about Samantha, her family, and the community they live in. What sort of shock did Samantha have when she was nine? How did the adults expect her to handle it? What sort of lasting impact has that incident had?

5. Log: Have students keep a response log as they read.

- a) In one type of log, the student pretends to be one of the characters (probably Samantha or Chip). On one side of each piece of paper, the student writes in the first person (“I...”) about his/her reactions to what happened in that chapter. A partner (or the teacher) responds to these writings on the other side of the paper, as if talking to the character.
- b) In the dual entry log, students jot down brief summaries and reactions to each section of the novel they have read. (The first entry could be made based on a preview of the novel—a glance at the cover and a flip through the book.)

Pages	Summary	Reactions
		These might begin: “I liked the part where Samantha...,” “This reminded me of the time I...,” “Chip reminds me of another character...,” “If I were Sam’s father, I wouldn’t...,” “I don’t understand why Mrs. Howell...”

3. Writing: Write about one of the two topics below.

a) Write the report the sheriff writes after talking with Slade.

b) Create a “missing persons” poster for Tom Telford. Include a physical description and the place he was last seen.

Book Four, pages 181–200

After his interview with Chip, Slade immediately warns a housepainter, Buddy Bailey, about the visit. Bailey burns his red and black mackinaw. When Sam discovers a bear in a trap set by her father, she helps Chip release the bear and enrages her father. Under hypnosis, Sam recalls that shortly before she found Howell’s body years ago, she saw a contractor’s pickup truck. Chip and Sam go to see Slade again and both recognize the big man who greets Slade. Buddy Bailey is the poacher who shot at Chip and Tom—and the man Sam saw carrying a body in the swamp.

Vocabulary

cackled 181
trauma 187
sullen 199

hobgoblin 182
levering 188

dentures 182
sinewy 188

caterwauling 182
cockfights 196

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Slade tell Buddy Bailey about the sheriff’s visit? (*Slade knows that Bailey is a poacher and is warning him.*) Do you think Slade has only suspicions or actual knowledge about the murder? (*Answers will vary.*)
2. Sam had wondered whether she would have the courage to spring the trap if her father set it. Does she? (*When a bear gets caught in the trap, Sam calls Chip and helps him to free the bear.*)
3. How does Sam help set Henry free? (*She talks to him to calm him, gets him food, gets Chip what he needs to pry the bear out.*) What does she talk to Henry about? (*Before Chip arrives, Sam talks to Henry about Chip and her dreams about him.*)
4. Why doesn’t Sam’s father shoot the bear? (*Sam begs him not to, points out that he hasn’t been raiding the apple trees, tells her father she won’t move, won’t stay another night in his house if he shoots the bear.*) Are you surprised? (*Answers will vary.*)
5. Who hypnotizes Sam? (*a psychiatrist in Norfolk whom Chip convinced her to see*) Is the session effective? (*She recalls details about the poacher’s hat and the truck she saw years ago near where Howell’s body lay.*)
6. Why do Chip and Sam go to see Slade again? (*Chip probably suspects that they can learn more from him about both murders; he asks Slade about cockfights.*)

7. What is a drop cloth? Why does Sam suddenly realize it was a drop cloth she saw the man carrying over the bundle? (*A drop cloth is used by painters to catch paint splatters, plaster, etc. When Sam sees Buddy Bailey get out of his truck in his painter's garb, she realizes he was the one she saw in the swamp and quickly puts two and two together.*) Why do both Chip and Sam recognize Buddy Bailey? (*Chip and Telford encountered him poaching; Sam saw him in the swamp.*) What do you suppose would happen if they confronted him? (*Answers will vary.*)
8. How did Chip "hide" in Columbus? (*After the accident, Chip went to live with his grandfather in Ohio, where he mostly stayed in the house, seldom went to school, took on a programming job that he could do at home.*) How does the reader learn this? (*Chip tells his father about these times while explaining why it is important to "come out of hiding" and speak at the meeting.*)
9. Why does Sam's father want her to go to the meeting? (*He is angry, wants to force her to listen to the other side.*) As her friend, would you advise her to go or stay home? (*Answers will vary.*)
10. Why doesn't Chip's father want him to go? (*He feels protective of his son, doesn't think the others will let Chip speak.*) As Chip's friend, would you advise him to listen to his father? (*Answers will vary.*)
11. **Prediction:** How will the meeting go? Will Chip and Sam regret attending?

Supplementary Activities

1. Literary Analysis/Theme: Explain that a *theme* of a novel is an important idea in a story—a "message." It is often about the way people deal with problems in life. What characters in a story learn is often a clue to the theme. The title and comments made by particular characters also offer clues to the theme.

Ask students what they think of Chip's comment that "There comes a time you've got to stand up for yourself" (page 186). What does he mean? How has he learned this? What has Sam learned from him and from her experiences in the swamp?

2. Research: Find out more about the history of the town meeting in the political process of this country. Where can you go to find town meetings still being held? What sorts of issues are discussed? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these meetings?
3. Writing: Write about one of the two topics below.
 - a) Write an interior monologue that reveals what Buddy is thinking as he talks to Slade, then burns his mackinaw.
 - b) Write the one-sided conversation that YOU would have with Henry.