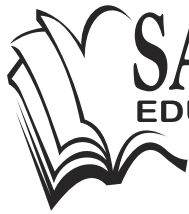


# *Focus* **ON READING**

*A Long Way  
from Chicago*

LISA FRENCH

This is a sample not intended for classroom use.



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# Introduction/Classroom Management

## WELCOME TO *FOCUS ON READING*

*Focus on Reading* literature study guides are designed to help all students comprehend and analyze their reading. Many teachers have grappled with the question of how to make quality literature accessible to all students. Students who are already avid readers of quality literature are motivated to read and are familiar with prereading and reading strategies. However, struggling readers frequently lack basic reading skills and are not equipped with the prior knowledge and reading strategies to thoroughly engage in the classroom literature experience.

*Focus on Reading* is designed to make teachers' and students' lives easier! How? By providing materials that allow all students to take part in reading quality literature. Each *Focus on Reading* study guide contains activities that focus on vocabulary and comprehension skills that students need to get the most from their reading. In addition, each section within the guide contains a before-reading **Focus Your Reading** page containing tools to ensure success: **Vocabulary Words to Know**, **Things to Know**, and **Questions to Think About**. These study aids will help students who may not have the prior knowledge they need to truly comprehend the reading.

## USING *FOCUS ON READING*

*Focus on Reading* is designed to make it easy for you to meet the individual needs of students who require additional reading skills support. Each *Focus on Reading* study guide contains teacher and student support materials, reproducible student activity sheets, an end-of-book test, and an answer key.

- **Focus on the Book**, a convenient reference section for the teacher, provides a brief overview of the entire book including a synopsis, information about the setting, author data, and historical background.
- **Focus Your Knowledge**, a reference page for students, is a whole-book, prereading activity designed to activate prior knowledge and immerse students in the topic.

The study guide divides the novel into 6 manageable sections to make it easy to plan classroom time. Five activities are devoted to each section of the novel.

## Before Reading

- **Focus Your Reading** consists of 3 prereading sections:

**Vocabulary Words to Know** lists and defines 10 vocabulary words students will encounter in their reading. Students will not have to interrupt their reading to look up, ask for, or spend a lot of time figuring out the meaning of unfamiliar words. These words are later studied in-depth within the lesson.

**Things to Know** identifies terms or concepts that are integral to the reading but that may not be familiar to today's students. This section is intended to "level the playing field" for those students who may not have much prior knowledge about the time period, culture, or theme of the book. It also gets students involved with the book, increasing interest before they begin reading.

**Questions to Think About** helps students focus on the main ideas and important details they should be looking for as they read. This activity helps give students a *purpose* for reading. The goal of these guiding questions is to build knowledge, confidence, and comfort with the topics in the reading.

## During Reading

- **Build Your Vocabulary** presents the 10 unit focus words in the exact context of the book. Students are then asked to write their own definitions and sentences for the words.
- **Check Your Understanding: Multiple Choice** offers 10 multiple-choice, literal comprehension questions for each section.

**Check Your Understanding: Short Answer** contains 10 short-answer questions based on the reading.

## After Reading

- **Deepen Your Understanding** is a writing activity that extends appreciation and analysis of the book. This activity focuses on critical-thinking skills and literary analysis.
- **End-of-Book Test** contains 20 multiple-choice items covering the book. These items ask questions that require students to synthesize the information in the book and make inferences in their answers.

## CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

*Focus on Reading* is very flexible. It can be used by the whole class, by small groups, or by individuals. Each study guide divides the novel into 6 manageable units of study.

This literature comprehension program is simple to use. Just photocopy the lessons and distribute them at the appropriate time as students read the novel.

You may want to reproduce and discuss the **Focus Your Knowledge** page before distributing the paperbacks. This page develops and activates prior knowledge to ensure that students have a grounding in the book before beginning reading. After reading this whole-book prereading page, students are ready to dive into the book.

The **Focus Your Reading** prereading activities are the keystone of this program. They prepare students for what they are going to read, providing focus for the complex task of reading. These pages should be distributed before students actually begin reading the corresponding section of the novel. There are no questions to be answered on these pages; these are for reference and support during reading. Students may choose to take notes on these pages as they read. This will also give students a study tool for review before the **End-of-Book Test**.

The **Focus Your Reading** pages also provide an excellent bridge to home. Parents, mentors, tutors, or

other involved adults can review vocabulary words with students, offer their own insights about the historical and cultural background outlined, and become familiar with the ideas students will be reading about. This can help families talk to students in a meaningful way about their reading, and it gives the adults something concrete to ask about to be sure that students are reading and understanding.

The **Build Your Vocabulary** and **Check Your Understanding: Multiple Choice** and **Short Answer** activities should be distributed when students begin reading the corresponding section of the novel. These literature guide pages are intended to help students comprehend and retain what they read; they should be available for students to refer to at any time during the reading.

**Deepen Your Understanding** is an optional extension activity that goes beyond literal questions about the book, asking students for their own ideas and opinions—and the reasons behind them. These postreading activities generally focus on literary analysis.

As reflected in its title, the **End-of-Book Test** is a postreading comprehension test to be completed after the entire novel has been read.

For your convenience, a clear **Answer Key** simplifies the scoring process.

This is a sample not intended for classroom use.

## Focus on the Book

### Synopsis

Over the course of seven years, Joey Dowdel and his sister, Mary Alice, spend one week each August in an Illinois country town with their paternal grandmother. Formidable Grandma Dowdel is an unflappable, independent woman. She first alarms, then fascinates, Joey and Mary Alice as she chooses highly unorthodox means to achieve her unfailingly just ends. Through Joey's eyes, readers are drawn into the squabbles, rivalries, and social pretensions of small-town American life in the early twentieth century. Each chapter represents one summer and imparts one more humorous vignette in the children's series of visits. Grandma's character emerges more clearly as the years pass, while Joey and Mary Alice grow to admire and love her for her strength, loyalty, compassion, and deadpan humor.

In "Shotgun Cheatham's Last Night Above Ground (1929)," nine-year-old Joey and seven-year-old Mary Alice first arrive at Grandma's. Fresh from the city, the children are initially bored. When curiosity about a recently dead loner named Shotgun Cheatham lures a reporter to town, however, Grandma leaps into action, and boredom is banished. She misinforms the reporter about Shotgun's past, turns the dead man into a Civil War hero, and hosts his wake and funeral at her own house. When Grandma's cat sneaks into Shotgun's coffin and makes the gauzy drapery around the body move, it frightens everyone—except Grandma—out of their wits.

In "The Mouse in the Milk (1930)," Grandma and her "enemy," Effie Wilcox, are the targets of pranks by the Cowgill brothers, sons of the local dairy farmer. Grandma seeks reparation for her blown-up mailbox by pretending that she has left town for a day, then sets a trap into which the brothers promptly fall. Ultimately, by doctoring a bottle of Mr. Cowgill's fresh milk with a dead mouse, Grandma extorts her way to "justice"—a new mailbox for herself and punishment for the four boys.

In "A One-Woman Crime Wave (1931)," as Depression-era drifters move through town in search of food and work, Grandma drags the children along on an illegal catfishing trip. Catching the sheriff and his cronies at a drunken songfest in the woods, Grandma blackmails the sheriff into letting her serve the drifters a feast that night by the railroad tracks. Along the way,

the children learn that Grandma has been faithfully feeding and caring for an aged, isolated woman who was her first employer.

In "The Day of Judgment (1932)," Grandma is enticed into entering the baking contest at the county fair. Fearing that a rival will win the blue ribbon for his superior-looking gooseberry pie, Grandma switches the name tags in front of their baked goods. Unfortunately, her own pie—now assigned to her rival—wins the contest. Undaunted, Grandma practices a little sleight of hand and uses the blue ribbon from her hat to win a free airplane ride, which she eventually transfers to an eager Joey.

In "The Phantom Brakeman (1933)," Mary Alice harbors a downtrodden girl, Vandalia Eubanks, in Grandma's house as Vandalia tries to escape the clutches of her grasping, critical mother. Eventually, Grandma capitalizes on a local ghost story to help Vandalia and her suitor, Junior Stubbs, elope on the Wabash Cannonball.

In "Things with Wings (1934)," Effie Wilcox is forced to leave town when the bank forecloses on her house. Resourceful Grandma makes a few minor adjustments to an old stovepipe hat and a quilt from her attic and takes them to the church rummage sale. Soon the town believes that these items once belonged to Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln, and the value of these items soars. Grandma leverages this rumor to get Effie's house back for her, "free and clear."

In "Centennial Summer (1935)," the final full chapter in the book, Joey and Mary Alice make their last visit to Grandma together. As the town celebrates its one-hundredth birthday, Grandma is once again goaded into competition against the banker's family. As usual, Grandma manages to make things come out "right," besting her rivals first in a talent show, then in a parade and contest for the town's "oldest settler."

"The Troop Train (1942)" is a brief afterword in which Joe Dowdel describes one last glimpse of Grandma as he rides an army train through the night en route to basic training camp. As the train passes through Grandma's town, Joey sees her house, lit up in greeting like a beacon of faith and hope. In the doorway stands Grandma, waving out into the night, solid and comforting as ever.

(continued)

## ***About the Author***

Richard Peck was born in 1934 in Decatur, a small town in central Illinois. As a boy, Peck dreamed of big-city life and foreign travel. After attending college in England and Indiana, he received his bachelor's degree in 1956, followed by a master's degree in 1959. Peck then became a high-school English teacher, which eventually served as a catalyst for his writing:

*From that first day in a classroom of my own, I heard the voices of the young, and found that I was no longer one of them. I'd never have become a writer without all this variety of voices, vocabulary, viewpoint. As an English teacher I learned things about the private life of the very young that their parents need never know.*

Since 1971, Peck has written over twenty books, including four young-adult novels featuring Blossom Culp. He has won numerous prestigious literary awards, including a Newbery Honor in 1999 for *A Long Way from Chicago* and the 2001 Newbery Award for its sequel, *A Year Down Yonder*. Peck now lives in New York City.

## ***Historical Background***

*A Long Way from Chicago* begins in August 1929. The Jazz Age—a boom time in the economic, technological, and cultural sectors of American life—was coming to an end. In the country, farmers were being forced to sell

their crops at minimal prices and could not pay their bills. In the cities, factory workers were earning very low wages while factory owners made record-breaking profits. Prohibition, voted in with the 18th Amendment in 1919, had essentially backfired, spawning an underworld bootlegging industry and spurring criminal organizations to new heights of power. In addition, the health of the stock market was questionable. Since millions of Americans in the 1920s had invested heavily in stocks with borrowed money, they risked being unable to pay back these debts should stock prices fall.

On October 24, 1929, the country faced the gravest economic crisis in its history when the stock market crashed. Shareholders lost over \$3 billion almost overnight. On October 29, stock prices tumbled again even more steeply. Stocks continued to decline for four years. Millions of Americans lost their jobs and their homes during this era, known as the Great Depression. President Herbert Hoover, whose attempts to remedy the situation were rather ineffectual, was voted out of office in 1932. His successor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, took office in March 1933 and brought Americans a New Deal. During Roosevelt's first 100 days in office, Congress passed fifteen new laws that authorized major bank loans, direct assistance to individuals and families, job programs, and farm subsidies. Although the Great Depression actually continued until the outbreak of World War II, conditions for many Americans improved during Roosevelt's terms in office.

**This is a sample not intended for classroom use.**

## *Focus Your Knowledge*

- In an atlas or on a wall map of the United States, find the state of Illinois. Where is Illinois in relation to the rest of the country? In what region of the country is Illinois located? What do you already know about this part of the country and its contributions to American life in the early twentieth century?
- Now find Chicago. How does Chicago compare with other towns and cities in Illinois in terms of size and location? How does it compare with other cities in the rest of the country? How do you think life in Chicago may have compared with life in less urban areas of Illinois in the early twentieth century?
- Review what you know about American life in the 1920s and 1930s. How much of the country was urban? How much was rural? How did most people in rural areas make their living? What did people in large towns and cities do for work?
- Think about communication and transportation systems in the early twentieth century. How did people stay in touch with each other then? How long did it take for news to spread? How important were the country's railroads in transporting both people and goods? How common were automobiles in the 1920s? the 1930s? How did most people get from place to place?
- The early chapters in this novel are set during a time when gangsters held a great deal of power in Chicago (as well as other American cities). What do you know about the Chicago "underworld" of Al Capone and other notorious criminals of the 1920s? How have these characters been portrayed in films and other media?
- Much of this novel is set during the Great Depression. What do you know about this time of economic and social crisis in the United States? How did people survive massive unemployment and poverty during the Depression years?

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I. PROLOGUE—SHOTGUN CHEATHAM'S  
LAST NIGHT ABOVE GROUND (1929)

BEFORE READING

## Focus Your Reading

### Vocabulary Words to Know

Study the following words and definitions. You will meet these words in your reading. Be sure to jot down in your word journal any other unknown words from the reading.

**privy**—a small building that serves as a crude toilet; outhouse

**snaggletoothed**—having crooked or broken teeth

**obituary**—a printed notice of someone's death

**hayseeds**—awkward and naïve country dwellers

**reprobate**—a person with an immoral character

**penitentiary**—a prison

**philanthropist**—a person who gives money to help others

**circumstances**—conditions, situations

**riveted**—paid complete attention to; rooted to the spot

**disfigured**—having one's looks marred by an injury or a wound

### Things to Know

Here is some background information about this section of the book.

**Al Capone** and **Bugs Moran** were archrivals in Chicago's gangster underworld. Both men ran illegal bootlegging and racketeering networks in the 1920s. On February 14, 1929, in the **St. Valentine's Day Massacre**, men from the Capone gang trapped seven men from the Moran gang in a garage. Believing that one of the seven was Bugs Moran, the Capone men killed the others with machine-gun fire. As it turned out, Moran was not there.

A **stiff** is an underworld term for a dead body. **Concrete overshoes** refer to the cement that gangsters sometimes put on their victims so that their dead bodies would sink to the bottom of a body of water.

**Prohibition** was the outlawing of the sale of alcoholic beverages in the United States. It was introduced by the 18th Amendment, which took effect in January 1920, and was repealed by the 20th Amendment, which took effect in January 1933.

The **Hupmobile** was an automobile that was made by the Hupp Motor Company in Detroit, Michigan, between 1909 and 1940. It was designed to be a reliable, sturdy car that could be afforded by many working people.

**I. PROLOGUE—SHOTGUN CHEATHAM'S  
LAST NIGHT ABOVE GROUND (1929)****BEFORE READING***Focus Your Reading**Questions to Think About*

The following questions will help you understand the meaning of what you read. You do not have to write out the answers to these questions. Instead, look at them before you begin reading, and think about them while you are reading.

1. In how many different ways can you interpret the title of this novel, *A Long Way from Chicago*?

2. Why do you think the author chose to write this book using the first-person point of view? (In the first-person point of view, the narrator of the story is an actor in the story. The reader only gets information that the narrator knows or experiences himself or herself.)

3. What motivates Grandma to trick people at times? Is this a good thing?

4. Do Joey's and Mary Alice's attitudes toward their grandmother change over time? If yes, in what ways?

5. When Joey talks about Grandma's town as a place to "ponder all the different kinds of truth," what do his words mean?

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I. PROLOGUE—SHOTGUN CHEATHAM'S  
LAST NIGHT ABOVE GROUND (1929)

DURING READING

*Build Your Vocabulary*

Read the sentences below. On the line, write your definition of the word in bold type. Then, on another sheet of paper, use that word in a new sentence of your own.

1. "For one thing, at Grandma's you had to go outside to the **privy**."  
privy: \_\_\_\_\_
2. "A big old **snaggletoothed** tomcat lived in the cobhouse, and as quick as you'd come out of the privy, he'd jump at you."  
snaggletoothed: \_\_\_\_\_
3. "The county seat newspaper didn't want to run an **obituary** on anyone called Shotgun, but nobody knew any other name for him."  
obituary: \_\_\_\_\_
4. "He wants to get the horselaugh on us because he thinks we're nothing but a bunch of **hayseeds** and no-'count country people."  
hayseeds: \_\_\_\_\_
5. "He was just an old **reprobate** who lived poor and died broke," Grandma said."  
reprobate: \_\_\_\_\_
6. "They were telling the reporter Shotgun killed a man and went to the **penitentiary**."  
penitentiary: \_\_\_\_\_
7. "Shotgun had gone from kill-crazy gunslinger to war-hero marksman. **Philanthropist**, even."  
philanthropist: \_\_\_\_\_
8. "In normal circumstances the family told stories about the departed to pass the long night hours."  
circumstances: \_\_\_\_\_
9. "The reporter was **riveted**, and Mrs. Wilcox was sinking fast."  
riveted: \_\_\_\_\_
10. "But apart from scattered shot, she hadn't **disfigured** Shotgun Cheatham any more than he already was."  
disfigured: \_\_\_\_\_

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**I. PROLOGUE—SHOTGUN CHEATHAM'S  
LAST NIGHT ABOVE GROUND (1929)****DURING READING**

## Check Your Understanding

### Multiple Choice

Circle the letter of the best answer to each question.

- How long each summer do Joey and Mary Alice spend with Grandma?
  - the month of August
  - two weeks
  - one week
- Where is Grandma's house located?
  - near the center of town
  - the last house in town
  - the first house in town
- How old are Joey and Mary Alice when they pay their first visit to Grandma?
  - eight and six
  - nine and seven
  - ten and eight
- Why does Mary Alice say that she can't stand it at Grandma's?
  - because she hates using the privy
  - because she misses her parents
  - because it is hotter than Chicago
- Why does the big-city reporter come to town asking about Shotgun Cheatham?
  - He is related to Shotgun.
  - August is a slow month for news, and Shotgun's story seems promising.
  - He is writing a book on the James brothers, and Shotgun was once part of the James brothers' gang.
- What does Grandma tell Joey and Mary Alice about how Shotgun got his name?
  - He accidentally shot a cow when he was ten.
  - Jesse James gave him the name.
  - General Grant gave him the name.
- What does Grandma tell the reporter about Effie Wilcox?
  - Effie was once married to Shotgun.
  - Effie has recently been in the hospital for the insane.
  - Effie is the smartest woman in town.
- Why does Grandma want a fancy funeral for Shotgun Cheatham?
  - She feels sorry for his family.
  - She and Effie were his good friends.
  - She wants to trick the reporter into thinking that Shotgun was a hero.
- Why does Grandma fire her gun in the middle of the night?
  - She fears Shotgun has come back to life.
  - She wants to kill the doctor drawing a Shotgun's coffin.
  - She wants Effie and the reporter to think that Shotgun is trying to get out of his coffin.
- What does Mary Alice say about her experience at Shotgun Cheatham's funeral?
  - It made her want to be like Grandma.
  - It gave her nightmares for years.
  - It made her want to be a reporter.

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## Check Your Understanding

### Short Answer

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Write a short answer for each question.

1. Why does Joey say that he and his sister seemed to see a “different woman every summer” when they visited Grandma?
2. Why is Grandma Dowdel not considered a popular woman?
3. Why is Joey surprised that he and his sister had to “leave Chicago to see a dead body”?
4. According to Joey, what has made it hard for his family to stay in close touch with Grandma?
5. How do Joey and Mary Alice get to Grandma’s?
6. When Joey and Mary Alice stroll “uptown” during their first visit, how does Joey describe it?
7. Why doesn’t the county seat newspaper want to run an obituary on Shotgun Cheatham?
8. What does Grandma think the newspaper reporter is after when he comes to town?
9. According to Grandma, where in town did Shotgun live?
10. When Grandma fires her gun, how does the reporter leave the house?

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I. PROLOGUE—SHOTGUN CHEATHAM'S  
LAST NIGHT ABOVE GROUND (1929)

## AFTER READING

*Deepen Your Understanding*

“‘And I wasn’t no Annie Oakley myself, except with squirrels.’ Grandma was still at the door, fanning her apron. Then in the same voice she said, ‘Looks like we got company. Take them tomatoes off the fire.’”

In this novel, all of the characters speak informal English. They do not always use correct grammar, and they sprinkle their speech with idioms—special phrases that cannot be taken literally. When Joey says that he and Mary Alice had to go all the way from Chicago before they could “set eyes on a corpse,” he is using an idiom. Obviously, the children are not actually placing their eyes on a dead body; they are just looking at one.

The novel also contains many *similes* and *metaphors*. These are special ways to compare two very different kinds of things. In a simile, the word *like* or *as* signals the comparison. In a metaphor, these words are omitted. When Joey says that Grandma is “tough as an old boot,” he is using a simile. Later, when he says that Grandma “wasn’t no oil painting herself,” he is using a metaphor.

With all of these techniques, the author has tried to create the everyday voices of the rural Midwest in the 1930s. This “real-life” regional language is called *the vernacular*. It helps make Joey’s story about life in Grandma’s town fresher and more believable.

Write a paragraph in which you use the vernacular to describe a colorful character you have either known or imagined. In your paragraph, try to use several idioms, at least one simile, and at least one metaphor.

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