



Mosswood Connections

A Long Way from Chicago by Richard Peck Lesson and Activities

Summary

Joey Dowdel and his sister Mary Alice are first shipped off to visit their Grandma Dowdel in the summer of 1929. Being city kids from Chicago, they are none too pleased to be packed off to the boonies for a visit with a grandmother they hadn't seen since they were "tykes."

But Grandma Dowdel is no ordinary Grandma, and these two kids learn to always expect the unexpected. This town that they first saw as sleepy and dull, transformed in their eyes all through helping Grandma carry out her plans. She squeezes off a couple of rounds from her shotgun - right in her own living room. She teaches a family of bullies a lesson they won't soon forget. She strong-arms a banker into returning something rightfully belonging to someone else - and demands a few bucks for the grandkids for good measure.

Over the years, and beneath that steely exterior, Joey and Mary Alice start to see a whole new and surprising side to Grandma Dowdel. And they begin to look forward to each summer adventure, always wondering: what will she be up to next?

Content Standard(s):	ELA(7)	1. Apply strategies appropriate to the type of reading material, including setting purposes for reading and making generalizations, to comprehend seventh-grade recreational reading materials.
	ELA(7)	2. Relate literary elements and devices to each other, including main idea and supporting details, climax, point of view, and imagery.
	ELA(7)	7. Interpret the author's message in various literary, informational, and functional texts.
	TC2(6-8)	9. Practice responsible and legal use of technology systems and digital content.
	TC2(6-8)	11. Use digital tools and strategies to locate, collect, organize, evaluate, and synthesize information.
	ELA2010(7)	26. Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation. [W.7.7]
	ELA2010(7)	27. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation. [W.7.8]
	ELA2010(7)	33. Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with pertinent descriptions, facts, details, and examples; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation. [SL.7.4]
	ELA2010(7)	36. Demonstrate command of the conventions of Standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking. [L.7.1]
	ELA2010(7)	38. Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening. [L.7.3]



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Seven Rules about Episodic Fiction

1. The work involves a dynamic character, one who changes in fits and starts throughout the course of the story.
2. Episodes vary in length.
3. Episodes are roughly chronological, but not specifically so.
4. A single unifying device runs throughout the story, appearing in each episode.
5. Episodes are not related directly by cause and effect; instead, all are related to a central theme.
6. If a traditional short story is a movie, moving in a linear fashion from beginning to end, an episodic story is more like a slide show or a music video.
7. And finally, to borrow a rule from George Orwell, "Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous."

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Writing Prompts

- 1) Write about something funny that happened on your summer vacation. Compare your experience with Joey's.
- 2) **Cities vs. Small Towns.** Compare and contrast life in the city and country. Where do you live? Would you rather live in Chicago or a small town in Illinois? Why?
- 3) **Grandma.** The children spend summers with their grandmother. Read about Grandmothers. Write your own parent or grandparent poem. Read about Grandma Annie O'Neill. Write a story about an older person who is doing great thing
- 4) **Newspaper Article** Pretend that you are a journalist. Write a story about Grandma based on one of the chapters
- 5) As Joey points out in this chapter, Chicago during the 1920's was quite famous for its notorious gangsters. In addition to **Al Capone** and **Bugs Moran**, men such as **Sam Giancana**, **Albert Anselmi**, **Tony Accardo** ruled the underworld of America's second largest city. Your task is to investigate a mobster from the 1920's and write a brief report on him/her. This report should contain at least four interesting facts. As a twist to this assignment, you can do a law enforcement official of this era instead (i.e. **Eliot Ness**).
- 6) **Talk Show:** With two or three other students prepare to participate in a television talk show featuring characters from this chapter. Choose an interesting character from the book (it doesn't necessarily have to be Grandma). Prepare about a half-dozen questions to ask and possible answers. Bonus: Act out your interview in front of your class.



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Literature Circle Questions

1. Where did Joey and Mary Alice go for the summer? Why?
2. Is it true that Grandma Dowdel doesn't 'give two hoots about the town'? Why or why not?
3. Who won the blue ribbon for the best gooseberry pie? Explain.
4. Who is the 'One Woman Crime Wave'? Why is she described this way?
5. How do Joey and Mary Alice change during *The Day of Judgement*? What do they believe at the beginning of the chapter? What do they believe at the end?
6. List all the things (activities, money, tools, etc.) that were different in the 1930's from today. Then make a list of things that are the same.
7. When do you think Joe stops thinking of Grandma Dowdel as a bad influence? Why? Does Mary Alice have different ideas about Grandma Dowdel? Why?
8. Describe how Grandma Dowdel goes about getting justice from the Cowgills? What do you think would be Grandma's definition of justice?
9. Do you notice any different rules or expectations for men and women in Grandma Dowdel's town? Are there things men can do that women can't? Are there things that women can do that men can't? How do you think Grandma Dowdel would have behaved differently if she were a man?
10. How does Joey feel about Grandma Dowdel's fish trap? Does he have any problems with it? What does he like about it?
11. Even though they never appear in the story, what do you think Joe's and Mary Alice's parents are like? What clues can you find in the story to their personalities?
12. Explain what Grandma Dowdel means by 'apart from its historical significance' on page 117.
13. Who is the better role model for the kids: O.B. Dickerson or Grandma Dowdel? Why? What is a role model supposed to provide?
14. Look at young Weidenbach's song at the end of the book. What is its message? Is it the same message of the book?



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Suggested Answers to the Literature Circle Questions

1. Where did Joey and Mary Alice go for the summer? Why?

They go for one week every August to visit their grandmother (pg. 1). The kids live in Chicago where their parents do not have a car and their grandmother does not have a phone, so they go to spend time with her.

2. Is it true that Grandma Dowdel doesn't 'give two hoots about the town'? Why or why not?

Grandma Dowdel enjoys her privacy and does not enjoy anyone gossiping about her, but she loves the town and the people within it. She demonstrates this by bringing the Cowgills to justice, baking her gooseberry pie to represent the town, and getting her old enemy Mrs. Effie Wilcox's house back from the bank that possessed it.

3. Who won the blue ribbon for the best gooseberry pie? Explain.

Rupert Pennypacker received the blue ribbon for the best gooseberry pie, but Grandma was actually the one who baked it. Grandma was afraid that her pie would lose to Mr. Pennypacker and she wanted the blue ribbon, so she switched nametags on the pies (pg. 78).

4. Who is the 'One Woman Crime Wave'? Why is she described this way?

Grandma is the 'One Woman Crime Wave.' She is described this way because she brews beer even though it is the Prohibition, she illegally traps catfish in fish traps, (pg. 45) and she feeds the drifters that the Sheriff has told to get out of town (pg. 58).

5. How do Joey and Mary Alice change during *The Day of Judgment*? What do they believe at the beginning of the chapter? What do they believe at the end?

At the beginning of the chapter, they believe that Grandma would do anything to win a challenge, but in her quest to win the blue ribbon for the best gooseberry pie she lost the blue ribbon that she actually won and deserved by switching name tags with a competitor. At the end, they see that you need to believe in yourself and your best effort. They also come to see that Grandma will do anything to help them get what they want out of life. For example, Grandma, without seeming to, gave Joe the winning ride in the airplane.

6. List all the things (activities, money, tools, etc.) that were different in the 1930's from today. Then make a list of things that are the same.

***Different.* Milk was delivered, few people had telephones, few people owned cars, many people grew their own food, few women worked outside of their homes, less money could purchase much more, and it**



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was illegal to drink alcohol.

Same: Kids jumped rope, people fished, people traveled by train, people went to the movies for entertainment, people gossiped, neighbors helped each other out, and town fairs and talent shows were held.

7. When do you think Joe stops thinking of Grandma Dowdel as a bad influence? Why? Does Mary Alice have different ideas about Grandma Dowdel? Why?

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Joe stops thinking of Grandma Dowdel as a bad influence after the gooseberry pie contest. He realized that Grandma was going to do anything to get him the ride that he wanted in airplane. Joe came to see that most of the crazy things Grandma did were to benefit her friends and family, and in her own rough and gruff way she was constantly telling them how much she loved them. By 1932, their fourth summer with Grandma, Mary Alice has begun to really enjoy and look up to Grandma. She recognizes Grandma's warmth and caring, but loves that Grandma is independent, smart, and will find a way to get what she wants. She sees her as a unique and wonderful woman.

8. Describe how Grandma Dowdel goes about getting justice from the Cowgills? What do you think would be Grandma's definition of justice?

Grandma Dowdel knew that the Cowgills knocked down her mailbox and Effie Wilcox's privies. So when her milk was next delivered she left her gun out to show the Cowgills what they could steal, lied to Ernie Cowgill that she was leaving town, and lied that she had found a dead mouse in her milk. As expected, the Cowgills came to her home to steal her gun. She caught them and had their parents brought to her home to show them what their sons were up to. Then she demanded that the Cowgills pay for the screen that the boys cut and buy her a new mailbox. Then she showed the Cowgills the bottle of milk that she had added a mouse to and claimed the boys had done it. She said that she would spread rumors that the boys often did this to hurt the Cowgills business. Grandma did not think it was right for the boys to prey on old widows and demanded that the boys be whipped by their father. I think Grandma would define justice as 'an eye for an eye.' If the Cowgill boys thought they were going to hurt her by destroying her mailbox, then she was going to hurt them right back using their parents to punish them (pgs. 19-35).

9. Do you notice any different rules or expectations for men and women in Grandma Dowdel's town? Are there things men can do that women can't? Are there things that women can do that men can't? How do you think Grandma Dowdel would have behaved differently if she were a man?

In the 1930's, men and women typically had more distinct and different roles. Men would earn money for their families while women tended to the business of a home like raising children, cooking, and cleaning. It would have been strange for the women to work as bankers and the men to stay at home. But as Grandma Dowdel shows, she is completely self-sufficient and does the jobs of both a man and a woman. She farms, cooks, cleans, takes care of her family and friends. Grandma Dowdel does as she pleases and does not worry about what other think of her behavior, so her behavior wouldn't change much if she were a man.

10. How does Joey feel about Grandma Dowdel's fish trap? Does he have any problems with it? What does he like about it?



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Joey doesn't know what to feel about Grandma Dowdel's fish trap because he knows that using a fish trap was illegal and could carry a five dollar fine. His father was also a member of the Conservation Club who tied his own flies and valued good sportsmanship (pg. 45). So because of his father, Joey feel the trap might not be right to use, but he liked the fishing was done all at once (pg. 46).

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11. Even though they never appear in the story, what do you think Joe's and Mary Alice's parents are like? What clues can you find in the story to their personalities?

Joe and Mary Alice say that their parents would not let them do see John Dillinger's body, they were city people, their father loved fishing (pg. 45), and they paid for Mary Alice to take dance lessons. It sounds like they are conservative and don't want to take too many risks by illegally fishing or letting their children view a dead body (pg. 103). But one of them had Grandma Dowdel as a parent, so she probably instilled in her children a sense of adventure and love of life.

12. Explain what Grandma Dowdel means by 'apart from its historical significance' on page 117.

Grandma manufactured historical artifacts that she claimed were found in Effie Wilcox's home. She made a quilt look like it belonged to Mary Todd Lincoln (pg. 113) and a stovepipe hat look like it belonged to Abraham Lincoln (pg. 114). The townspeople believed in these artifacts and Grandma was able to claim that Lincoln once spent time in Mrs. Wilcox's home and that it should not be torn down by the bank. Thus Grandma was saying that the home had no value apart from its historical significance, a significance that was fabricated by Grandma.

13. Who is the better role model for the kids: O.B. Dickerson or Grandma Dowdel? Why? What is a role model supposed to provide?

Grandma Dowdel is a much better role model. The sheriff, O.B. Dickerson, pretends to uphold the law, but instead he gets drunk with his fishing pals (pg. 49) and tries to run starving drifters out of town so that they don't bother the townspeople (pg. 58). Whereas Grandma often breaks the law, but she always does in order to benefit a person in need or to demonstrate the error in a person's ways. A role model should be a model of good behavior that young people can turn to as a guide. Grandma makes a wonderful role model because she is smart, resourceful, just, generous, and consistently works to benefit and enrich the lives of other people in her town.

14. Look at young Weidenbach's song at the end of the book. What is its message? Is it the same message of the book?

The message of young Weidenbach's song is that it is much better to be a boy than to be a girl. This is not the same message of the book. The two main female characters, Grandma and Mary Alice, are more brave, honest, and resourceful than most of the men and boys in the story. For example, the Cowgill boys knock down Grandma's mailbox and tear down Mrs. Wilcox's privies. The sheriff gets drunk on the job even though it is illegal. Mr. Weidenbach, the head of the bank, tries to tear down Mrs. Wilcox's house. Whereas Grandma saves Mrs. Wilcox's house, gets the Cowgill boys punished, and bakes pies in an attempt to win the town a blue ribbon in the fair.



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MORE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Describe Joey and Mary Alice's relationship with Grandma Dowdel. Discuss why their parents thought it so important that they get to know their Grandma. What kind of mother do you think Grandma Dowdel was to Joey and Mary Alice's father? Joey says that Grandma frightens his mother-Grandma's daughter-in-law. What characteristics of Grandma make her so frightening?
2. Joe Dowdel is an adult sharing his memories of Grandma Dowdel. He says, "*Are all my memories true? Every word, and growing truer with the years.*" (p. 1) What does Joe mean when he says, "growing truer with years?" What kind of relationship do you think Joe Dowdel has with his grandchildren? Discuss whether the summers spent with Grandma Dowdel might have shaped the kind of grandfather he became.
3. Why does Mary Alice say, "*I don't think Grandma's a very good influence on us*"? (p. 61) How is she a good influence on her grandchildren? Ask the students to debate whether Grandma is a "bad influence" or a "good role model."
4. Grandma Dowdel never seems to show affection. How do you know that she loves her grandchildren?
5. Why does Grandma Dowdel display the body of Shotgun Cheatham in her parlor? Discuss what Grandma means when she says, "A rumor is sometimes truth on the trail." (p. 115)
6. During their visit in 1931, Joey and Mary Alice realize that Grandma Dowdel runs illegal fish traps. Why is it important to have hunting and fishing laws? What department in state government is responsible for monitoring such laws? They vow never to tell their dad about this. Discuss what other things Joey and Mary Alice discover about Grandma that they are likely to keep to themselves. Why does Sheriff Dickerson call Grandma a "*one-woman crime-wave*"? (p. 57)
7. One of Grandma's weapons is blackmail. Discuss the numerous times in the novel that she uses blackmail to help people. What does the phrase "larger than life" mean? How does this fit Grandma?
8. During which summer do you think Joey and Mary Alice learn the true character of Grandma?
9. Joey says, "*As the years went by, we'd seem to see a different woman every summer.*" (p.1) Discuss whether it's Grandma that changes, or Joey and Mary Alice.



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Vocabulary

A	B
gunnysack	a sack made of a coarse heavy fabric (as burlap)
douse	to throw a liquid on; extinguish
shimmied	to shake, quiver, or tremble
stifled	to withhold from circulation or expression; repress
contraption	device; gadget
ramshackle	appearing ready to collapse; rickety; carelessly or loosely constructed
hightailed	to move at full speed or rapidly in making a retreat
plug nickel	worthless
flue	an enclosed passageway for directing a current; a channel in a chimney for conveying flame and smoke to the outer air
bawled	to cry loudly; wail
posse	a large group often with a common interest; a body of persons summoned by a sheriff to assist in preserving the public peace



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keeled	to fall in or as if in a faint
forecloses	to deprive (a mortgagor) of the right to redeem mortgaged property, as when payments have not been made
galleon	a heavy square-rigged sailing ship of the 15th to early 18th centuries
loafer	one that loafes; an idler
revel	to take intense pleasure or satisfaction
gratis	without charge; free
aerial	of, relating to, or occurring in the air
chaw	a chew especially of tobacco
hoist	to lift; raise
Prohibition	forbidding the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages
apt	exactly suitable; appropriate
reprobate	a morally unprincipled person
philanthropist	lover of humankind, charitable
sawhorse	a frame with legs, used to support pieces of wood
codger	a somewhat eccentric man, old man



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loll	to move, stand, or recline in a relaxed manner
riveted	to engross or hold (attention)
smithereens	fragments or splintered pieces
waft	to cause to go gently through the air or water
galoot	a person, clumsy or uncouth
eaves	the projecting overhand at the lower edge of a roof
woozy	dazed and confused
settee	a long wood bench or sofa
maw	slang for mother
depot	a railroad or bus station
pilfer	to steal
ransack	to search or examine thoroughly
strop	a strap, or rope, used for sharpening a razor
lamented	to express grief for or about; mourn
vat	a large vessel, such as a tub, to hold liquid
poise	a state of balance or equilibrium; stability; composure
grubby	dirty; grimy



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scuttle	a metal pail for carrying coal
lye	a strong alkaline liquid rich in potassium carbonate leached from wood ash; to make soap
unfurl	unroll, unfold, or spread out to be unrolled
jimmy	to move or force in an effort to get something open
abdicated	to relinquish (power of responsibility) formally (in the book, the character meant to use the word that means "kidnapped")
shriek	a shrill, often frantic cry
shrouded	wrapped (a corpse) in burial clothing; shut off from sight or screened
valise	a small piece of hand luggage
anvil	a heavy block of iron or steel with a smooth, flat top
gander	a look or glance
frazzle	condition of exhaustion
belfry	a bell tower
crackbrained	insanely irresponsible



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estate	one's possessions, property, and debts left at death
cockeyed	foolish, ridiculous, absurd
bogus	counterfeit or fake; not genuine
cootie	a parasitic louse that infests the body of human beings (in the book the character meant to use the word that means "an eccentric or crotchety person")
centennial	a 100th anniversary or its celebration
patooties	a rear end
derby	a man's tiff felt hat with a domed shaped crown and narrow brim
bustle	a pad or framework expanding and supporting the fullness and drapery of the back of a woman's dress or skirt
scrapple	a seasoned mixture of ground meat and cornmeal set in a mold and served sliced and fried
gallivanting	to travel, roam, or move about for pleasure
mixers	a dance used as a get-together to give members of a group an



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	opportunity to meet one another in a friendly informal atmosphere
nigh	near
vermin	small common harmful animals such as fleas, lice, and mice that are hard to control
Victrola	a phonograph/record player
curtsey	a slight lowering of the body with the bending of the knees done by women to show respect
garbed	to cover with clothing, dress
mocker	an object of scorn or derision
clodhopper	a clumsy and uncouth person
brawling	to quarrel or fight noisily
basic training	fundamental instruction, discipline, and drill that a person learns when they join the military
siding	a short railroad track connected with the main track
crap game	a gambling game played with two dice