

BOOKNOTES

educators guide



Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-83486-8 • GLB: 978-0-375-93486-5
Listening Library CD: 978-0-7393-7128-2

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Bullying
Father-Son Relationships
Values in Conflict • Courage
Sacrifice • Abandonment

GRADES 5 UP

ABOUT THE BOOK

Nick and Marta set out to solve the mystery surrounding the disappearance of Mrs. Starch, the most feared teacher at Truman School, and in the process expose a crooked oil-drilling operation.

Mrs. Starch takes her biology students on a field trip to Black Vine Swamp, but the smell of fire cuts their trip short. The students return to school, but Mrs. Starch isn't with them. There are rumors regarding her disappearance, but the school principal only says that she is away on a "family emergency." The police think that Smoke, the school delinquent, is responsible, but Nick and Marta don't buy it. They set out to solve the mystery by going to Mrs. Starch's home on Buzzard Lane where they encounter an eccentric man who claims to be Bunny Starch's nephew. He leads them on a journey back into the swamp where they make a surprising discovery . . . Mrs. Starch and Smoke, two unlikely soul mates, on a mission to reunite a baby panther with its mother. But, there is still a missing piece to the puzzle: Who set the fire, and why?

"Hiaasen is able to portray the world as flawed, weird, yet sometimes wonderful."

—USA Today

Visit Teachers @ Random at www.randomhouse.com/teachers



PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to find sites on the Internet or newspaper and magazine articles to help them understand oil drilling and oil usage in present-day America. Then engage them in a discussion about whether land like the Everglades should be kept pristine from oil drilling and mining, or if drilling and mining should be allowed. Be sure that students address the impact on animals (especially endangered species) and their habitats.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

BULLYING

Ask students to discuss behaviors that best characterize a bully. Then have them name the bullies in the novel. Dr. Dressler and the police might label Smoke a bully, but Nick says that Smoke doesn't really bother anyone. Debate the difference between criminal behavior and bullying. At what point in the novel does the reader know that Smoke is quite the opposite of a bully? Contrast the way Mrs. Starch bullies her students with the way she treats the baby panther. Discuss the difference between bullying and blackmail. How does Mrs. Winship use blackmail to help her grandson and son-in-law? Discuss Drake McBride's attempt at blackmail. Why doesn't it work for him?

FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIPS

Have students contrast Nick's relationship with his father to that of Smoke and his father. What about Twilly Spree? How does his relationship with his father shape the life he has chosen to lead? Discuss Mrs. Winship's role in helping Duane, Sr., understand Smoke's need for a "real father."

VALUES IN CONFLICT

Twilly admires Nick, Marta, and Smoke because they "were tough and brave and determined to do the right thing, qualities that were often lacking among grown-ups." (p. 367) What lessons do Nick and Marta learn about preserving the land and protecting endangered animals? How does their quest to do the right thing expose greedy grown-ups? Explain the phrase "Hope springs eternal." Discuss whether this is the overall theme of the novel.

COURAGE

There are many characters in the novel who display courage. Ask students to discuss the character they feel is the most courageous. Smoke displays one type of courage when he

stands up to Mrs. Starch at the beginning of the novel. How does he show a different type of courage as the plot develops? What do Smoke and Mrs. Starch teach Nick and Marta about courage?

SACRIFICE

Nick's father joins the army reserve in order to have extra money to send Nick to Truman School. What is his ultimate sacrifice? Explain what Nick, Marta, Smoke, and Mrs. Starch sacrifice to save the panther cub. What does this reveal about their character? What is the irony of Nick breaking his right arm?

ABANDONMENT

Ask students to discuss Smoke's feelings of abandonment. How do these feelings contribute to his past criminal record? Debate whether his dedication to reuniting the panther and her kitten is related to his feelings of abandonment. Mrs. Starch is also the victim of abandonment. Discuss how she deals with her feelings. What other characters in the novel deal with abandonment? How has this shaped the way in which they live?



CONNECTING TO THE CURRICULUM

LANGUAGE ARTS

Mrs. Starch says, “A teacher’s job is to identify and cultivate each student’s strength, and then encourage him or her to utilize those strengths in the pursuit of knowledge.” (p. 7) Ask students to write an essay from the point of view of Nick, Marta, or Smoke titled “What I Learned from Mrs. Starch.”

Write a feature story that might have appeared in local and national newspapers after Mrs. Starch and her three students return from Black Vine Swamp. Title the article: “Teacher and Students Save Baby Panther and Expose Crooked Oil-Drilling Operation.”

SOCIAL STUDIES

Have students find out the purpose of the Sierra Club (www.sierraclub.org). How do the activities of this club relate to both science and social studies? One of the initiatives of the club is to promote National Public Lands Day that is celebrated each year on September 29. Ask students to read about various ways people have marked this celebration. Then have them plan several activities for a celebration in their school.

SCIENCE

Instruct students to find out the endangered plants and animals in their state. Then have them pick one to research and write about for a science column in a school newspaper. They may begin by visiting the following Web site: www.endangeredspecies.com. Encourage them to end their paper with a plea for protecting these endangered species.

DRAMA

Ask students to stage a television talk show with Nick, Marta, Smoke, and Mrs. Starch as guests. The interviewer should ask questions that directly relate to saving the panther cub and exposing the Red Diamond Energy Company. Encourage students to use the information that they learned in the pre-reading activity, and have Al Gore as a surprise guest on the show. What might he say to Mrs. Starch and her three students?

ART

Ask students to design a “Save the Earth” postcard. Then have them write a message on the back of the postcard to Twilly from Nick, Marta, or Smoke.

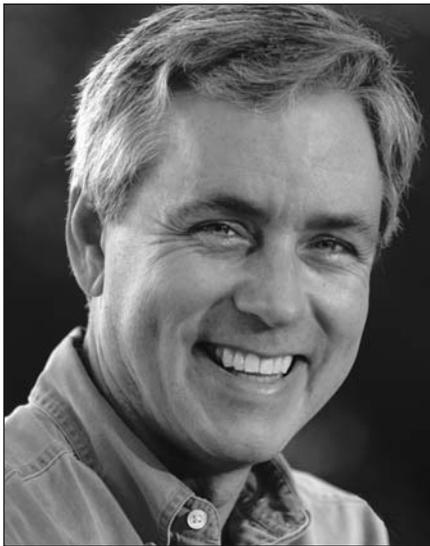
Illustration © 2008 by Isabel Warren-Lynch

VOCABULARY | USE OF LANGUAGE

Ask students to write down unfamiliar words and try to define them by taking clues from the context of the novel.

Such words may include:

p. 2	<i>regurgitation</i>	p. 90	<i>intimidated</i>	p. 136	<i>menagerie</i>	p. 356	<i>ominously</i>
p. 2	<i>anvil</i>	p. 96	<i>leverage</i>	p. 165	<i>culprit</i>	p. 343	<i>prelude</i>
p. 3	<i>tactical</i>	p.116	<i>bogus</i>	p. 230	<i>agitated</i>	p. 358	<i>ballistic</i>
p. 25	<i>confiscated</i>	p. 118	<i>maimed</i>	p. 269	<i>jargon</i>		
p. 67	<i>trepidation</i>	p. 126	<i>liberate</i>	p. 290	<i>recuperate</i>		
p. 76	<i>traipse</i>	p. 136	<i>infinity</i>	p. 309	<i>compensate</i>		



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carl Hiaasen, a columnist for the *Miami Herald*, is the author of many bestselling novels for adults, including *Sick Puppy* and *Basket Case*. He has been writing about Florida since he was six when his father gave him a typewriter. *Hoot*, Hiaasen's first novel for young readers, was named a Newbery Honor Book in 2003. *Flush* and *Scat* also take a satirical look at the weird and sometimes criminal goings-on in the wilds of Florida.

For more information about the author, visit www.carlhiaasen.com

INTERNET RESOURCES

Florida Panther Net

www.floridaconservation.org/panther

Defenders of Wildlife

www.defenders.org/wildlife_and_habitat/wildlife/panther.php

The Nature Conservancy

www.nature.org

Dealing with Bullies

www.kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/emotion/bullies.html

Everglades Foundation

www.evergladesfoundation.org

ON THE WEB

For bios, teachers guides, and more, visit our FREE online site:

Teachers @RANDOM

Be sure to sign up for our online newsletter at:
www.randomhouse.com/teachers



Search over 100 themes and holidays
for books for your classroom!

RELATED TITLES BY THEME



Flush

Carl Hiaasen

Values in Conflict • Bullying
Father-Son Relationships • Sacrifices • Courage

Grades 4-7

Alfred A. Knopf PB: 978-0-375-84185-9

Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-82182-0

GLB: 978-0-375-92182-7



Hoot

Carl Hiaasen

Values in Conflict • Bullying • Courage

Grades 4-7

Yearling PB: 978-0-440-41939-6

Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-82181-3



Autumn Winifred Oliver Does Things Different

Kristin O'Donnell Tubb

Values in Conflict • Bullying • Sacrifices • Courage

Grades 4-7

Delacorte Press HC: 978-0-385-73569-8

GLB: 978-0-385-90558-9



Belle Prater's Boy

Ruth White

Abandonment

Grades 4-7

Yearling PB: 978-0-440-41372-1

🔊 = Listening Library audio available