

Teacher support materials to use with



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Discussion Questions

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What Did You Read? – Form

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Fill in the Blanks Review Activity

Brief Plot Summary

In **Nobody Knows**, Mattie’s family are sharecroppers in the South. When Mattie is six, Mama takes her to town where she sees two doors marked “White Only” and “Colored Only.” Mattie thinks the shopkeeper doesn’t like them. Her mother tells her at least she’s not a slave, as she was as a child. At 18, Mattie marries Nate Charles. In 1917 their cotton crop is failing, so Nate takes a job in a Chicago meatpacking plant. Mattie is sad to leave home, but she moves with her husband to work for a better life. In the North they find racial prejudice, labor unrest, and violence. They work hard, and with two children they move to a better home. Then there is an accident at the plant. Nate is killed. Alone after Nate dies, Mattie brings Mama north to help her. Through the Great Depression and World War II, she works many jobs to support her family. When Mama dies, Mattie takes her home. She finds the South still segregated. She stands up for change.

Think about it

Nobody Knows

Discussion Questions

Chapter 1 The Sweet Shop

1. What is a slave? Does slavery exist nowadays?
2. Why does the shop have one side for white people and one side for black people?
3. What does being “free” mean to you?
4. Is Mattie really “free to come and go” as she pleases?

Chapter 2 Mr. Nate Charles

1. What is your idea of a “fine wedding”?
2. These families paid rent with a share of their crops. They were called “sharecroppers.” What do you think of that kind of deal?
3. What do people need to think about before they move so far away?
4. Do you think Mattie and Nate will have a better life in Chicago?

Chapter 3 Moving North

1. What do you know about the slave trade between America and Africa? Would you like to learn more about it?
2. How would you survive a long trip across the ocean in terrible conditions?
3. What does it mean to feel like a piece of meat?
4. Nate promised they would never be slaves in Chicago. Do you think he will be able to keep that promise?

Chapter 4 Chicago

1. Would you be willing to move very far away from your home to get a better life?
2. Should people be able to live wherever they want to?
3. What would you be willing to stand up for?

Chapter 5 Trouble at the Lake

1. Why do you think Mattie remembers Mama’s stories?
2. Would you actually fight for something? When?
3. Do you think Nate will be all right or not?

Chapter 6 Black and White

1. If you were Mattie and Nate, would you move to South Side? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think the white people were so angry?
3. How are matters between the races nowadays?

Chapter 7

The Union

1. What does Mattie mean when she talks about “two doors that lead to the same place”?
2. How does a labor union help its members?
3. How does a labor union have “power in numbers”?
4. How could life in Chicago become better for Mattie?

Chapter 8

Feeling Like Home

1. How do you know when life is going well for you?
2. What is your favorite thing to do in your free time?
3. How would you keep in touch with someone far away who can't read what you write?
4. The title of Chapter 9 is “A Very Bad Night.” What does that suggest?

Chapter 9

A Very Bad Night

1. In what ways should a company take care of its workers?
2. When you are sick or hurt, how do you know when you need a doctor?
3. How can Mattie take care of her family without Nate?

Chapter 10

Mattie Finds Work

1. Have you ever seen men and women treated differently in a workplace?
2. “This family hasn't come very far in a hundred years,” Mattie says. Why does she say that?
3. If you were Mattie, how would you feel about Nate's words? (“We are free. The slaves were not.”)
4. The Great Depression began in 1929. What was it? How will it affect Mattie?

Chapter 11

A Different Job

1. Was Mattie wrong to keep her older children home from school?
2. Was it wrong to secretly bring home food?
3. When do you know it is time to ask for help?
4. In 1941, the U.S. entered World War II. How would that affect Mattie?

Chapter 12

Standing Up

1. Why is it so important that there is only one union now?
2. Do all people have their fair share of troubles? Or do some people seem to have more troubles than others? Why?
3. Mattie's mother sings a song, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen.” What kind of song is it?

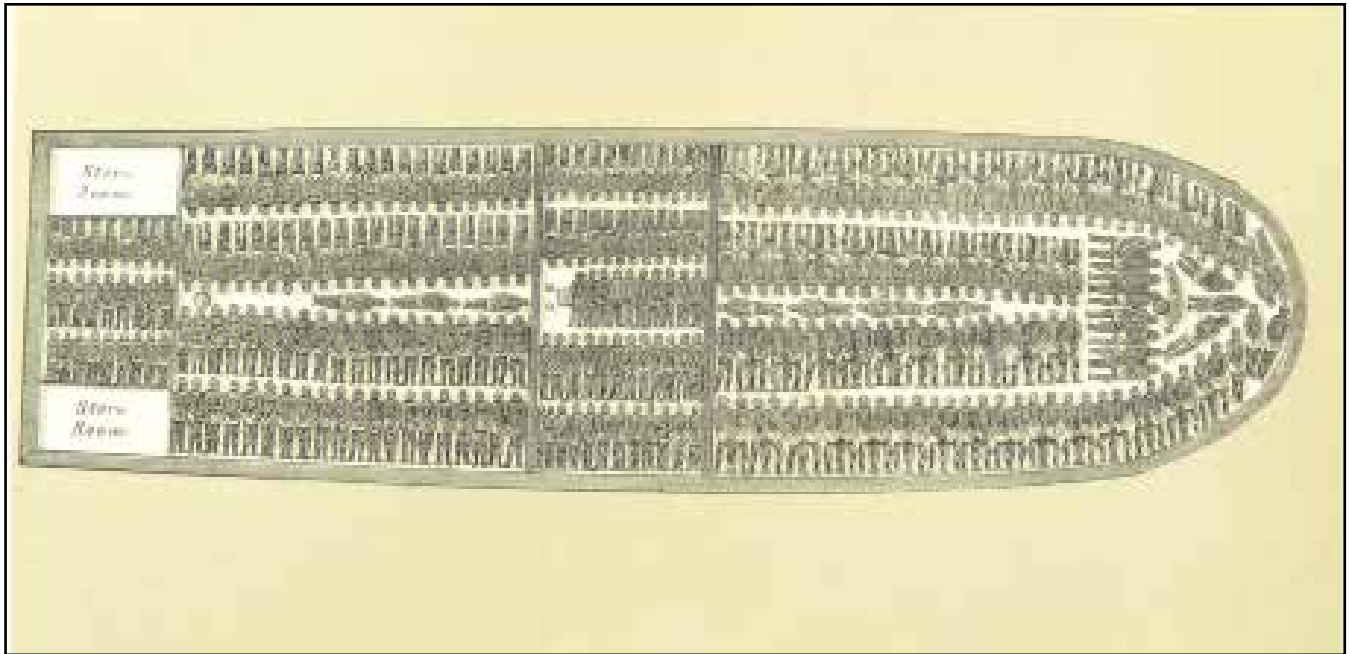
Chapter 13

Going Home

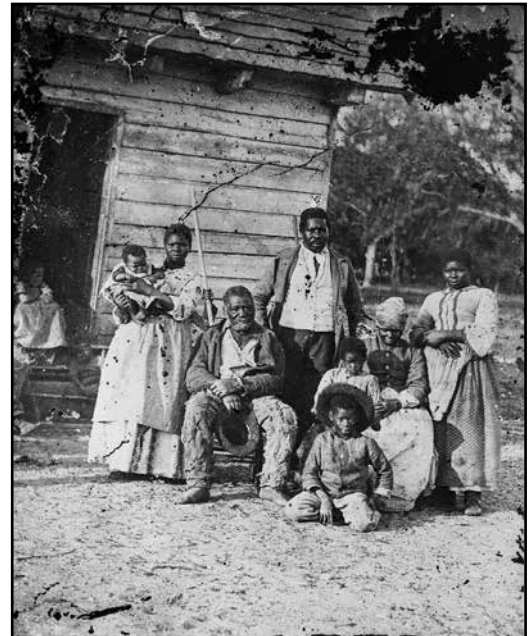
1. What is the meaning of what Mattie did at the sweet shop?
2. What is your idea of “going home”? (Note: In the South, an African-American funeral is usually called a *homegoing*.)
3. The title of this book is *Nobody Knows*. Now that you've read the book, what does that title mean?

Nobody Knows

Historical Drawings and Photos for Discussion



Slave quarters in a slave ship



Slave families about the time of the Civil War

Note: Most of these photos are from the Library of Congress and in the public domain. Others appear many times without attribution online and thus are in the public domain. You may print them for classroom use.



Doing laundry with a scrub board and wash tub. Young woman laying out clothes to dry on grass.



White and Black doors to a cafe.



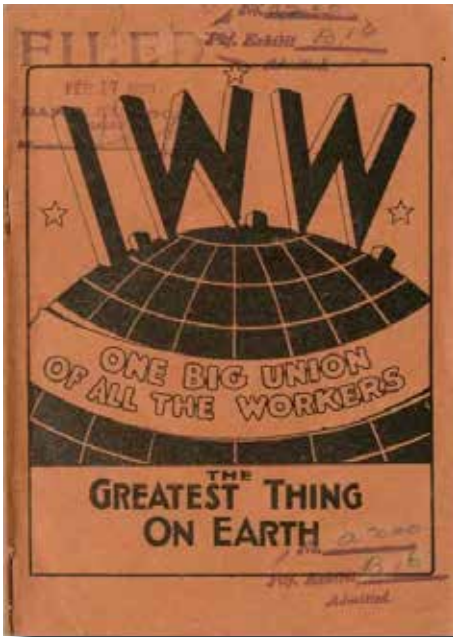
Black Only drinking fountain.



Black neighborhood on Chicago's South Side with apartments over small shops.



Gustavus Swift founded his meatpacking company in Chicago in 1875, employing many African-Americans and immigrants. Their treatment by the industry was exposed and became a scandal in 1906



A leaflet promoting the I.W.W., one of many unions that gained power from the 1920s through the 1950s.



Mammy Prater, 115 year-old ex-slave, still strong and healthy in about 1920.

Nobody Knows

Detailed Plot Summary

Six-year-old Mattie finishes shelling peas and goes along with Mama into town. After shopping, they stop at the sweet shop. There are two doors, “White Only” and “Colored Only.” They wait for service while the owner, Mr. Prinn, serves the people in the white section first. Mattie thinks Mr. Prinn dislikes them, but Mama reminds her that when she was six years old she was a slave and didn’t even have the freedom to take a little trip into town.

Mattie grows up, while Mama and Daddy, who are sharecroppers, never get ahead. When she is 18 she meets and marries Nate Charles, a strapping young sharecropper. They have a legal wedding, unlike Mattie’s grandparents, who, because they were slaves, were not entitled to a legitimate marriage certificate.

The boll weevil is destroying the cotton crop, and labor contractors are soliciting for industrial workers up north. The offer reminds Mattie of Mama’s stories about sea captains herding young Africans onto ships to become unpaid laborers-slaves-in America. The voyage was horrible, and when they arrived they were auctioned off like livestock. Nate assures Mattie that now, in 1917, there are no slaves in America.

So Mattie and Nate move to Chicago where Nate works in a meat-packing plant. Observing the dirty and loud urban atmosphere, Mattie feels transplanted, like the slaves. Nate’s working conditions are very dangerous; furthermore, Mattie feels his hard work benefits only the white plant owners. Nate reminds her that, unlike the slaves, they are free and they get paid for their work.

Two years go by. The Charles family now has two children. They move to a bigger place in a white neighborhood. They are not welcome. One day racial violence breaks out when a black boy swims in the lake. Nate joins the fracas. Mattie and the children lose him in the lakeside crowd. The incident reminds Mattie of slaves trying to escape and being hung when they got caught. When she finds Nate, he is hurt. She nurses his wounds with a piece of her dress. She and the children help him home. There, five white men try to bar them from entering. A white neighbor convinces the men to let them through. The fighting in Chicago lasts 13 days.

Mattie is angry at the paradox: “White people brought us up here to work. Now it’s white people who don’t want us here.” It was the same with the slaves. When Nate recovers, the family moves back to the black ghetto.

White workers at the meat-packing plant organize for better working conditions, sick and overtime pay, and job advancement. Black workers are excluded from the union. Nate watches as white workers achieve their goals. He,

Bo Green, and the other black workers organize their own union. To Mattie, this seems like the sweet shop: “Why have two doors that lead to the same place?”

Mattie has three more children and begins to enjoy the neighborhood as black restaurants, shops, and nightclubs spring up. Though not rich, she thinks her life is not too bad.

One evening she is home alone writing a letter to Mama when she hears two men lumbering up the stairs. Bo Green is helping Nate get home. Nate has had two fingers cut off in an accident at the plant. The company doctor is not on duty this late, and the company won't pay for outside medical help. But Mattie and Bo take Nate to Dr. Flowers, anyway. Nate has lost a lot of blood; the help comes too late, and he dies.

Mattie finds a job as a cleaning woman at a steel mill. She feels like a slave but hears Nate's voice in her head, reminding her she is free and gets paid for her work. Those words aren't sufficient anymore.

When the Great Depression hits, Mattie, among the last hired, is among the first to be fired. She offers to work for 10¢ an hour but is laid off anyway. She then works as a maid for a rich white family. Her older children take turns going to school and watching the little ones. The truant officer threatens Mattie with a fine for not sending her children to school, so she begs Mama, now widowed, to come north and care for them. Two weeks later Mama arrives on the train.

Twelve years pass until the United States joins World War II. Mattie's oldest son joins a black army unit. Mattie gets a job at the steel mill, but only after she confronts the company with the fact that they may not legally shut out black workers because the mill is participating in the war effort. At 45 years of age, her physical strength surprises her. She is delighted to join the now-unified labor union, which, she expresses to Mama, is a significant sign of progress.

Mama sits in her chair singing “Nobody Knows” (the trouble I've seen) often now. It brings back memories of slave days. Then Mama dies.

Mattie accompanies Mama's body back to the South. Her hometown isn't much different than when she left it. Even the old sweet shop is still there. Mattie enters through the “White Only” door and asks Mr. Prinn's son why there are still two doors. Back outside, she forms a band of nine blacks, including herself. They go in the “White Only” door and wait to be served singing “Nobody Knows.” They wait ten minutes for service. Finally, Mr. Prinn comes over to take their order. Mattie orders a soft drink and a sweet roll.

Nobody Knows

Historical Background

The horrid story of slavery in America is well known – how greedy sea captains kidnapped young Africans, inhumanely stuffed them into their ships, and sailed to new shores; how the slaves were auctioned to the highest bidder; how their native culture was robbed from them; how they were put to hard labor for excruciating long days; how they were physically and emotionally abused; how they were lynched on the few occasions when they attempted escape; how they were denied all civil rights; and how they were finally “freed” to fend for themselves in a predominantly white-racist society. Africans were immigrants not by choice but by coercion.

The years that followed the War Between the States were difficult for the blacks in new ways and presented many parallels to the slave story. Many freed slaves became sharecroppers in a system that continued to oppress by charging such high rent, in the form of crops, that it was almost impossible to eke out a decent living. The “Jim Crow” era bred a prejudice against blacks in America that even the sweeping civil rights legislation of the last 60 years has not completely eradicated.

When northern industries found themselves in need of labor at the beginning of the twentieth century, they turned to blacks, who for the most part had stayed in the South up to that time. This employment offer coincided with the boll weevils’ destruction of cotton, triggering a massive migration of blacks from the South to the northern industrial cities. The shift provided jobs, but also resulted in blacks being sequestered in limited sections of the cities. Because opportunities for job advancement were limited and the major labor unions were closed to blacks, living conditions deteriorated, and it became increasingly difficult to break out of the ghetto. In 1919, 13 days of racial violence in Chicago, sparked by a black boy swimming in the lake, illustrated the volatility of black-white tensions. The Great Depression exacerbated the situation when black workers, the most recently hired, were the first to be laid off. Many found employment in government Works Progress Administration jobs.

During World War II, young blacks served the United States in all-black regiments. On the home front, defense-related industries could not refuse to hire based on color, and labor unions became more integrated.

But civil rights had a long way to go. In 1943, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) staged what was probably the first sit-in. It took place at a restaurant in Chicago. Blacks sat in "white only" seats. During the 1950s the struggle for equality became more agitated with small demonstrations, such as when Rosa Parks defiantly sat in the front of the bus. It was not until the 1960s that large-scale activism produced stronger civil-rights laws. In 1985, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, set aside to commemorate the work of the slain civil-rights leader, became a national holiday.

Name _____

What Did You Read?

Write the answers to these questions about *Nobody Knows*.

1. In what part of the United States did Mattie Charles grow up? _____

2. What signs were on the two doors at the sweet shop? _____

3. When Mama was a child, what was she? _____

4. Why did Nate want to move to Chicago? _____

5. What did Mattie think of Nate's new job? _____

6. What two facts made Nate feel his life was better than the slaves'? _____

7. Why did the fight break out at the lake? _____

8. Why did Nate die? _____

9. How did Mattie feel about being a cleaning woman? _____

10. Why did the steel mill have to give Mattie a job during the war? _____

11. Why was Mattie so happy about joining the union? _____

12. At the end, how did she stand up for her rights at the sweet shop? _____

Book Review

Book Title _____

Student's Name _____

The people in this book came from _____

I read this book because _____

Is this book interesting? Why or why not? _____

The best part of the story is _____

The worst part of the story is _____

My favorite person in the story is _____

because _____

The main thing I learned from this book is that _____

Too many hard words? yes no Examples: _____

Too many long sentences? yes no Examples: _____

The length of the books is: too long / too short / about right

Tell a friend to read this book? yes / no Why? _____

Name _____

Word Play: Yes or No

Change each statement below to a question. Then answer the question. The first exercise is done for you.

1. Mr. Prinn served Mattie and Mama first.

Q. *Did Mr. Prinn serve Mattie and Mama first?* _____

A. *No, Mr. Prinn served the white people first?* _____

2. Black bugs ate the cotton crop.

Q. _____

A. _____

3. Nate Charles would rather have a hard life in the South.

Q. _____

A. _____

4. Mattie should beg Nate to stay out of the fight.

Q. _____

A. _____

5. Mattie and Nate are having another baby.

Q. _____

A. _____

6. Bo Green and Nate started their own union.

Q. _____

A. _____

7. Mattie and Nate could hear good music right in their own neighborhood.

Q. _____

A. _____

8. The company will make sure Nate has a doctor.

Q. _____

A. _____

Fill in the Blanks

Review Activity

In **Nobody Knows**, Mattie's family were poor farmers in the _____. When she was six, Mama took her to _____ where she saw two _____ marked "White Only" and "_____ Only." Mattie thought the _____ didn't like them. Her mother told her at least she was not a _____, as she was as a child. At 18 Mattie _____ Nate Charles. In 1917 their _____ crop was failing, so Nate took a _____ in a Chicago meatpacking plant. Mattie was _____ to leave home, but she _____ with her husband to work for a _____ life. In the _____ they found racial prejudice, labor unrest, and _____. They worked _____, and with two children they moved to a _____ home. Then there was an _____ at the plant. Nate was killed. Alone after Nate _____, Mattie brought _____ north to help her. Through the Great Depression and World War II, she worked many _____ to support her _____. When Mama _____, Mattie took her home. She found the _____ still segregated. She stood up for change.

Full text of the fill in the blanks review activity

In **Nobody Knows**, Mattie's family were poor farmers in the South. When she was six, Mama took her to town where she saw two doors marked "White Only" and "Colored Only." Mattie thought the shopkeeper didn't like them. Her mother told her at least she was not a slave, as she was as a child. At 18 Mattie married Nate Charles. In 1917 their cotton crop was failing, so Nate took a job in a Chicago meatpacking plant. Mattie was sad to leave home, but she moved with her husband to work for a better life. In the North they found racial prejudice, labor unrest, and violence. They worked hard, and with two children they moved to a better home. Then there was an accident at the plant. Nate was killed. Alone after Nate died, Mattie brought Mama north to help her. Through the Great Depression and World War II, she worked many jobs to support her family. When Mama died, Mattie took her home. She found the South still segregated. She stood up for change.

Answer Key

“What Did You Read?” questions are objective in nature; however, in some cases the answers may not be derived from the book verbatim. The answers given below are intended as guidelines to be used in conjunction with the teacher’s judgement that the question has been satisfactorily answered. The answers to the “Word Play” exercise should be exactly as given in this answer key, except where specifically noted.

What Did You Read?

1. the South
2. “White Only” and “Colored Only”
3. a slave
4. for a job (in a meatpacking plant) or because bugs were eating the cotton.
5. that it was too much like slave work
6. that he was free and he got paid
7. Whites got angry because a black boy was swimming in the lake.
8. because he didn’t get to the doctor in time and lost too much blood
9. that she was not much better off than her grandmother
10. because a law said that they could not shut out blacks
11. because there was only one union for both blacks and whites
12. She (and a group of other blacks) walked in the “White Only” door and waited until they were served.

Word Play: Yes or No

Provided here are the “Q” questions, The “A” answers are all variable and may be evaluated based on sense, grammar, and so forth.

- 2.Q. Did black bugs eat the cotton crop?
- 3.Q. Would Nate Charles rather have a hard life in the South?
- 4.Q. Should Mattie beg Nate to stay out of the fight?
- 5.Q. Are Mattie and Nate having another baby?
- 6.Q. Did Bo Green and Nate start their own union?
- 7.Q. Could Mattie and Nate hear good music right in their own neighborhood?
- 8.Q. Will the company make sure Nate has a doctor?

Fill in the Blanks Review

South, town, doors, Colored, shopkeeper, slave, married, cotton, job, sad, moved, better, North, violence, hard, better, accident, died, Mama, jobs, family, died, South

Note: On the website, this answer key is on a separate page.