

Nightjohn



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Genre Historical Fiction

Synopsis Sarny, a female slave at the Waller plantation, first sees Nightjohn when he is brought there with a rope around his neck, his body covered in scars. He had escaped north to freedom, but he came back--came back to teach reading. Knowing that the penalty for reading is dismemberment Nightjohn still returned to slavery to teach others how to read. And twelve-year-old Sarny is willing to take the risk to learn.

Themes Human Rights, Prejudice

Protagonist Female, African-American

Note Over the years, these books have been published in multiple editions. The page numbers in your book may be different than the ones on the lesson plan.

More Information www.scu.edu/character



Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Sarny, Day 1



Key Paragraph

Page 5:

Ain't that something? That a sprite everybody looked right over, clean over the top when they were busy to see something, would be the one to live and live and write it all down. Ain't that something?

Writing Prompt

In this paragraph, Sarny is describing herself. She is amazed that someone who seems so insignificant, especially to herself, would be known by many in the present and future because she is the one that told their story. It takes courage to tell your story. What would you write about if you were to write about your family, your community, your group of friends, or your culture?

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) telling your story. Remember that a narrative is when you tell a story.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Sarny, Day 2



Key Paragraph

Page 20:

I ran to the wagon and said things, wild things, said I would do anything for him only please don't take my children, not my heart, not all of me, not that.

Writing Prompt

In the above paragraph, Sarny pleads her heart out for Waller not to sell her children away from her. She is a desperate woman in this moment. There is little she wouldn't do to save her children. She knew Waller was a cruel man, but she used courage to do the only thing she was able to do, beg. Think of a time when you were in a desperate situation, a time when you were willing to do just about anything for something.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that moment.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Sarny, Day 3



Writing Prompt

Sarny had never been off the plantation before in her life. Although her yearning for her children gave her motivation, it still took courage to go out into the unknown. Think of a time when you or someone you know did something for the first time in your life that was scary or adventurous.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Sarny, Day 4



Key Paragraph

Page 30:

“But there are still dangers. We are just an advanced unit. There are bands of renegade scavengers—rebel deserters—that we haven’t rounded up yet, killing and looting.”

Writing Prompt

In the paragraph above, a union officer warns Sarny and Lucy of the danger they put themselves in by travelling as two lone women. The officer represents heroism, not only by giving his advice, but by being a soldier fighting for the rights of others. Do you know any men or women who served in the military?

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) telling a story about someone you know in the military. If you don’t know anyone, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 5



Writing Prompt

Hope is a key component in courage. Without hope, would you be able to have courage? Think of a time when you had a lot of hope which gave you the courage to do something.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can't think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Sarny, Day 6



Key Paragraph

Page 47:

Lucy her smile was gone and she must have been thinking like me because she said, “Freedom sure costs a heap, don’t it?”

Writing Prompt

What does Lucy mean by this statement? Think about the heroes who have paid the price for our freedom. It is easy to take the things we enjoy for granted. Now think of a time when you didn’t appreciate something until you didn’t have it anymore.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can’t think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Sarny, Day 7



Key Paragraph

Page 59:

“How far do you think we’ll get carrying a white child?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know but he’s needing help and it don’t matter what color he is, does it? Might be we could take him to a white family along the way. Just take him down the road a bit—”

Writing Prompt

In this paragraph we see another example of Sarny’s courage as well as her integrity. She didn’t care about what other people would think. She only cared about what was right. Think of a time when you cared so much about something that you didn’t care what other people would think about it.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can’t think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Sarny, Day 8



Key Paragraph

Page 64:

Thought on Nightjohn. Just as my thinking closed down for the night I thought on Nightjohn and how he really started it all. Saved me. Hadn't we been able to read we wouldn't have found the paper about New Orleans...

Writing Prompt

In this paragraph, Sarny is reflecting on how much Nightjohn has affected her life by teaching her to read. Think about someone who has deeply affected your life.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) telling about how that person affected your life. If you can't think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 9



Writing Prompt

Sarny's determination to keep going despite how hard it was showed her courage. Think of a time when you were determined to do something and wasn't going to let hardship stop you. Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can't think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 10



Key Paragraph

Page 82:

Told her all of it even the name of the man took my children and all the time I was sitting there talking I thought on how it couldn't be happening. Never talked to a white woman except to say Yes ma'am and No ma'am, and here I was sitting in a fine carriage with this beautiful white woman that talked like molasses telling her everything. Everything. And she nodded and smiled and cried, a touch of a white hankie to the corner in her eye, and all the time I thought this ain't so, this can't be happening. But it was. All of it.

Writing Prompt

In this paragraph Sarny is not only surprised the new experience she is in, but she is also surprised by herself, that she is telling this strange woman everything. It must have taken her courage to talk so freely to and to trust a white woman after her lifelong bad experience with white people. Think of a time when you couldn't believe something that was happening.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can't think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 11



Key Paragraph

Page 92:

“We each live in our own time.” Her voice was soft. Like she was talking to a little girl. Soft with love. “And we must do the best we can with our time. Those who came before weren’t as lucky as us and we aren’t as lucky as some who may come later. We must live in our own time and do the best we can...we all have our own quarters.”

Writing Prompt

What does Miss Laura mean when she says *we each must live in our own time and we each have our own quarters*? All of us have difficulties we have had to overcome. Think of a time when you suffered a very bad hardship.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can’t think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 12



Writing Prompt

Can you imagine how happy Sarny and Lucy were to go from living in the horrors of slavery to living in a luxurious home working for a kind and generous woman? Miss Laura was a real hero to them. Think of a time when something that started really bad for you turned out really good in the end.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can't think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 13



Key Paragraph

Page 118:

Found myself looking on a man 'bout as big as Nightjohn had been. Carried himself straight up and down. Deep black with a wide smile and eyes that seemed on the edge of laughing. Found myself looking on my next husband. But I didn't know it then.

Writing Prompt

In the above paragraph, Sarny is reflecting on the first time she met her husband, Stanley. She was nervous, but had the courage to talk to him and to try to learn how to be a good marketer. Think of a time in your life when you first met a person that would later be a very close friend of yours.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can't think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 14



Key Paragraph

Page 132:

“To the end of the war,” Miss Laura said, “and the end of slavery but mostly to Sarny’s babies coming home.”

Drank to that and then went into my room and laid down next to little Delie and Tyler and closed my eyes.

Happiest day of my life.

Writing Prompt

How was Sarny’s heroic journey to find her children rewarded? What has been the happiest day of your life so far?

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can’t think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 15



Writing Prompt

How was Sarny's heroic journey to find her children rewarded? What has been the happiest day of your life so far?

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can't think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 16



Writing Prompt

All of the risks that Nightjohn and Sarny courageously took to educate the slaves is paying off everyday of Sarny's life. Sarny is describing how much she is learning. Think of a time when you learned something that affected you profoundly.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can't think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 17



Writing Prompt

Sarny continues to show courage in the face of prejudice and oppression. In the above paragraph, she is threatened by hateful people. Yet she never gives up. Think of a time when you were threatened.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can't think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 18



Writing Prompt

While Stanley showed courage by going to talk to Haggerty, it was a bad decision. Sarny deeply regretted telling Stanley that she saw Haggerty burn her school. Think of a time when you regretted doing something.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can't think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 19



Writing Prompt

Miss Laura is asking Sarny to have courage and take on her responsibilities because she knows she is strong and can handle it. Think of a time when someone believed in you and trusted you to do something.

Write a short narrative (1-3 paragraphs) describing that experience. If you can't think of a time in your life, make it up.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Sarny, Day 20



Writing Prompt

The author of this book, Gary Paulsen, says that although this story is fiction, it is a true in the sense that many of the things the characters experienced were really things that some people did experience. This story was the slaves' story. Think of a conflict that many people face in our time.

Write a fictional narrative (1-2 pages) about a character or characters who face that conflict. Like the book *Sarny*, you will write a fictional story about a real conflict people face.