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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



When the Legends Die

by Hal Borland

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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When the Legends Die

NOTE TO TEACHER

When the Legends Die by Hal Borland, published in 1963, is an interesting novel about a young Ute Indian raised in the wilderness by his parents and taught to live in harmony with nature in the same way his ancestors once lived. After his parents are killed, the young boy must adjust to life in the white man's world, where he is forced to adopt white ways. Hal Borland is affectionately referred to as a local-color writer because of his vivid descriptions of life in the Southwest. This easy-to-read, exciting story is also rich with literary elements, making it a good choice for the English classroom.

Some students may object to the use of "Indian" for "Native American"; however, "Indian" is the term used in the book, and we decided to conform to that. In addition, the book contains some profanity, a non-sexual encounter with a prostitute, and a few instances of cruelty to horses, which are vividly described. The overall theme and importance of *When the Legends Die* far outweigh these reservations, however.

All references come from the Bantam edition of *When the Legends Die*, copyright 1963.

When the Legends Die

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. relate significant details from the story for each of the following topics: methods of survival in the wilderness, techniques of bronc riding, and details of Indian culture.
2. discuss whether Blue Elk is a rounded character and whether he may be representative of all Indians who abandon their heritage in favor of white culture.
3. discuss the following themes:
 - Man must live in harmony with nature to feel truly happy.
 - Man is often cruel to his fellow man.
 - A man must accept his cultural heritage to discover his identity.
 - A man must decide for himself how to live his life.
 - A young person with roots in two different cultures often has difficulty establishing his or her identity.
 - It is not beneficial for a person from a minority culture to be forced to conform to a more dominant culture.
4. discuss Borland's use of imagery to convey mood and to establish the themes of the novel.
5. discuss the following as possible symbols in the story: Blue Elk, songs, baskets, the bear, and the colors red, blue, white, and black.
6. cite incidents from the story to prove that this is a coming-of-age story and identify the defining incident(s) in the story when Tom takes charge of his life.
7. point out instances of the following uses of language in the story:
 - metaphor
 - repetition
 - foreshadowing
 - allusion
 - flashback
 - irony
 - symbol
8. understand why Tom is considered by many rodeo fans to be a legend and relate details of the legends told about him.
9. discuss what life lesson the parable of the chipmunk teaches Tom.

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QUESTIONS FOR ESSAY AND DISCUSSION

1. Why, despite her death in Part I of the story, is Bessie an important character in the novel?
2. Cite one incident from the novel to illustrate each of the following themes:
 - Man must live in harmony with nature to feel truly happy.
 - Man is often cruel to his fellow man.
 - A man must accept his cultural heritage to discover his identity.
 - A man must decide for himself how to live his life.
 - A young person with roots in two different cultures often has difficulty establishing his/her identity.
 - It is not good for an Indian to be forced to conform to white culture.
3. Discuss whether Blue Elk is an evil character. Cite instances from the story to support your ideas.
4. What is the significance of the title of this story? Which legends do you think the title is referring to—the legends of Killer Tom Black or some other legends?
5. Define the following vocabulary words from the text: breechclout, pinioned, riatas, surcingle, deadfall, euchred, latigo, cantle, spraddle, roister.
6. What might the following colors represent or symbolize in the story: red, white, blue, black?
7. Why does the young boy select Bear's Brother as his name?
8. In Part IV, in what ways are Tom and the bear alike? What might the bear represent or symbolize in the story?
9. In what ways does Red Dillon help Tom and in what ways does he harm him?
10. What does Meo teach Tom about his place in the world?
11. Describe Tom's skill as a bronc rider. Why is he successful?
12. At the end of the story, what decision(s) does Tom make concerning his future? For what reasons do you agree or disagree with his choice(s)?
13. Why does Tom decide to track the bear that kills the lamb?

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PART I – Bessie

Chapter 1

1. Why does George Black Bull tell Bessie he will meet her at the “stream with the black-stem ferns on Horse Mountain”?

2. What evidence is there that Blue Elk cannot be trusted?

3. Despite Blue Elk’s willingness to help the Sheriff, what evidence is there that at some level he is still proud to be an Indian?

Chapter 8

1. Why does Bessie decide to return to Pagosa?

2. One of the themes of this story is the conflict between the Indian values and the white man's values. Find a passage in the story illustrating this theme.

3. Blue Elk takes Bessie's pack, insisting that she owes him for helping clear Black Bull's name. Why do you think Bessie decides to run from Blue Elk, leaving him with her pack of food and her new skirt cloth, instead of turning Blue Elk in to the authorities?

Chapter 19

Vocabulary

acrid – sharp, bitter, stinging, or irritating to the taste or smell
quirt – a riding whip with a braided leather lash and a short handle
riatas – a rope used for tethering grazing horses; lasso
stringhalt – a disease that affects horses’ legs
surcingle – a strap passed around a horse’s body to bind on a saddle, blanket, or pack

1. For what reasons is Tom a terrible plowboy?

2. Why does Tom enjoy riding the unbroken horses?

3. Why does Tom believe that the old method of breaking horses is better than the new way?
