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## *Finding Langston*

*Lesa Cline-Ransome*

**2019 Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book**  
**2019 Scott O Dell Award for Historical Fiction**

- ★ *Booklist*, starred review
- ★ *The Horn Book*, starred review
- ★ *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review
- ★ *School Library Journal*, starred review
- ★ *Shelf Awareness*, starred review

### *About the Book*

In this debut historical novel about the Great Migration a boy discovers Chicago's postwar South Side and the poetry of Langston Hughes.

Set in 1946 in Chicago, eleven-year-old Langston is grieving the death of his mother, and missing rural Alabama where he and his father lived until his father decided there was no longer a reason to stay. They moved into a small one-room apartment in a section of Chicago called the Brown Belt. Langston's father works in a nearby factory, and Langston walks to school. The problem with school is there are bullies who call Langston "Country" and laugh at his overalls and rundown shoes, and his Southern accent. When Langston discovers the Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library, he finds that, unlike the whites-only library in Alabama, he is welcome. He spends every afternoon in the library and with the guidance of the children's librarian, he discovers the poetry of Langston Hughes. Until now, he didn't know where his name came from, but the poetry his mother quoted in secret letters she once wrote his dad reveal that his mother was so inspired by Langston Hughes that she named her son for him.

**#Finding Langston**



## Pre-Reading Activity

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Have students read about the Great Migration on the following website: [blackpast.org/aah/great-migration-1915-1960](http://blackpast.org/aah/great-migration-1915-1960). Then read aloud “One–Way Ticket” by Langston Hughes: [http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/ows/seminars/tcentury/gmigration/Hughes\\_OneWayTicket.pdf](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/ows/seminars/tcentury/gmigration/Hughes_OneWayTicket.pdf).

Ask students to write a one-page paper that states how this poem reflects the feelings of the people who left the South during the Great Migration.

**Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.1; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-5.3**

## Classroom Discussion

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- After Langston’s mother dies, he and his father move to Chicago. What does Langston miss most about Alabama? How are the people in Chicago different from those in Alabama? Why does Langston think that the folks in Alabama would call those in Chicago “uppity”? Langston describes his memory of Alabama, “like a candle fighting to stay lit in the wind” (p. 5). Why is it important for him to keep his memories of Alabama “lit”?
- Langston says nothing in Chicago belongs to them, and no one knows his name. At what point does Langston begin to feel a sense of belonging? Who and what helps him find his place in the vast city?
- Langston’s father explains that Chicago is their home now. Discuss the difference between a house and a home. Contrast Langston and his family’s house in Alabama with the apartment in Chicago. Explain how their house in Alabama was a home. Debate whether the apartment in Chicago ever feels like a home to Langston.
- Compare and contrast the way Langston and his father deal with grief. Why won’t Langston cry in front of his father? Discuss how tears are often the best way to confront grief.
- Define privacy. What is the difference between privacy and secrets. Langston discovers a box of letters that his mother sent his father when they were young. How does Langston violate his father’s privacy by reading the letters? Why is reading someone’s mail like stealing?
- What does Langston learn about his parents from reading the letters? Discuss what his father would say if he knew that Langston read the letters.
- How does Langston deal with loneliness? Parts of poems by Langston Hughes are used throughout the novel. Which of the poems speak of loneliness? How do the poems console Langston? In what other ways do Hughes’s poems speak to Langston?



- Discuss Langston’s encounter with bullies. Who is the ringleader? Describe Erroll’s and Clem’s roles in the bullying. Debate whether they are afraid of Lymon. What is the first hint that Clem is different from Lymon and Erroll? At what point does Langston stand up to Lymon? Describe his father’s reaction to the fight. How does the schoolyard incident help Langston gain respect from the other boys? Debate whether such respect is worth the detection Langston must serve.
- Describe the friendship that develops between Langston and Clem. What do they have in common? Langston doesn’t like being called “Country.” What is symbolic about Langston telling Clem his name?
- Langston discovers the George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library and goes there every afternoon after school. Why does he lie and tell his father that he is playing with boys his age after school? Explain his reaction when Miss Fullton asks him if he has been spending his afternoons at the library.
- Discuss Langston’s thoughts when he discovers the poems of Langston Hughes. Why does he think the poet is like a magician? Discuss why he wants to keep the library and Mr. Langston Hughes to himself. Explain why he finally tells his father about the library. What is the significance of Langston and his father going to the library together at the end of the novel? (p. 104)
- How does Miss Fulton become more than just a neighbor to Langston and his father?
- What does Langston learn about his father during the short time they’ve been in Chicago?
- Debate whether Langston’s attitude toward Chicago changes by the end of the novel.

**Correlates to CCSS in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 3-5.1, RL.3-5.2, RL. 3-5.3; Craft & Structure RL. 4-5.4, RL. 3-5.5, RL. 3-5.6; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 3-5.1, SL. 3-5.2, SL. 3-5.3; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3-5.1; Knowledge of Language L. 3-5.3.**

## Curriculum Connections

**Writing**—Langston and his father move from Alabama to Chicago in 1946. Most African Americans leaving the South were escaping Jim Crow laws, and searching for better work opportunities. Have students write a paper that reveals what Langston and his father are seeking, and what they leave behind.

**Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.1; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 3-5.3.**

Ask students to write a paper that explains the title of the book. Instruct them to cite direct quotes or specific scenes to support their opinion.

**Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.1; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 3-5.3.**



**Language Arts/Writing**—Langston’s father likes blues songs. He later thinks that the poems of Langston Hughes are similar to the blues. Read about Langston Hughes and the blues on the following website: <http://bbkingmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/L.-Hughes-and-the-Blues.pdf>. Allow students to work with a partner and consider the main character of the novel and his sadness about living in Chicago. Then have them write a blues song or poem called Langston’s Chicago Blues.

**Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.3; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 3-5.3.**

Read aloud “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes, and have the class analyze the message the mother is sending. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47559/mother-to-son>). Then have them write a poem titled Father to Son that reveals the relationship between Langston and his father.

**Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.3; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 3-5.3.**

**Social Studies/Writing**—Ask students to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to research the Harlem Renaissance. The following sites are helpful: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWMus4KHKx4> (for younger students) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance> (for older students). Then have them write a newspaper feature for Black History Month that discusses the importance of this cultural movement. Remember to include who, what, when, where, and how.

**Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W.3-5.2; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 3-5.4, W. 3-5.6; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 3-5.9; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2.**

What is a jewel? Have students write a one-page paper that explains why the Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library is called the Black Jewel of the Midwest.

**Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.1; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 3-5.3.**

**Drama**—Plan a program for the Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library about the Chicago Black Renaissance. Have Langston and Clem as Master of Ceremonies. Engage other classmates in the program by having them present some of the luminaries of this cultural movement. End the program with an interpretive dance to one of the poems of Langston Hughes. Information may be found on the following websites:

#### Visual Artists

Charles White (<http://www.cejjesinstitute.org/cwpp/biography.php>)

William Edouard Scott, visual artist (<http://www.illinoisart.org/william-edouard-scott>)

#### Musicians

Louis Armstrong (<http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/armstrong/index.htm>)

Cab Calloway (<http://www.notablebiographies.com/Br-Ca/Calloway-Cab.html>)

Muddy Waters (<https://muddywatersofficial.com/>)

Mahalia Jackson (<https://www.biography.com/people/mahalia-jackson-9351242>)



## Writers

Lorraine Hansberry (<https://www.chipublib.org/lorraine-hansberry-biography/>)

Arna Bontemps (<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/arna-bontemps>)

Gwendolyn Brooks (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gwendolyn-brooks>)

Richard Wright (<https://www.biography.com/people/richard-wright-9537751>)

Langston Hughes (<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/langston-hughes>)

**Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 3-5.7, W. 3-5.8, W. 3-5.9: Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 3-5.4.**

## Vocabulary/Use of Language

The vocabulary in the novel isn't difficult, but students should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them taking clues from context. Such words may include: *esteemed* (p. 28), *residents* (p. 280), *selections* (p. 29), *surpassing* (p. 63), and *sashaying* (p. 91).

## Internet Resources

**Encyclopedia of Chicago, Community of Bronzeville**

[encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/171.html](http://encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/171.html)

*This is information about Bronzeville, where Langston and his father lived.*

**Chicago Public Library Hall Branch**

[www.chipublib.org/about-hall-branch/](http://www.chipublib.org/about-hall-branch/)

*This site offers information about the Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library.*

## About the Author



Photo Credit: John Halpern

**LESA CLINE-RANSOME** is best known for her picture books. Her most recent book, *Before She Was Harriet*, illustrated by James E. Ransome, received six starred reviews, a Christopher Award, a Coretta Scott King Honor Award for Illustration, and a nomination for an NAACP Image Award. *Finding Langston* is her first novel. Lesa lives in Rhinebeck, New York.

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