

Grades  
3–7

# HOLIDAY HOUSE

# EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



Novel in  
Verse



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## *One Big Open Sky*

by Lesa Cline-Ransome

★ “Cline-Ransome’s spare free-verse narrative centers three skillfully developed female voices. . . . Captivating.” —*The Horn Book*, Starred Review

★ “Cline-Ransome once again demonstrates her incredible literary skills . . . [in this] deeply moving story that centers a distinctive part of the African American story.” —*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review

“[The] evocative writing [is] a mix of richly textured description and vibrant dialogue. . . . Meticulous research.” —*New York Times*

A Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection

### ABOUT THE BOOK

**Three women narrate a perilous wagon journey westward that could set them free—or cost them everything they have—in this intergenerational verse novel that explores the history of the Black homesteader movement.**

1879, Mississippi. Young dreamer Lettie may have her head in the stars, but her body is on a covered wagon heading westward. Her father, Thomas, promises that Nebraska will be everything the family needs: an opportunity to claim the independence they’ve strived for over generations on their very own plot of land. Lettie; her mother, Sylvia; and young teacher Philomena are free from slavery—but bound by poverty, lack of access to opportunity, and patriarchal social structures. Will these women survive the hardships of their journey? And as Thomas’s desire for control overpowers his common sense, will they ever truly be free?



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#OneBigOpenSky

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will analyze why Black Americans settled in Nebraska and what challenges they faced before and during their migration west.
- Broaden idea of migration in the United States to include Black farmers leaving the South.
- Discuss the impetus for Black families to homestead in communities rather than independently.
- Reflect on how homesteading offered Black Americans new access to the “American Dream.”

## BACKGROUND HISTORY

The Homestead Act had an immediate and enduring effect on North America that led to profound and lasting changes to the land, Native American life, and migration. The act distributed millions of acres of prairie land in the Western US to individual settlers, known as homesteaders. The Homestead Act promised recently freed Black Americans and others the opportunity to settle on public lands taken from Native American Plains Tribes. Most Black Americans left homes in the South to escape racial violence, pursue economic and educational opportunities, and obtain freedom from oppressive Jim Crow laws. Many Black homesteaders settled in clusters or “colonies” with other Black families.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

### Teaching with Timelines: Building a Historical Context

In order for students to develop an understanding of the period of time during which *One Big Open Sky* takes place, it is recommended that teachers guide students in an exploration of the historical context surrounding the Homestead Act and Western expansion era. Timelines are a strategy to help students better understand a time period by providing a visual aid for identifying relationships between historical events and a visual prompt to activate student prior knowledge.

As the class explores history, reference the timeline to situate new evidence in relation to other historical events, to infer how events are connected, and to determine cause and/or effect between events. Listed below are some historical events directly referenced in *One Big Open Sky*. This is not an exhaustive list, and other events that deepen students’ understanding of the historical context should be welcomed and added to the timeline.

1. Westward Expansion
2. Indian Removal Act
3. Civil War
4. Emancipation Proclamation
5. Sharecropping System
6. Homestead Act
7. Civil Rights Act of 1866
8. Reconstruction Act of 1867
9. Black Codes & Jim Crow Laws



## Activating Background Experience: Migration

Before reading, tap into students' background knowledge about *migration* in order to help students make connections with new information and understand concepts. Teachers should take care to consider their students' cultures, as well as the experiences they bring to the classroom and discussion.

Consider starting with a general question such as, “*Why do people leave home and migrate?*” Answers may range from things like *to get access to more opportunity* or *to build a better life*. Encourage separating reasons for migrating into **push factors** and **pull factors**. What attracts people to a location [pull factors]? Is it a job, family, schooling, affordable housing, access to land, and resources? What pushes people out of their homes [push factors]? Is it a lack of opportunity? Is it violence, oppression, or an ongoing war? This question lends itself to obvious connections with current events. It's also a relevant question to ask in an assessment of most historical time periods and units.

Whether talking about colonization, westward expansion, or the Great Migration, movement of peoples is an enduring part of American history.

Also explore examples of people who moved against their will. Whether talking about enslaved people being transported across the Atlantic from Africa or Native Americans being pushed out of traditional homelands, educators have opportunities to connect this question to historical topics that students likely have some knowledge about.

## DURING READING

### Reading Journal: Character Experience

Encourage students to keep a reading journal to gather thoughts, notes, vocabulary, questions, and reflections. In their reading journals, have students draw a line down the center of their page to create two columns. Have students label one column *Push Factors: Reasons for Leaving Home*, and label the second column *Pull Factors: Dreams of Nebraska*. As students read and learn about the Black families and characters, and their experiences and dreams, have students stop and fill out each column. Once several characters' experiences have been recorded, have students reference their notes as they answer the following questions:

- What were the pull factors for Black Americans to migrate to Nebraska?
- What were the push factors for Black Americans to leave their homes?

### Discussion Questions

Read each italicized excerpt from *One Big Open Sky* aloud to the class before posing the following questions.

1. For Black people who had spent their lives working the lands of white landowners with no freedom or pay, the opportunity to own land offered by the Homestead Act was a path to a better life. If you had a large amount of land, what would you do with it? Would you build on it? Would you have crops?

*We can't live free  
on someone else's land  
picking someone else's crop!*  
—Thomas, page 5



2. What does the following passage tell us about life for Black Americans during this period in history?

*Right up until freedom  
every day I woke  
I was scarer than the next  
Never knew what was gonna come  
If I was gonna eat  
gonna get a beating  
be sold off  
maybe all  
Not knowing  
is the scariest thing there is Lettie  
That's why a man gotta  
set his mind to making his own way  
without no one telling him what he gonna do  
You understand?*

—Excerpt of conversation between Thomas and Lettie, page 135

3. Many Black American homesteaders packed only what was most valuable to them for their long journey West. What would you take with you if you were moving to an unfamiliar, new place? Why?

*Everything I got in this world in my wagon  
—Lettie, page 138*

4. How does Thomas's/Daddy's view of women reveal what challenges women faced during this time?

*Why don't women get to decide  
who leads them  
and plans their route  
and keeps order?*

*Daddy said  
That's why women  
have husbands Lettie  
so they ain't got to do the choosing  
Men provide for them  
keep them safe  
Once you grown  
you'll see for yourself  
how lucky you are  
to have you a husband*

—Excerpt of conversation between Lettie and Daddy, page 38



5. Why does Sylvia consider the other homesteaders in her group like family?

*We need each other Lettie  
Hardest thing  
I ever had to do  
was leave behind  
every one of my brothers  
and my sister  
back in Mississippi  
I thought I was losing  
the only family I'd ever have  
But these folks here  
been family too*  
—Momma to Lettie, page 251

6. What lessons did Lettie learn from seeing how the Boston sisters and Philomena Pratt took charge? How was this different from Thomas's/Daddy's view of women?

*I wondered if [the Boston sisters] came  
to Nebraska  
looking for someone to marry  
but then I remembered  
Miss Pratt  
and I thought  
maybe they could have a whole life here  
in Grand Island  
without husbands making decisions  
and voting for them*

*One of the words  
Miss Pratt taught me  
from an article I read  
in the Independent newspaper  
was suffrage  
Women who want the right to vote in elections*  
—Lettie, pages 258–259



## POST-READING

### Discussion Questions

- How did the Homestead Act open new opportunities for Black American homesteaders?
- Most Black homesteaders settled in colonies with other Black families to support each other. How did the Black homesteaders in Lettie's homesteading company support each other during difficult times?
- What is a family? Are families only made up of people who are blood-related? Do you consider any groups of people like a family? Who and why?

*We made a family  
with every one of these folks  
So now we got family back home  
and we got family here too  
and we are gonna be just fine  
Ain't we Lettie?  
—Sylvia, page 253*

- In the book *One Big Open Sky*, many characters left something behind but gained something new; for example, Lettie left behind her friend Oda to make a new friend in Agnes, and Sylvia left behind her brothers and sisters to gain a new family with the Black homesteaders. Have you ever had to give up something but found you gained something in return? Share what it was.
- What kinds of dangers did Black American homesteaders face during their journey out West?

### Activities

1. To dream is a way of keeping hope alive or imagining something you want. Have students share their hopes and dreams for themselves and/or others.

*Dreams  
Everybody had them  
all different in some way  
but the same too  
wanting more than they had  
and more than they'd ever seen  
Not one knowing  
what the West was like  
—Lettie, page 86*





2. In pairs or small groups, have students research and learn about Black American homestead communities. How did Black Americans “find their own kind of free” in these newly created homestead communities?

*Us colored folks  
ain't never gonna be free  
the way white folks is  
We gotta find  
our own kind of free  
Daddy told me*

*Independence looked to me  
like colored folks may have found  
their own kind of free  
coming and going  
to do just as they pleased*  
—Lettie, page 91

See this interesting article from the National Park Service, “African American Homesteaders in the Great Plains,” at [www.nps.gov/articles/african-american-homesteaders-in-the-great-plains.htm](http://www.nps.gov/articles/african-american-homesteaders-in-the-great-plains.htm).

3. Many Black homesteading individuals and families were willing to leave the only place they had known to move to a place few of them had ever seen. Most hoped for and imagined lives filled with freedom and opportunities. Have students use their creativity to imagine the life they want for themselves and others. Encourage them to write their responses in verse similar to *One Big Open Sky*.

Guide created by Myra Hernandez, educational consultant, curriculum developer and literacy specialist.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Lesla Cline-Ransome** is the author of more than twenty books for young readers from picture books to novels for middle graders and young adults, including the award-winning Finding Langston trilogy. Her work has received a plethora of honors, including dozens of starred reviews, NAACP Image Award nominations, a Coretta Scott King honor, the Scott O’Dell Award for Historical Fiction, and a Christopher Award. Lesa’s books have been named to ALA Notable Books and Bank Street Best Children’s Book lists, and she lives in the Hudson Valley region of New York. *One Big Open Sky* is Lesa’s first novel in verse. Learn more at [LeslaClineRansome.com](http://LeslaClineRansome.com).

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