

HOLIDAY HOUSE EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



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California or Dust

by Mindy Nichols Wendell

★“At once heart-wrenching and hopeful, Lark’s perspective allows young readers to understand a bit more about this important time in American history while also connecting the perennial themes of perseverance and belonging.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

A Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection

ABOUT THE BOOK

A powerful story of the devastation of the Dust Bowl—and the courage of those who survived it—in the tradition of *Out of the Dust*.

We came all the way from California to make something of ourselves. Today’s the day we start.

California, 1939. It’s hard being the new kid in school . . . but it’s harder for eleven-year-old Lark, after she and her family fled Oklahoma’s Dust Bowl for a not-so-sunny welcome in California. Kids whisper “Go back to Oklahoma!” Lark would give anything to go back to where she came from, but she can’t: the dust storms destroyed everything. The farm labor camp she, her parents, and her siblings live in is her life now, and even Lark has to get a job.

Can California really be “the land of milk and honey” she was promised? More than that . . . can it ever be home? Mindy Nichols Wendell’s sophomore historical middle-grade novel is a heartfelt, powerful, and incredibly well-written story of resilience, pride, and tenacity in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Describe the dust storms that forced Lark Jenson and her family out of Oklahoma. How did they contend with the storms before they decided they must leave?
- Explain what Pa means when he calls California “the land of milk and honey” (p. 23). How does this reveal his optimistic nature?

- The family finds shelter at Fieldstone Farm Labor Camp, a government camp for migrants in California. What is life like at Fieldstone? Identify the greatest hardships. In what way is Fieldstone better than the life they left behind in Oklahoma?
- Lark is the oldest child in her family. How do her parents depend on her to care for Zeb and Junie? Describe Ma, Pa, Zeb, and Junie from Lark's point of view.
- What is the first hint that Linnie, Lark's mother, struggles with her mental health? Discuss the events in the book that cause her to retreat to her bed. The children wonder what is wrong with their mother. What is Pa's explanation?
- Several times in the novel Lark refers to the "old Ma" and the "new Ma." Contrast the two. Cite passages when the children see glimmers of the "old ma." Pa had said that Ma needed to learn to "trust life" again (p. 159). At what point does this happen for Linnie?
- Linnie Jenson tells Lark, "There's beauty and goodness everywhere. You just have to look for it" (p. 41). Explain why Linnie expects Lark to see "beauty and goodness" when she can't see it herself. Point out times in the novel when Lark sees "beauty and goodness."
- Define bigotry. The migrants are called "Okies." Discuss the hurt this label causes. How does bigotry lead to violence? Who is behind the violence?
- The children from the camp attend Alder School, a nearby public school. How are they treated? Describe Miss Petty's attitude toward Lark and her camp classmates. What is Pa's advice about dealing with Miss Petty?
- Miss Petty sends a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Jenson informing them that Lark is in jeopardy of failing fifth grade. Why does Lark hesitate to give the letter to her parents? Discuss the dilemma she finds herself in regarding the letter. Explain the following simile: "Lark felt like a mouse about to be caught in the talons of a hawk" (p. 94). Who is the hawk?
- How does Lawrence, Lark's classmate, taunt the migrant children? Explain why he gets away with such behavior. How is Lawrence and the other students' bigoted behavior fueled by the adults in their lives?
- Contrast Mr. Ford, the Superintendent of Education, and Miss Petty's treatment of the camp children. What is Mr. Ford's answer to the bigotry the students face?
- Discuss the concept of the Fieldstone School that Mr. Ford builds. How do the children embrace the school? In what way is the curriculum unique? Describe the teachers.
- Who is Mrs. Oliver? How does she help Lark deal with the life she is living? Explain what Mrs. Oliver means when she says, "People often need the most love when they are being the most unlovable" (p. 269).
- Lark searches for hope throughout the novel. For example, she looks for a four-leaf clover. What other symbols of hope does she find? Cite specific scenes where she almost loses hope.
- Despair is the opposite of hope. When in the novel does Lark almost sink in despair? What is Pa's role in helping her confront sadness? Debate whether Ma is the root of Lark's sadness.
- Discuss the argument against migrant labor among the local citizens in California. Contrast this argument to the one some people today use against immigrants. Describe the contribution of migrant labor to farmers and immigrants to the workforce today.
- What is the purpose of the Epilogue? Discuss Lark's feelings about returning to Fieldstone for a reunion. Explain what she means, "She didn't know if her heart could handle the memories" (p. 310).

Guide created by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mindy Nichols Wendell is the author of *LIGHT AND AIR*, a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection that Shelf Awareness called "richly detailed" and "timeless" in a starred review. She was a professor of writing and pedagogy at SUNY Fredonia, where she served as the Director of the Composition Program. In 2019, she received the prestigious State University of New York Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching. Mindy lives in Western New York with her husband, Steve, a retired teacher.