



Middle Row

Sylvia Olsen

Interest level: grade 7 and up

Reading level: 2.4

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AR Quiz # 122458

Book Summary

When Dune quits showing up for school, and he and his eccentric mother seem to disappear from the face of the earth, Raedawn becomes obsessed with finding him. She recruits her somewhat-reluctant boyfriend Vince and her Uncle Dave to help her in a search that leads them into the nearby mountains and a marijuana-growing business ready for harvest. After nearly being killed by wild gunshots, they inform the police, who promptly arrest the drug dealers and rescue Dune and his mother.

Prereading Idea

Depending on a person's ethnicity, racism is a societal ill that may or may not seem to affect them. Ask students to write about a time when a bigger societal issue affected them or their family personally, and they took action. For example: racism, vandalism, unemployment, pollution, violence, water shortages, global warming, skyrocketing health care costs, or others.

Connecting to the World—Writing and Research Ideas

While trying to find Dune and his mother, Raedawn, Vince, and Uncle Dave could have been killed by the drug dealers who were protecting their marijuana crop. Ask students to research marijuana farms, the growing threat they pose to law enforcement officers and civilians, and the future of legalized marijuana. Ask students to take a stand on the issue and to write a persuasive paper supporting their viewpoint based on the impact in the community as opposed to recreational use.

Coming close to death causes Vince to reflect on his life and the contributions he has made to his community and to other people. He wonders what people would say about him at his funeral. Have students reflect on their own life, the goals they have set for themselves and the legacy they would like to leave behind. Have students write their own eulogy using the assignment as an exercise of self-evaluation and a guide for future action towards goal accomplishment. Ask students to place their eulogies in a self-addressed stamped envelope and turn them in for you to mail to them at a later date.

Dune could very well have been another high school drop out statistic had it not been for Raedawn's concern and obsession for finding him. In recent years almost one-third of high school students drop out of school with less than two years remaining before graduation. Ask students to investigate the reasons behind the high drop out rate. They can start with this site:

http://teammates.org/media/Education_TheSilentEpidemic.pdf

Then as a class discuss the report and its implications. In small groups ask students to prepare a "Commit to Graduate" brochure with relevant statistics for staying in school and a listing of community programs available to offer support for students. Plan to post and display the brochures in the halls throughout the school year.

Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel**Characterization**

Vince's father is a stereotypical racist, and Uncle Dave seems to be his opposite, but they have similarities as well. With a partner, ask students to draw a Venn diagram and list each of their unique characteristics in one circle with their similar traits in the overlapping center. Next, have the pairs to draw another overlapping circle on each side of the Venn diagram and to list Vince's traits just outside of his father's circle and Raedawn's traits just outside of her Uncle Dave's circle. Ask the students to choose one of the various characters and to write a reflective analysis of the character based on the Venn diagram.

Point of View

The story centers on Dune—his parentage, his safety, and his talent—though the reader knows little about him. Ask students to assume Dune's voice and to write a letter to Uncle Dave updating him on what Dune's life has been like without a father. Dune might also express his feelings about being rescued and then welcomed into the community at the celebration. Students can share their letters with the class and post them on a classroom bulletin board.

Setting

The setting for *Middle Row* is a rural small town with a racial division between Natives and whites. In groups, ask students to consider how the story would differ if the town was located in a large metropolitan area and the conflict was between two other racial groups. What conflicts might take place? How would the characters act and react to the conflict? How would the problems be resolved? Ask each group to prepare and perform a skit showing how the new setting would change the story. Have the class choose the best scenario based on the believability of the skit.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. On page 20, Vince states that his dad is a “bigoted fat head” and living with him causes Vince to say the same junk his father spews out of his mouth. How does Raedawn's influence change Vince's views on race?
2. As hurtful and ugly as Vince's father is to Raedawn, Vince says, “It's as if Dad is nothing more than a fly buzzing around her head,” (page 32). How can Raedawn ignore the hurtful things Vince's dad says to her? Why does she take it in stride and ignore his comments?
3. Raedawn and Vince are wise to meet in neutral places, not rubbing their relationship in anyone's face (page 34). Why are the Natives less hostile than the whites about Raedawn and Vince's relationship?

4. Vince is less than enthusiastic about looking for Dune, so why does he agree to help Raedawn? What happens to change his attitude about their search for Dune and his mother?
5. Uncle Dave is unique on the reservation because, according to Raedawn, “he knows everything about everything,” (page 36). How does he know so much about so many different things? How does this help him discover he is Dune’s father?
6. Why does Raedawn want Vince’s parents to come to the celebration to welcome Dave and his mother to the community? Why does Vince’s mother come without her husband?

Writer’s Craft

Dialogue

Have students work in small groups to select a particularly powerful section of dialogue. Students should develop the section as a reader’s theater presentation, omitting narration, cutting and/or expanding lines of dialogue, repeating lines for emphasis, or having characters say lines in chorus to create effect. Then have groups present their reader’s theater selections in the same sequence as the book.

Author Biography

Sylvia Olsen was born and educated in a white, middle-class neighborhood in Victoria, British Columbia. She married into the Tsartlip First Nation when she was seventeen, and for more than thirty years, she has lived and worked and raised her four children in the Tsartlip community. At age thirty-five, Sylvia returned to school and earned a master’s degree in history, specializing in Native/white relations in Canada. Writing about her experiences and those of others, Sylvia often finds herself exploring the in-between place where Native and non-Native people meet. Sylvia currently works in First Nations’ community management, with a focus on reserve housing.