

# The Teacher's Funeral

by Richard Peck

## Teacher's Guide

Written By Laurie Rozakis, Ph.D.

**PERMA-BOUND**  
THE STRONGEST BOOKS YOU CAN BUY

**CLASSROOM  
FAVORITES**

**A Perma-Bound Production**

*This guide was prepared using the Puffin Book edition, ©2004. Other editions may differ.*

## Synopsis

### **PART I Kissing Summer Good-Bye**

#### **Chapter One August**

The novel takes place in rural Indiana in 1904. The story is told in a flashback, as Russell Culver, now an adult, looks back to the time when he was fifteen years old and his brother Lloyd was ten. That year, Russell and Lloyd were delighted to hear that their teacher, Miss Myrt Arbuckle, had unexpectedly died. They're hoping that her death will convince the school board to tear down the one-room schoolhouse. After all, the Hominy Ridge School is "an out-of-date, unimproved, one-room country schoolhouse in the backwoodsier corner of Indiana" which only six students attend.

#### **Chapter Two The Best Boys in the World**

Russell, his brother, and their father eagerly anticipate the yearly arrival of the steel Case Agitator threshing machine from Wisconsin on its once-yearly exhibit. To make sure their father takes them to the exhibit, the boys work diligently that day on the family farm, despite the oppressive heat. Tansy, the boys' older sister, is home from high school (she boards in town). She keeps a close watch on the boys, acting as a surrogate mother since their own mother's death. Russell plans to leave his tiny Indiana farm town for the endless sky of the Dakotas.

#### **Chapter Three Me and Lloyd and Charlie Parr**

After the exhibit, Russell and Lloyd camp for the evening at the "crick." With the help of his best friend Charlie Parr, Russell plays a trick on Lloyd, having Charlie pretend to be the ghost of their teacher. Charlie turns the tables on him, however, when he conspires with Tansy, who pretends to be the ghost of their dead teacher.

#### **Chapter Four Flowers for Miss Myrt**

The boys kill a snake that has gotten into the henhouse and on Tansy's orders, pick some flowers for Miss Myrt's funeral.

#### **Chapter Five A Mess of Bad Puppies**

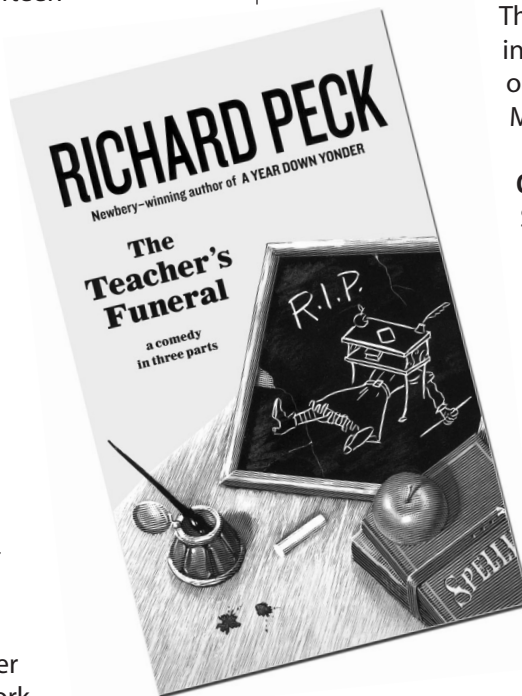
Since nobody is going to miss the teacher, Preacher Parr gets the assembly to miss the good old days when kids were better. He reads a doggerel poem by the anonymous "Sweet Singer of Sycamore Township." Tansy takes Miss Myrt's pointer from the casket, not willing to have to be buried and thus not be of any use to anyone.

#### **Chapter Six The First Such Mishap of the Twentieth Century**

On the way home from the funeral, the family's buggy collides with the Overland Automobile Company's Bullet No. 2 racing car, driven by a handsome young man named Eugene Hammond. Although Aunt Maud is thrown quite some distance, she is fine and everyone settles matters amicably.

#### **Chapter Seven A Droning of Locusts, a Mourning of Doves**

The school board has hired Tansy as the new teacher, even though she still has a year left of high school herself. Russell is horrified because Tansy is a hard taskmaster. But there's still hope: the school has only six students and needs eight to stay open. Russell, Tansy, and Lloyd clean the school and Russell muffles the bell with a sheet so no one can be called to class.



## **PART II A Jailhouse of School**

### **Chapter Eight Called to the Trough of Knowledge**

On the first day of school, Tansy receives a beautiful new hat and thanks her father, although the gift clearly did not come from him. Russell and Charlie Parr meet behind the privy to smoke. Tansy has circumvented the wadded bell: she uses a cowbell. Then she lists the school rules and the students sing their usual song. Tansy gets her seventh student: very young Pearl Bradley, nicknamed "Little Britches." Charlie is unusually helpful, which shows that he has a crush on Tansy. The class spelling bee is interrupted by a fire in the privy, accidentally started by the burning buggy whip the boys have smoked but not extinguished fully.

### **Chapter Nine One Lucky Boy**

Tansy wakes up Russell and Lloyd at night and Russell easily confesses that he set the fire and muffled the bell. She sets appropriate punishments. The story of the crash between the Culvers and Eugene Hammond appears in the newspaper. Dad realizes that Hammond supplied the information to obtain free publicity for his company and admires Hammond's ambition. Dad quietly gives Russell the lumber to rebuild the privy.

### **Chapter Ten Stony Lonesome**

Tansy and Russell visit the trashy Tarbox family in an attempt to find the eighth pupil. Mrs. Tarbox doesn't want her children educated because then they will be smarter than she is. She runs Tansy and Russell off her land, but as they drive away, their dog tussles with a porcupine and comes off the worse. Glenn Tarbox, age 19 or 20, gently and skillfully removes the quills. To everyone's astonishment, Glenn shows up in school the next day. Illiterate, he is a keen learner and very helpful. He also has a crush on Tansy.

### **Chapter Eleven Trouble on the Way**

The Sweet Singer writes a poem about the road mishap. For his school lunches, Glenn brings whatever he can catch or trap; this day, it's frogs. He also has apples for everyone. To curry favor with Tansy, Eugene Hammond sends school supplies to her class. The supplies delight the class. Tansy is horrified to find a harmless but terrifying puff adder snake in her drawer. Glenn disposes of it while Tansy uses a garter snake to turn the incident into a fun lesson. Russell and Lloyd begin to realize that Tansy is beautiful as well as bright and thus has many eager suitors—Eugene, Glenn, and Charlie.

### **Chapter Twelve Another Old Gal in the Ditch**

Someone has cut the plank over the ditch, sending hugely obese and nasty Aunt Fanny Hamline into the water. It takes the entire class and the mailman, George Keating, to get her out. Aunt Fanny has come to warn whoever is stealing her frogs and fruit that she will shoot them if she catches them. Russell finally convinces Charlie to head off to the Dakotas with him. They plan to leave the following evening.

### **Chapter Thirteen The Only Really Perfect Thing in the World**

Eugene Hammond sends Tansy's class a bust of Abraham Lincoln, but even better, a real baseball. Glenn and Charlie beat each other up over Tansy, and Russell realizes that Charlie will never leave with him. That night, Dad takes Russell on a trip to Montezuma, where Russell and Charlie were going to hop a train. Russell sees all the tramps and realizes that his father knew about his plan all along and wants him to realize what a miserable, dangerous idea it was.

## **PART III The Fall of the Year**

### **Chapter Fourteen One Serious Suitor**

Flashing forward, Russell says that he didn't get to the Dakotas until 1926, on a vacation he took with his wife. Hammond courts the entire family, even dancing with Aunt Maud. Dad invites Hammond to help with the hog butchering. A country boy despite his city polish, Hammond neatly kills the pig with a single bullet between its eyes and easily handles the carcass. He then delights the boys by taking them for a ride in his car.

### **Chapter Fifteen Fatal Friday**

Tansy gets a letter that she is to be examined for her provisional teaching license the following day. The class makes the school room spotless. Glenn has moved out of his house because his brothers are trying to get him to quit school: they put the puff adder in Tansy's desk and sawed the plank in half. He is now living with Aunt Fanny, doing chores in exchange for a room in the stables. She is also cooking for him. Glenn and Russell try to clean the stove with gunpowder, covering the room with soot and burning off their eyebrows.

## Chapter Sixteen Two Miracles and a Mercy

All the kids work hard to get the schoolroom cleaned up quickly before the inspectors come. Aunt Fanny donates her American flag to the school. Tansy performs beautifully for the inspectors. Glenn and Britches prove that Tansy is an excellent teacher. The biggest surprise is Flopears: everyone thinks he's a dunce, but he is really a skilled artist.

## Chapter Seventeen Grown and Flown

In the present, Russell ties up all the loose ends. He recalls how Tansy pushed him through high school and then college at Purdue. Lloyd followed in his footsteps. Charlie became a preacher; Aunt Maud was the Sweet Singer. Flopears (Floyd) became a famous cartoonist; Lester Kriegbaum became president of Indiana University. Charlie married Pearl Parr, Russell married Britches, and Tansy married Glenn.

## Timeline of Milestones in Equal Opportunity & Education

- 1635** The first Latin Grammar School (the Roxbury Latin School) is established.  
The first "free school" in Virginia opens.
- 1636** Harvard College, the first higher education institution in the New World, established in Cambridge, MA
- 1642** The Massachusetts Bay School Law is passed, requiring parents to make sure their children know the principles of religion and the laws of the commonwealth.
- 1647** The Massachusetts Law of 1647 is passed, requiring that every town of at least 50 families hire a schoolmaster to teach the children to read and write, and that all towns of at least 100 families should have a Latin grammar school master who will prepare students to attend Harvard College.
- 1690** The first *New England Primer* is printed in Boston. It becomes the most widely-used schoolbook in New England.
- 1751** Ben Franklin helps to establish the first "English Academy" in Philadelphia. The academy later becomes the University of Pennsylvania.
- 1779** Thomas Jefferson proposes a two-track educational system, with different tracks for "the laboring and the learned."
- 1785** Noah Webster writes *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*: a spelling book, a grammar book, and a reader. They become very widely used throughout the United States.
- 1817** The Connecticut Asylum at Hartford for the Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons opens. It is the first permanent school for the deaf in the U.S..
- 1821** First public high school, Boston English High School opens.
- 1827** Massachusetts passes a law requiring towns of more than 500 families to have a public high school open to all students.
- 1829** The New England Asylum for the Blind, now the Perkins School for the Blind, opens in MA, becoming the first school in the U.S. for children with visual disabilities.
- 1836** The first of William Holmes McGuffey's readers is published.
- 1837** Mount Holyoke Female Seminary opens. It is the first college for women in the U.S.
- 1839** The first state funded school specifically for teacher education (then known as "normal" schools) opens in Lexington, Massachusetts.
- 1848** Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Youth, the first school of its kind in the U.S., opens.
- 1851** The New York State Asylum for Idiots opens.
- 1852** Massachusetts enacts the first mandatory school attendance law.
- 1856** The first kindergarten in the U.S. is started in Watertown, Wisconsin.
- 1857** The National Teachers Association (now the National Education Association) is founded.
- 1862** The First Morrill Act donates public lands to states, the sale of which will be used for the "endow-

- ment, support, and maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”
- 1864** Gallaudet University, the first college specifically for deaf students, opens.
- 1875** The Civil Rights Act is passed, banning segregation in all public accommodations. The Supreme Court rules it unconstitutional in 1883, deciding that the Congress did not have the authority to regulate the conduct of individuals.
- 1881** Booker T. Washington becomes the first principal of the newly-opened normal school in Tuskegee, Alabama, now Tuskegee University.
- 1890** The Second Morrill Act is enacted, providing for the “more complete endowment and support of the colleges “through the sale of public lands.” Part of this funding leads to the creation of 16 black colleges.
- 1916** The Stanford Revision of the Binet-Simon Scale becomes a widely-used individual intelligence test, and along with it, the concept of the intelligence quotient (IQ) is created.
- 1916** The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is founded.
- 1917** Army Alpha and Beta tests lay the groundwork for future standardized tests.
- 1919** All states have laws providing funds for transporting children to school.
- 1926** The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is first administered.
- 1944** The G.I. Bill signed. Nearly 8 million World War II veterans take advantage of the GI Bill during the seven years benefits are offered. More than two million attend colleges or universities.
- 1952** Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952 modifies the G.I. Bill for veterans of the Korean War.
- 1954** Brown v. Board. of Education of Topeka, ruling that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”
- 1957** Federal troops enforce integration in Little Rock, Arkansas.
- 1963** Samuel A. Kirk uses the term “learning disability” at a Chicago conference on children with perceptual disorders. The term sticks, and in 1964, the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, now the Learning Disabilities Association of America, is formed. Today, more than one-half of all students in the U.S. who receive special education have been diagnosed as having learning disabilities.
- 1964** The Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion or national origin.
- 1965** The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed, providing federal funds to help low-income students. This results in educational programs such as Title I, Head Start, and bilingual education.
- 1966** Veterans Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966 provides educational benefits for Vietnam veterans.
- 1971** Federal court rules that students with mental retardation are entitled to a free public education.
- 1972** Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 becomes law, prohibiting discrimination based on sex in all aspects of education. Mills v. the Board of Education of Washington, D.C. extends the PARC v. Pennsylvania ruling to other students with disabilities and requires the provision of “adequate alternative educational services suited to the child’s needs, which may include special education . . .”
- 1975** The Education of All Handicapped Children Act passed, requiring a free, appropriate public education, suited to the student’s individual needs, be offered in the least restrictive setting.
- 1990** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is passed, mandating transition services and adds autism and traumatic brain injury to the eligibility list.
- 2001** No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) becomes law, holding schools accountable for student achievement levels. The Act provides penalties for schools that do not make adequate yearly progress toward meeting the goals of NCLB.



2004 The Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act reauthorizes and modifies IDEA.

## Author Sketch

Richard Peck was born in 1934, in Decatur, Illinois, the son of a merchant and a homemaker. He began his education at the University of Exeter, where he stayed a year, from 1955 to 1956. Then he transferred to DePauw University, where he earned his B.A.. Peck's education was then interrupted by a two-year stint in the Army, where he served in Stuttgart, Germany. Upon his discharge, Peck enrolled at Southern Illinois University, earning his M.A. in 1959. He later completed further graduate study at Washington University.



Peck began his career as an English teacher at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. From 1961-1963, he taught English at Glenbrook North High School, Northbrook, Illinois. He left education that year to become a textbook editor at Scott, Foresman, a job he kept for two years. From 1965-1971, Peck returned to teaching, moving to New York and working at Hunter College of the City University of New York and Hunter College High School. When he was 37 years old, Peck published his first young adult novel and made writing his full-time career.

"Ironically, it was my students who taught me to be a writer, though I had been hired to teach them," he said in a speech published in *Arkansas Libraries*. "They taught me that a novel must entertain first before it can be anything else. I learned that there is no such thing as a 'grade reading level'; a young person's 'reading level' and attention span will rise and fall according to his degree of interest. I learned that if you do not have a happy ending for the young, you had better do some fast talking."

When asked what he hopes to accomplish in his books for young adults, Peck told an interviewer: "I don't know what books can do, except one point is that I wish every kid knew that fiction can be truer than fact, that it isn't a frivolous pastime unless your reading taste is for the frivolous. I wish they knew that being literate is a way of being successful in any field.... So that's the hope I have."

## Critic's Corner

Richard Peck is a highly regarded young adult author. In a survey of members of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English (ALAN) conducted in 1988, Peck was voted the third most important YA writer —only S. E. Hinton and Paul Zindel received more votes. Not surprisingly, given the high quality of Peck's writing, the reviews for *The Teacher's Funeral* were excellent. For example, Susan Riley, reviewing the novel for *School Library Journal*, wrote: "Another gem from Peck."

Carolyn Phelan, writing in *Booklist*, was equally enthusiastic: "Peck's droll humor, so familiar to fans of *A Long Way from Chicago* (1999) and *A Year down Yonder* (2000), lights up his latest book set in the rural Midwest... Peck is in his element here. The narrator's adult voice comes through as in his recollection of walking to school: 'It was only about a mile, and uphill both ways, as the road to school always was back then.' In every other way, though, Russell seems no great distance in time from his experiences in the story, so vivid is the telling of every event, conversation, and emotion. Best of all, the dry wit and unpretentious tone make the story's events comical, its characters memorable, and its conclusion unexpectedly moving."

## Peck's Other Works

*Mindscapes: Poems for the Real World* (1971)  
*Don't Look and It Won't Hurt* (1972)  
*Dreamland Lake* (1973)  
*Through a Brief Darkness* (1973)  
*The Creative Word* (1973)  
*Representing Superdoll* (1974)  
*Transitions: a Literary Paper Casebook* (1974)  
*The Ghost Belonged to Me* (1975)  
*Are You in the House Alone?* (1976)  
*Ghosts I Have Been* (1977)  
*Monster Night at Grandma's House* (1977)  
*Father Figure* (1978)  
*Secrets of the Shopping Mall* (1979)  
*Amanda/Miranda* (1980)  
*Close Enough to Touch* (1981)  
*The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp* (1983)  
*This Family of Women* (1983)  
*Love and Death at the Mall* (1994)  
*Remembering the Good Times* (1985)  
*Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death* (1986)  
*Princess Ashley* (1987)

*Those Summer Girls I Never Met* (1988)  
*Voices After Midnight* (1989)  
*Unfinished Portrait of Jessica* (1991)  
*Bel-Air Bambi and the Mall Rats* (1993)  
*The Last Safe Place on Earth* (1995)  
*Lost in Cyberspace* (1995)  
*Anonymously Yours* (1995)  
*The Great Interactive Dream Machine: Another Adventure in Cyberspace* (1996)  
*A Long Way from Chicago: A Novel in Stories* (1998)  
*London Holiday* (1998)  
*Strays Like Us* (1998)  
*A Year Down Yonder* (2000)  
*Fair Weather* (2001)  
*The River Between Us* (2003)  
*The Last Safe Place on Earth* (2005)  
*Past Perfect, Present Tense* (2006)  
*Philly Amateurs* (2006)  
*On the Wings of Heroes* (2007)  
*Invitations to the World Teaching and Writing for the Young* (2007)

## Further Readings About the Author

*Children's Literature Review*, Volume 15, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1988, pp. 146-166.  
*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Volume 21, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1982.  
Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*, 18. Detroit: Gale Research, 1980, pp. 242-244.  
Donelson, Kenneth L. and Nilsen Alleen Pace, *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. Glenview, Ill., Scott, Foresman and Company, 1980.  
Gallo, Donald R., ed. *Speaking for Ourselves: Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults*, Urbana, Ill.: National Council for Teachers of English, 1990, pp. 165-167.  
Gallo, Donald R. "Who Are the Most Important YA Authors?" *The ALAN Review*, vol. 16, no., 3 Spring 1989, pp. 18-20.  
Gunton, Sharon R., ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 21. Detroit: Gale Research, 1982, pp. 295-301.  
Locher, Frances Carol, ed. *Contemporary Authors*, 85-88. Detroit: Gale Research, 1980, pp. 458-459.  
*Publishers Weekly*, November 10, 2003, review of *The River Between Us*, p. 38.  
Sarkassian, Adele, ed. *Something About the Author Autobiography Series*, Detroit: Gale Research, 1985, Vol. 2, pp. 175-186.  
Scheler, Curt. Peck Is the Author Whose Dreams Came True. Grand Rapids Press, 25 July 1982.

Schwartz, Sheila. *Teaching Adolescent Literature: A Humanistic Approach*. Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden Book Company, 1979.  
*Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, Volume 2, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1986, pp. 175-186.  
*St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers*, 2nd edition, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1999.  
*Twentieth Century Children's Writers*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1989.  
*Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers*, first edition, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1994.  
*Writers for Young Adults*, Scribner (New York, NY), 1997.

## General Objectives

1. To appreciate the novel's suspense
2. To understand the novel's title
3. To recognize the importance of setting
4. To assess each character's personality
5. To recognize the novel's theme and lessons that it teaches
6. To understand the importance of education
7. To appreciate the author's use of humor
8. To find examples of wisdom
9. To be emotionally moved by the unexpected ending
10. To describe the novel's mood or atmosphere

## Specific Objectives

1. To understand the shifts in chronology, especially the flashback
2. To analyze why Russell wants to leave him home and go to the Dakotas
3. To see how Tansy acts as a surrogate mother to her two younger brothers
4. To appreciate Tansy's determination, intelligence, and skill as a teacher
5. To recognize the effect and value of Mr. Culver's gentle wisdom
6. To probe the relationship between Tansy and Glenn
7. To see the humor in the exploding privy, Aunt Fanny mishap, and other amusing scenes
8. To grasp how Tansy changes the lives of her students by educating them and by her example
9. To consider the lessons the book teaches about the past
10. To determine why Tansy marries Glenn and not Eugene or Charlie

## Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Richard Peck's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

**Humor:** the use of comedy in a novel. Peck is known for his skillful use of humor in his writing and *The Teacher's Funeral* is no exception. For example, on page 53, Russell recounts the story of Harve and Orv Oglivy, a father and son duo who were "dumber than stumps." When they saw their first motorcar, they shot at it. "Did you kill that thing, Paw?" Orv asked Harve. "No," Harve said, "but I got him to turn loose of the man he had hold of."

**Dialect:** is the way people speak in a certain region or area. In a dialect, certain words are spelled and pronounced differently. Writers use dialects to describe their characters and setting more fully. One of the most well-known modern examples of dialect is Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Peck uses some dialect in *The Teacher's Funeral* to help readers visualize the setting and characters. For example: "The water wasn't crotch-deep on a dwarf at that point," and "She had a snout on her long enough to drink water down a crawdad hole."

**Point of View:** is the position from which a story is told. In *The Teacher's Funeral*, Peck uses the first-person point of view to give the events a personal and immediate slant. Russell tells the story in his own words. This helps readers get the flavor of the era and feel as though they, too, are a part of the action.

## The Importance of Setting

*The Teacher's Funeral* is set in the mythical rural town of Hominy Ridge in Indiana, 1904. The community is comprised of stereotypical country folk, for example: the taciturn, wise Mr. Culver, a widowed farmer; the pipe-smoking old maid Aunt Maud; who secretly writes bad poetry; the stingy, cranky Aunt Fanny who nonetheless has a heart of gold. The boys play in the "crick" (creek), yearn for sleek and fast machines, and detest school. The poor eat what they can catch or forage, as we see with Glenn Tarbox; haircuts are homemade, as we see with Russell and Lloyd. The citizens have solid values and strong religious faith. They support each other in times of need. It's a highly idealized view of the past, which Russell is not above mocking, as he does recounting his days in the one-room school house: "It was only about a mile and uphill both ways, as the road to school always was back then. And we were barefoot, as we were all winter in our memories later." (p. 63)

The community is also closed to "outsiders," which includes anyone who can't trace their family back several generations. "Miss Myrt was not one of us," Preacher Parr recalled. "She served here only twenty-two years, a foreigner in our midst, as she came from up around Crawfordsville." (p. 37) Based on this attitude, Tansy's marriage to Glenn Tarbox rather than Eugene Hammond comes as no surprise: While both men work hard and love Tansy, Glenn is the insider and Eugene is not.

The setting is crucial in the novel, as important as any of the characters. It determines their current life, and in large part, their futures. Peck lavishes the setting with description to make sure that readers can visualize it. For example, he describes the creek this way: "A couple of old screech owls swooped up a hedgerow, looking for mice. Me and Lloyd speculated about using pickled peaches for bait. A star or two began to show. It would have been another of life's perfect moments except for the mosquitoes and chiggers and whatever was crawling off J.W. and onto us." (p. 17) Notice how carefully Peck constructed this passage to appeal to the senses: taste, sight, touch, and sound.



## Cross-Curricular Sources

### Novels

Avi, *The Secret School*  
Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*  
Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*  
Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Giant Peach*  
Julie Dannenberg, *First Day Jitters*  
Kate DiCamillo, *Because of Winn-Dixie*  
Patricia Reilly Giff, *Pictures of Hollis Woods*  
Ben Mikaleson, *Touching Spirit Bear*  
Stephanie Tolan, *Surviving the Applewhites*  
Jerry Spinelli, *Loser*  
Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Little House on the Prairie* series

### Audio

*The Teacher's Funeral*  
*On the Wings of Heroes*

### DVDs and Videos

*Blazing Saddles* (1974)  
*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004)  
*High Anxiety* (1977)  
*History of the World* (1981)  
*Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2004)  
*The Producers* (1968)

### Internet

Richard Peck, Featured Author  
[www.carolhurst.com/authors/rpeck.html](http://www.carolhurst.com/authors/rpeck.html)  
Richard Peck  
[www.tallmania.com/peck.html](http://www.tallmania.com/peck.html)  
Richard Peck biography  
[www.car.org/mae/peck/peck.htm](http://www.car.org/mae/peck/peck.htm)  
Richard Peck Teacher Resource File  
[falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/richardpeck.htm](http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/richardpeck.htm)

## Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Richard Peck's *The Teacher's Funeral* should include these aspects:

### Themes

- death
- education
- emotion
- family
- friendship
- humor
- love
- machines
- rural life around the turn of the century
- personal sacrifice

### Motifs

- using death as comic relief
- appreciating the importance of education
- obtaining higher education despite family opposition
- raising a family with love and gentleness
- courting a girl
- serving as a positive role model for a younger brother
- understanding a framing device in a novel
- being fascinated by machines and technology
- living on your own
- analyzing the interweaving of fact and fiction in an historical novel

## Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each. Chapter and page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. If your teacher has to die, August isn't a bad time of year for it. (Chap. 1, p. 1)  
*(The death of Miss Myrt Arbuckle, the sole teacher in the one-room school house, sets off the action. It leads to Tansy being the new teacher, Russell and Lloyd getting a first-class education, and Tansy marrying Glenn Tarbox.)*
2. Though he was too big to hold my hand, Lloyd had me in a grip. It was the Case Special. (Chap. 2, p. 10)  
*(The men in the community are transfixed by the new threshing machine. On a humorous level, it represents the stereotypical male obsession with machines. On a more serious level, it symbolizes the great technological explosion of the 20th century that drastically changed life in America, especially small-town rural life.)*
3. All I wanted was to be on a threshing crew, to be in the stubble fields on crisp mornings like the dawn of creation. (Chap. 2, p. 12)  
*(Russell intends to run away from his home and work on a threshing crew in the Dakotas. He is convinced that his best friend Charlie Parr feels exactly the same way and the two of them will run away together, hitching rides on the rails as hobos. Russell's dream is shattered when Charlie falls for Tansy and does not want to leave.)*
4. In their wisdom, the school board had hired on Tansy to take Miss Myrt's place at Hominy Ridge



School. (Chap. 7, p. 61)

*(Teachers were scarce in rural America around the turn of the century. Most men worked in the fields or factories; women had to surrender their teaching certification when they married. As a result, students in the upper levels of high school were allowed to teach younger students if they could pass a certification exam. This is what happens in Tansy's case. Since she is a harsh taskmaster intent on making her students learn, Russell is terrified: no more slacking off in school for him!)*

5. Mrs. Tarbox clenched her jaw. "And be better than me?" (Chap. 10, p. 103)  
*(Many people take it as a given that children should be smarter and more successful than their parents; after all, this is part of the "American Dream." Mrs. Tarbox, in contrast, takes the opposite view; she refuses to let her children get an education because she fears they will show her up as the ignorant, cruel, lazy person she is. That Glenn succeeds in spite of her and his equally ignorant brothers is a testament to the strength of his character and his intelligence.)*
6. The ball, the only really perfect thing in the world, rested in Glenn's cupped palm. (Chap. 13, p. 137)  
*(To today's children, baseballs are laughably common objects, affordable playthings. In rural Indiana in 1904, however, a baseball was as rare as a snowball in July. None of the students had ever seen one, much less possessed one. As a result, they are in awe of its beauty and possibility.)*
7. And there was but one thing I understood. (Chap. 13, p. 141)  
*(As Glenn and Charlie battle each other over Tansy, Russell realizes that Charlie will never go with him to the Dakotas: he loves Tansy and intends to stay home and court her. The realization that his dream has ended, that he is trapped at home, hits Russell hard.)*
8. "That's the way people is who ain't goin' anyplace in life theirselves." (Chap. 16, p. 168)  
*(Glenn reveals that his brothers played the mean tricks on Tansy, sawing through the plank over the creek and putting the snake in her desk. They were determined to drive Glenn from school because like their mother, they did not want him to have more education than they did. They did not want him to get ahead in life.)*
9. "Then you need an American flag." (Chap. 16, p. 173)  
*(Here, Miss Fannie presents Tansy and her students with the American flag that her husband had carried into battle in the Civil War. Earlier, Fanny had criticized Tansy for not having a flag in the classroom. Tansy is very touched by Miss Fanny's generosi-*

*ty and the symbolism it represents: an acceptance of her role as a "real" teacher. In effect, receiving the flag is the same as passing the official certification test.)*

10. We'd get together to laugh and live over the old days when we and the twentieth century were young: Floyd and Lloyd and Lester and their wives, Charlie and Pearl Parr, me and Beulah, Tansy and Glenn. (Chapter 17, p. 190)  
*(In the surprisingly touching ending, readers learn that Tansy chose Glenn of all her suitors and that Russell married "Little Britches," the smartest girl in the class and Tansy's pet.)*

## Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

### Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. When and where does the story take place?  
*(The story is set in rural Indiana in 1904. The narrator is looking back on the year he was fifteen years old.)*
2. What joke does Russell play on Lloyd while they are camping at the creek?  
*(Russell gets his friend Charlie to pretend to be the ghost of the recently deceased teacher Myrt Arbuckle.)*
3. What joke does Charlie play on Russell, with Tansy's help?  
*(He plays the same joke, but with Tansy as the ghost.)*
4. Who does Tansy say brought her a hat for the first day of school? Who really bought her the hat?  
*(She says that her father bought her the hat, but it is really from Eugene Hammond.)*
5. Eugene Hammond sends several gifts to Tansy's students. Which gift do they like the best?  
*(They like the baseball the best.)*

### Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. What do the Tarboxes represent?  
*(They stand for ignorance and a desire to keep others as ignorant as they are. Within the value system of this book, ignorance is among the worst vices.)*
7. What qualities make Tansy an effective teacher?  
*(She is creative, determined, and very intelligent. She tailors her*

# The Teacher's Funeral

Richard Peck

*lessons to each of her students, giving them the information they need to be confident and educated adults.)*

8. Aunt Fanny gives to Tansy an American flag. What does the flag represent?

*(The flag represents the continuation of tradition and Miss Fanny's acceptance of Tansy's legitimacy as a teacher.)*

## Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. Do you think that Tansy made the right choice in marrying Glenn Tarbox? Why or why not?

*(Answers will vary, depending on students' feelings about Glenn and Tansy. However, the strength of his character, his determination to learn to read and better himself, his creativity in surviving on his own, and his kindness – he won't kill a harmless snake—shows that he is a fine man with true integrity.)*

10. What qualities made the preacher's sermon effective?

*(Possible responses: Since no one feels sorry that Miss Myrt died, the preacher shifts the focus to the loss of the good old days when the winters were worse and the kids were better.)*

## Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Write a journal entry from Russell's point of view that describes his life after the novel ended, from age 16 to 25.
12. Working with a small group of classmates, make a mural showing the main events in this novel.

## Across the Curriculum

### Art/Music/Physical Education

1. The students sing at the beginning of every class. Find or write a song to help your classmates get into the right frame of mind for learning.
2. Draw a portrait of Tansy as she looked on the first day of school.
3. The students play outside at recess. They play modern games such as baseball and traditional games like "Bug in the Gully" and "Old Sow Out." Research some traditional games and demonstrate them for your classmates. If time permits, organize an Old-Time Field Day.
4. Sketch the one-room school house, as it is described in the novel.

### Speech/Debate

1. As a class, hold a spelling bee like the ones in the novel. Use challenging words, as these students do.
2. Write and deliver a funeral oration for Miss Myrt.
3. Who should Tansy marry? She certainly has no lack of suitors! Resolve this issue in a debate with your classmates.
4. Tansy teaches largely by memorization, a technique not emphasized in today's schools. In a roundtable discussion, evaluate the effectiveness of various teaching methods, including memorization, hands-on learning, and the Socratic method.
5. The novel is subtitled "A comedy in three parts." Recast the novel as a three-act play and perform it for the class. Try to keep the action to no more than a half hour to an hour.
6. Enact a scene between Tansy and Glenn in which he proposes and she accepts.

### Language Arts

1. Mr. Culver says that the only man who got his work done by Friday was Robinson Crusoe. Explain the reference, read the novel, and explain its enduring appeal and status as a "classic."
2. When writing for any age group, Peck told Jean F. Mercier in *Publishers Weekly*, he tries to "give readers leading characters they can look up to and reasons to believe that problems can be solved." Explain how he accomplished his aim in *The Teacher's Funeral*.
3. Some people like the poetry written by the "Sweet Singer of Sycamore Township," while others correctly recognize it as dreadful. Explain what makes literature in general and poetry in particular well-written.
4. Find the quote "Curfew must not ring tonight" (Chapter 7) and explain its relevance to the book.
5. Writing as Tansy, make three journal entries describing how you change as a result of your experience teaching.

6. Tansy cites James Whitcomb Riley as the greatest living poet in 1904. Whom do critics believe is the greatest living poet today? Share your findings with the class.

## History/Social Studies

1. List all the presidents, as the students in this book would have to do.
2. The students in rural schoolhouses were expected to help keep them clean. This is still the case in several other cultures as well. Choose another culture, such as Japan, China, or France. In a research report, compare and contrast their educational system to ours.
3. Aunt Maud cuts the boys' hair by moonlight so it does not grow so fast. This is a superstition, not a fact. List five other common superstitions. Theorize why these myths continue.
4. List all the states and their capitals, another exercise that Russell and his fellow classmates must do.
5. On a timeline, list some of the major inventions in America from 1904 to 1950. Include at least 20 inventions. Then decide which ones were the most important and why.

## Science

1. When Lloyd hears that his teacher has died, Russell says that he looked like "he was hearing the music of the spheres." Explain the reference.
2. Miss Myrt has arthritis. Explain the causes, symptoms, and treatments for this disease.
3. On a chart, classify the most common snakes found in your region. Draw each one or use pictures to help people identify them.
4. Tansy does not like handling any snakes, even the small, harmless garter snake. Many people feel the same way. Choose another creature that people fear, such as spiders, and explain which ones are harmful and which are harmless. How can people tell the difference between them?
5. Research what science an 8th grader would be expected to learn around 1904. Compare this to the science that you are expected to have mastered today.

## Math

1. Locate Indiana on a map and calculate how far it is from your home. How long would it take to drive there?
2. Glenn Tarbox is illiterate. On a chart or graph, show how many Americans today cannot read.
3. Memorize the multiplication tables from 0 to 12, as the students in Tansy's class had to do.
4. Find out how many miles per hour the Model T could travel. Then calculate how long it would take to drive from Indiana to your home in 1904. How long would it take today in a modern car? How much longer did the trip take in 1916?

## Alternate Assessment

1. Tansy lists the school rules. Make up six classroom rules and use them as the basis of a class constitution.
2. To get her teaching license, Tansy is tested on general knowledge. Make up a test of general knowledge that someone your age should know.
3. Make a character list of the main characters and describe each one. Include at least ten characters.
4. Write a critical review of the novel for the school newspaper.

## Vocabulary

Match each word to its meaning. Write the letter of your choice in the space provided.

- |                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| ___ 1. cadaver     | A. emaciated, scrawny                      |
| ___ 2. solace      | B. choke                                   |
| ___ 3. robust      | C. self-satisfied                          |
| ___ 4. oration     | D. dead body                               |
| ___ 5. smug        | E. a deliberately setting a dangerous fire |
| ___ 6. derision    | F. foolish, stupid                         |
| ___ 7. shard       | G. scorn                                   |
| ___ 8. tarry       | H. strong, healthy                         |
| ___ 9. asinine     | I. sophisticated, classy                   |
| ___ 10. ascend     | J. wait                                    |
| ___ 11. asphyxiate | K. speech                                  |
| ___ 12. cacophony  | L. climb                                   |
| ___ 13. gaunt      | M. harsh sounds                            |
| ___ 14. elegant    | N. comfort                                 |
| ___ 15. arson      | O. small piece                             |



## Comprehension Test A

### Part I: Sentence Completion (20 points)

Supply a term to complete each of the following statements. Place your answers in the blanks provided in the sentences.

1. The novel opens in the year \_\_\_\_\_.
2. At that time, the narrator, Russell Culver, is \_\_\_\_\_ years old.
3. Russell Culver is in the \_\_\_\_\_ grade.
4. The boys kill a snake that has gotten into the henhouse and on Tansy's orders, pick some \_\_\_\_\_ for Miss Myrt's funeral.
5. Tansy takes Miss Myrt's \_\_\_\_\_ from the casket, not willing to have to buried and thus not be of any use to anyone.
6. On the first day of school, Tansy receives a beautiful new \_\_\_\_\_ and thanks her father, although the gift did not come from him.
7. The boys nearly burn down the class \_\_\_\_\_ because of their smoking.
8. Tansy is horrified to find a harmless but terrifying \_\_\_\_\_ in her drawer at school, put there by the Tarbox brothers.
9. "The Only Really Perfect Thing in the World" is a(n) \_\_\_\_\_.
10. Glenn and Russell try to clean the stove with \_\_\_\_\_, covering the school room with soot and burning off their eyebrows.

### Part II: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left.

- |                   |                       |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| A. Tansy          | F. Lloyd Culver       |
| B. Russell Culver | G. Aunt Maud          |
| C. Glenn Tarbox   | H. Little Britches    |
| D. Charlie Parr   | I. Aunt Fanny Hamline |
| E. Eugene Hammond | J. Mr. George Keating |

- \_\_\_\_ 1. Russell's best friend; he and Russell plan to run away together
- \_\_\_\_ 2. the mean, stingy fat lady who falls into the ditch and can't get out
- \_\_\_\_ 3. a terrible cook
- \_\_\_\_ 4. Tansy's suitor who sends supplies such as notepads to the school
- \_\_\_\_ 5. the new teacher; the boys' older sister
- \_\_\_\_ 6. the mailman
- \_\_\_\_ 7. the youngest and smartest student in school; Tansy's favorite student
- \_\_\_\_ 8. the narrator, age fifteen
- \_\_\_\_ 9. Russell's ten-year-old brother
- \_\_\_\_ 10. the man Tansy eventually marries

## Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

### Part III: Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each and explain why it is important in the novel.

1. snakes
2. the 1904 Case Agitator threshing machine
3. the Dakotas
4. the cowbell
5. the baseball

### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Evaluate Mr. Culver's skill as a father. Is he a good father or not? Explain your answer.
2. Analyze the relationship between Russell and Lloyd. Describe how it changes.
3. Explain what influence Tansy has on her brothers.
4. Who is the most admirable character in the novel. Why?

## Comprehension Test B

### Part I: Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each and explain why it is important in the novel.

1. the baseball
2. the flag from Aunt Fanny
3. the Sweet Singer of Sycamore Township
4. the pointer
5. Eugene's racing car

### Part II: Matching (20 points)

Match the following descriptions with names of speakers from the list below. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- |                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| ___ 1. J.W.               | A. Russell's best friend                             |
| ___ 2. Pearl Bradley      | B. Parke County Superintendent of Schools            |
| ___ 3. Russell            | C. Just Worthless, the family's dog                  |
| ___ 4. Siren              | D. the Sweet Singer of Sycamore County               |
| ___ 5. Aunt Maud          | E. the new teacher                                   |
| ___ 6. Charlie Parr       | F. an arrogant student; she later marries Charlie    |
| ___ 7. Pearl Nearing      | G. "Little Britches"                                 |
| ___ 8. Glenn Tarbox       | H. one of the family's horses                        |
| ___ 9. T. Bernard Whipple | I. the illiterate man determined to get an education |
| ___ 10. Tansy             | J. the narrator                                      |

## Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

### Part III: True/False (20 points)

Write T if the statement is true or F if the statement is false.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Russell and Lloyd are shattered to hear that their teacher, Miss Myrt Arbuckle, has unexpectedly died. They adored her.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Russell plans to leave his tiny Indiana farm town to work on a farm in another region.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. On the way home from the funeral, the family's buggy collides with the Overland Automobile Company's Bullet No. 2 racing car, and Aunt Maud is killed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Someone has cut the plank over the ditch, sending Aunt Fanny Hamline into the water.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Dad invites Hammond to help with the hog butchering. A country boy despite his city polish, Eugene neatly kills the pig and easily handles the carcass.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Russell blows up the school to avoid having to attend.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Russell never gets to the Dakotas, even after he is an adult.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Tansy isn't examined for her teaching license because the school board members trust her.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Glenn ends up living with Aunt Fanny, doing chores in exchange for a room in the stables and food.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Flopears proves to be a very talented artist and grows up to be a professional cartoonist.

### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Evaluate Tansy's skill as a teacher. Is she an effective teacher or not? Explain your answer.
- 2. Analyze what the title means and tell why it fits the novel's plot.
- 3. Describe the novel's setting and explain its importance to the story.
- 4. Provide two examples of humor in the novel and explain why they are amusing.



## Answer Key

### VOCABULARY TEST

- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. D | 6. G  | 11. B |
| 2. N | 7. O  | 12. M |
| 3. H | 8. J  | 13. A |
| 4. K | 9. F  | 14. I |
| 5. C | 10. L | 15. E |

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Sentence Completion (20 points)

- |            |                    |
|------------|--------------------|
| 1. 1904    | 6. hat             |
| 2. fifteen | 7. privy, outhouse |
| 3. 8th     | 8. snake           |
| 4. flowers | 9. baseball        |
| 5. pointer | 10. gunpowder      |

#### Part II: Matching (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. D | 6. J  |
| 2. I | 7. H  |
| 3. G | 8. B  |
| 4. E | 9. F  |
| 5. A | 10. C |

#### Part III: Identification (20 points)

- Snakes are one of the chief motifs in the novel. A snake gets trapped in the hen house when he eats an egg; the Tarbox brothers put a huge, ugly snake – a puff adder—in Tansy's desk at school. Tansy handles a garter snake to turn the puff adder incident into a positive lesson, although she hates snakes.
- All the Culver men covet the 1904 Case Agitator threshing machine, a beautiful piece of technology.
- Russell wants to run away from Indiana to the Dakotas to work in the fields. He plans on doing so with Charlie Parr, but Charlie wants to stay home to court Tansy.
- Tansy uses the cowbell to summon the students to class when Russell muffles the traditional school bell.
- Eugene Hammond sends the students a baseball as he courts Tansy. Russell calls the ball "the only really perfect thing in the world." The children are in awe of the ball because they have never had a real baseball before, only homemade ones.

#### Part IV: Essay (40 Points)

Answers will vary.

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Identification (20 points)

- Eugene Hammond sends the students a baseball as he courts Tansy. Russell calls the ball "the only really perfect thing in the world." The children are in awe of the ball because they have never had a real baseball before, only homemade ones.
- Aunt Fanny criticizes Tansy for not having an American flag in the classroom. On the day that Tansy is undergoing her certification examination, Aunt Fanny brings her husband's flag from the Civil War to the classroom as a gift. It is very touching, showing the importance of tradition and Aunt Fanny's acceptance of Tansy's legitimacy as a teacher.
- The Sweet Singer of Sycamore Township is a poet who submits doggerel anonymously to all occasions. Readers learn that the poet is Aunt Maud.
- Tansy retrieves the pointer from Miss Myrt's coffin. It represents the passing of the educational torch from one generation to the next, as it is a symbol of the classroom and education.
- Eugene's racing car stuns the men and boys with its beauty and speed. It represents the huge explosion of technology in the 20th century, including cars; household appliances (washing machines, etc.); paved roads; and eventually, radios, televisions, and computers.

#### Part II: Matching (20 points)

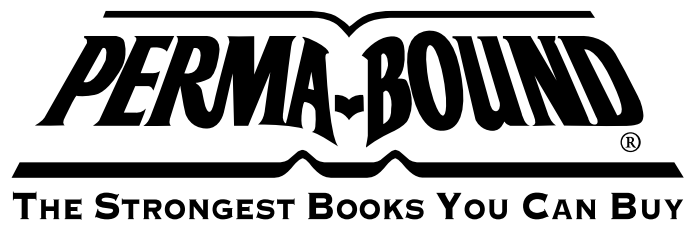
- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. A  |
| 2. G | 7. F  |
| 3. J | 8. I  |
| 4. H | 9. B  |
| 5. D | 10. E |

#### Part III: True/False (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. F  |
| 2. T | 7. F  |
| 3. F | 8. F  |
| 4. T | 9. T  |
| 5. T | 10. T |

#### Part IV: Essay (40 Points)

Answers will vary.



**Perma-Bound**

617 East Vandalia Road • Jacksonville, Illinois 62650  
Toll Free 1-800-637-6581 • Fax 1-800-551-1169  
E-Mail: [books@perma-bound.com](mailto:books@perma-bound.com)

**Perma-Bound Canada**

Box 868, Station Main • Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7A2  
Toll Free 1-800-461-1999 • Fax 1-888-250-3811  
E-Mail: [perma-bound.ca@sympatico.ca](mailto:perma-bound.ca@sympatico.ca)

Visit us online at [www.perma-bound.com](http://www.perma-bound.com)