



Knots on a Counting Rope

by Bill Martin Jr., illustrated by John Archambault

Teacher's Guide

Written By Kathleen Greenholdt

CLASSROOM
FAVORITES

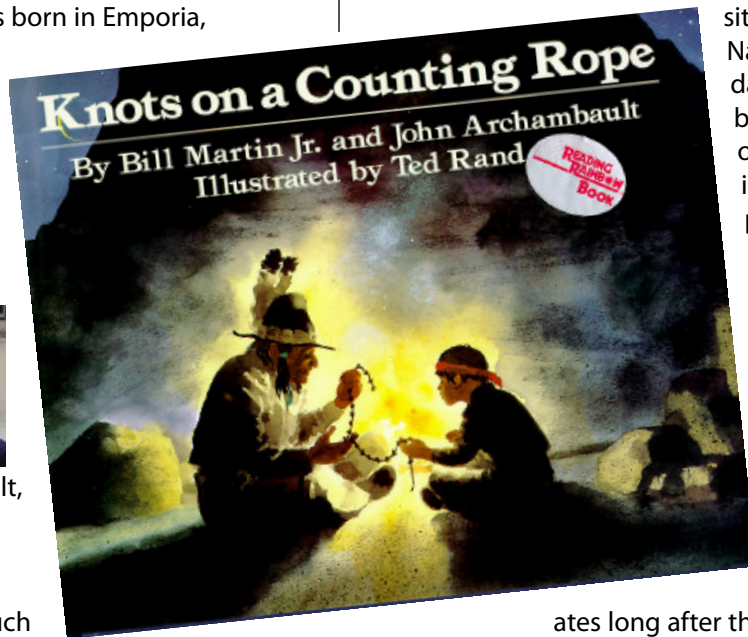
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Synopsis

Boy-Strength-of-Blue-Horses, a blind Native American child, learns from his grandfather the story of the boy's birth and how he overcame hurdles as a result of his disability. His grandfather hopes that the child will memorize the story, so that he will be able to remember it after the old man dies. The pair keep track of how many times the story has been told by tying knots on a rope.

Author Sketch

Bill Martin Jr. (1916-2004) was born in Emporia, Kansas. He graduated from Kansas State Teachers College and earned master's and doctoral degrees at Northwestern University. He created more than 200 children's books as part of a career devoted to education that spanned more than sixty years. In addition to working as an author, editor, and staff member at Holt, Rinehart & Winston, he was a teacher, an elementary school principal, a storyteller, and a folksinger. He also devoted much effort to studying the relationship of sound to printed words and its applications for children with learning disabilities and beginning readers. Bill Martin Jr. died in Texas in 2004.



introduce his then-infant son, Arie, to the joys of reading; it has since become a children's classic and a best-seller. With Martin, Archambault created the landmark supplemental reading program, *The Sounds of Language*. He lives in California.



Critic's Corner

Knots on a Counting Rope was published in 1987. The book offers a modern, sensitive look at both current Native American life and day-to-day thinking of a blind child. The depiction of the little boy is unique in that his disability is presented as an accepted part of his being and a feature that makes him special, rather than as a problem to be pitied. Publisher's Weekly called the book "rich tale of intergenerational love and respect" and "a moving collaborative effort that reverberates long after the book is closed."

School Library Journal said, "Parents and grandparents should share this book, and then their own stories, with children."

Bibliography

"Bill Martin," http://www.michaelsampson.com/bill_martin

"Educational Paperback Association's Top 100 Authors: Bill Martin Jr.," <<http://www.edupaperback.org/showauth.cfm?authid=243>>

"John Archambault website," <<http://www.johnarchambault.com/books.html>>

Selected Other Books by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault

Chicka Chicka Boom Boom
Barn Dance!
The Ghost-Eye Tree
Listen to the Rain
White Dynamite and Curly Kidd
The Magic Pumpkin
Here Are My Hands
Up and Down on the Merry-Go-Round

General Objectives

1. To learn about modern Native American life
2. To understand what it is like to live without the ability to see

Specific Objectives

1. To understand the characters and motivations of Boy-Strength-of-Blue-Horses and his grandfather
2. To examine the relationship between the boy and his grandfather

Comprehension Study

1. Is the boy in the story able to see?
(No, he is blind. We know this by the references to darkness, by the boy's inability to understand the color "blue" by his descriptions of morning and other natural occurrences, and by his use of his horse as his eyes.)
2. Even though he is blind, how is the boy able to "see"?
(He is able to "see" with his other senses, touch and hearing. For example, he touches the horse's neck and counts her gallops to determine when he should turn on the trails. Also, he "sees" with his heart by connecting feelings with various things he cannot see. For example, he refers to the color blue as happiness.)
3. How did the boy get his name?
(After he was born, his grandfather took him outside. Although, the child was blind, he reached out for two blue horses who had stopped and watched the boy. The grandfather thought then that the boy would live and that the horses had given strength to the child. The baby seemed to communicate with the horses despite his disability, and he was named "Boy-Strength-of-Blue Horses")
4. Explain what the grandfather means when he says "I love you. That is better than a promise."

(The grandfather knows that he will not be around forever to be with the boy. He will die some day, so he cannot promise that he will be able to tell the story again. However, he wants the boy to know that the man's love will always be with him, even after death, when the grandfather can no longer tell the story.)

5. What is the purpose of the counting rope?
(Each time this story is told, the grandfather ties a knot in the rope. After the rope is filled, the boy will have memorized the story. The grandfather is teaching the boy the story so that he will be able to tell himself the tale after the grandfather dies. The man wants the boy to always have great pride in himself and to remember how he crossed great hurdles despite his disability. Since the boy is blind, the rope serves as a symbol of shared love and communication between the boy who cannot see and the man who can. The boy will always be able to feel the knots and remember his grandfather.)
6. Does the boy already know the story by heart?
(Almost. However, he likes to hear his grandfather tell it. Still, the boy often interrupts his grandfather to tell portions of the tale himself)
7. Explain what the grandfather means when he says "You are learning to cross the dark mountains."
(The boy is blind, so everything is dark, and he must overcome many obstacles because of his disability. The dark mountains are these obstacles. However, the term "dark mountains" also refers to life's general problems that we must all overcome.)
8. What are some of the ways the traditional Native American culture is presented in the book?
(The element of superstition prevails: The grandmother must be present at birth for good luck; the horses give the boy strength to live; and the rainbow is a good omen. Nature plays an important, revered, god-like part in life: The wind speaks, and people are named after things in nature. The tribe still has traditional naming ceremonies and holidays. Feathers and headbands are still worn to some extent.)
9. In what time period is the story set?
(Modern day. We know this because many people are dressed in modern clothing, rather than traditional ceremonial garments.)
10. If something is beautiful, must we be able to see it with our eyes?
(No. The boy sees much beauty with his heart. He feels happiness in the rainbow and the color blue although he cannot see these intangible things. He says, "The wind is my friend, Grandfather. It throws back my hair and laughs in my face." "His grandfa-

ther responds, "You see the wind better than I, Boy." Also, the boy overcomes fear and participates in the race, allowing his courage and dreams to exhibit his own inner beauty. The tribe grandmothers say, "This boy walks in beauty. His dreams are more beautiful than rainbows and sunsets."

Across the Curriculum

1. Ask students to write short stories about "dark mountains" they have crossed.
2. To learn more about Native American culture, ask students to research and write short reports about different tribes. Oral presentations may follow, and the students may wear traditional attire. Costumes could be made of construction paper and crayons.
3. Invite a Native American storyteller to perform for your class. Resources for locating storytellers include libraries, arts councils, and theatre companies.
4. Have your students write brief poems in which they give themselves Native American names based on nature or natural events. In the lines of the poems, the students may explain how the names were chosen.
5. Ask your students to write short stories in which natural things take on human or supernatural qualities.
6. In a history lesson, explore the settling of the American frontier and its effects on the Native American. You may wish to invite an expert in Native American history to provide further insight to your students. Resources for locating a speaker include governmental social service agencies and universities.
7. Teach Braille or sign language to your class.
8. Ask your students to imagine that they cannot see. Then, have them write down how they would describe the colors red, yellow, white, blue, and black. Also ask them to describe the four seasons.
9. People who have no physical disabilities often overlook the importance of accessibility. Take your students on a tour of the school or other buildings to show them how and why buildings and parking lots are designed to assist the physically disabled. Then, ask them to draw simple blueprints of buildings, indicating accessible areas.
10. Have your class research and write short reports about famous individuals who are/were successful despite physical disabilities. Suggested profiles include: Helen Keller, Ray Charles, and Franklin Roosevelt.

Word Study

Introduce and define the following words for students:

- hogan - a house made of tree branches and grass
- bobcat - a type of spotted cat (lynx)
- foal - a baby horse
- colt - young male horse
- granite - hard rock, gray in color
- flats - low, level land
- switchbacks - winding, crooked roads on steep hills
- tribal - relating to a particular Native American community
- bareback - riding a horse without a saddle

Vocabulary Test

(20 points)

For each vocabulary word on the left, find the matching definition on the right. Write the letter of the definition next to the word.

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| 1. switchback ____ | a. gray rock |
| 2. frail ____ | b. relating to Native American community |
| 3. flat ____ | c. young male horse |
| 4. Hogan ____ | d. weak |
| 5. tribal ____ | e. low, level land |
| 6. foal ____ | f. baby horse |
| 7. bareback ____ . | g. lynx |
| 8. colt ____ | h. Navaho house |
| 9. bobcat ____ | i. riding the horse without a saddle |
| 10. granite ____ | j. crooked road on steep hill |

Comprehension Test A

Part I: True or False (40 points)

Mark each question "T" for "True" or "F" for "False".

- _____ 1. The boy in the book was named "Boy-Strength-of-White-Horses".
- _____ 2. When he was born, the boy was very sick.
- _____ 3. The boy lost his sight in a horse race.
- _____ 4. Each time the story was told, a ribbon was tied on a rope.
- _____ 5. The boy did not win the horse race.
- _____ 6. The name of the boy's horse was "Blue Sky".
- _____ 7. The horse served as the boy's eyes in the race.
- _____ 8. For good luck, the grandmother had to be present when the boy was born.
- _____ 9. The grandfather promised to tell the story one more time after this telling.
- _____ 10. The boy was named after he first smiled.

Part II: Quotation Completion (25 points)

Complete each quotation with a word from the list below.

- _____ 1. "You were born with a dark _____ in front of your eyes."
- _____ 2. "You are learning to cross the dark _____."
- _____ 3. "He and his _____ are together like on."
- _____ 4. "Trust your _____! Go like the wind!"
- _____ 5. "See how the _____ speak to him. They are his brothers. ..."
- _____ 6. "I love you. That is better than a _____."
- _____ 7. "The wind is my _____, Grandfather. It throws back my hair and laughs in my face."
- _____ 8. "I always feel _____ when you are with me, Grandfather."
- _____ 9. "_____ throws off the blanket of night."
- _____ 10. "You _____ the wind better than I, Boy."

- a. horses
- b. see
- c. promise
- d. curtain
- e. strong
- f. darkness
- g. morning
- h. mountains
- i. friend
- j. horse

Part III: Identification (25 points)

Explain the significance of each of the following in the story.

1. Darkness

2. Horses

3. Grandfather

4. The sense of touch

5. Mountains

Part IV: Essay (25 points)

The color blue was mentioned several times in the book. In paragraph form, discuss its meaning to the story.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Quotation Completion (25 points)

Complete each quotation with a letter from the list of words below.

1. "The great _____ horses have given him the strength to live."
2. "This boy walks in _____. His dreams are more beautiful than rainbows and sunsets."
3. "I hear it in the wounded _____."
4. "There will never be a last time _____ me that."
5. "He will _____ in beauty . . . to the east . . ."
6. "And I was born _____, wasn't I, Grandfather?"
7. "_____ mountains are always around us."
8. "Yes, I hear _____, in the song of the birds."
9. "No one thought you could teach her to _____, Boy."
10. "You will never be _____, Boy."

- | | |
|------------|------------|
| a. walk | f. promise |
| b. sunrise | g. blue |
| c. strong | h. alone |
| d. race | i. dark |
| e. beauty | j. wind |

Identification (25 points)

Explain the importance of each of the following in the story.

1. Nature
2. Ceremonies
3. A person's name
4. Respect for the elderly
5. Pride

Multiple Choice (25 points)

Fill in the blank with the letter of the correct word(s).

1. When the boy was born, the wind cried, "_____!"
a. Hee-llp b. Boy-eee c. Blu-eee
2. _____ horses galloped by when the boy was born.
a. Two b. Three c. Five
3. The grandmother came to _____ the baby.
a. bless b. feed c. change
4. The grandfather said that all children need a strong
a. horse b. rope c. name
5. The boy said that the color blue was _____.
a. wisdom b. sadness c. happiness
6. The boy's horse was named after a _____.
a. blue sky b. rainbow c. race

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7. The boy learned the trails by counting
a. gallops b. rope knots c. minutes
8. The grandfather said that his _____ would always surround the boy so that he would never be alone.
a. darkness b. love c. strength
9. The boy said that the _____ was blue.
a. mountain b. winter c. sunrise
10. The grandfather said that the boy would always have to live in the _____ .
a. dark b. rain c. sunset

Essay (25 points)

After the boy finished the race, his grandfather said, “. . . you have raced darkness and won! You now can see with your heart, feel a part of all that surrounds you. Your courage lights the way.” In paragraph form, explain what this means.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY TEST (20 POINTS)

1. j
2. d
3. e
4. h
5. b
6. f
7. i
8. c
9. g
10. a

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: True or False (25 points)

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

Part II: Quotation Completion (25 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. d | 6. c |
| 2. h | 7. i |
| 3. j | 8. e |
| 4. f | 9. g |
| 5. a | 10. b |

Part III: Identification (25 points)

1. Darkness - Darkness symbolized the boy's blindness.
2. Horses - Horses seemed to speak to the boy when he was born, so he was named after them. Also, the boy's horse, Rainbow, helped him defeat blindness in the race.
3. Grandfather - The boy's grandfather encouraged him to fight the blindness to understand how "beautiful" life is, even without the sense of sight.
4. The sense of touch - His ability to touch and feel helped the boy to "see".
5. Mountains - Mountains symbolized the obstacles that all people must face in life. However, the boy had more obstacles to overcome as a result of his blindness.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Quotation Completion (25 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. g | 6. c |
| 2. e | 7. i |
| 3. j | 8. b |
| 4. f | 9. d |
| 5. a | 10. h |

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Part II: Identification (25 points)

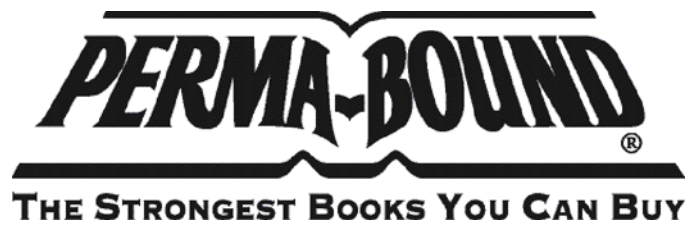
1. Nature - Nature played a god-like role in the story. The characters were very superstitious about nature, and they respected it greatly. Examples: the god-like horses at the beginning of the story and the wind that cried.
2. Ceremonies - Ceremonies were important to the Native American culture in the story. We saw a naming ceremony and a tribal day as examples.
3. A person's name - The grandfather said the every person needed a strong name to grow strong. Naming a child was a critical event.
4. Respect for the elderly - The eldest members of the tribe were highly regarded in the story. The grandmother blessed the new baby. The tribe grandparents were present at the naming ceremony and the tribal day. The grandfather is the boy's mentor.
5. Pride - The counting rope symbolized the boy's pride in overcoming his disability by participating in the race. The grandfather wanted to instill pride in his grandson, a trait that the child could hold dear even after the man died.

Part III: Multiple Choice (25 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. b | 6. b |
| 2. a | 7. a |
| 3. a | 8. b |
| 4. c | 9. c |
| 5. c | 10. a |

Part IV: Essay (25 points)

Answers will vary.



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