



The Little House

by Virginia Lee Burton

Teacher's Guide

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CLASSROOM FAVORITES

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Synopsis

A little house is built way out in the country, and enjoys the passing seasons and the changes that come as the years pass. A new road is built in front of the Little House. More and more houses are built close by. Then the houses are replaced by apartment and tenement buildings, and a trolley car goes back and forth in front of the Little House. Next, an elevated train and a subway are built.

Then the apartments and tenements are torn down to make room for tall skyscrapers. The Little House is dirty, shabby, and no longer lived in when the great-great granddaughter of the man who built her recognizes her and has her moves her away from the city. There, the Little House gets a new lease on life, refurbished and happy in her new country home.

Author Sketch

Virginia Lee Burton (1909-1968) was an acclaimed American author and illustrator. She was born August 30, 1909, to Alfred Burton, an engineer and dean at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and British artist and writer Lena Yates. Jinnee, as Burton was known, spent an idyllic early childhood in New England; then, in 1917, her mother moved with Jinnee and her brother and sister to California, claiming the Massachusetts winters were ruining her health; Jinnee's mother apparently abandoned the family altogether in 1925 when she fell in love with one of her husband's former students, and Jinnee wound up in a foster home in California for a time.

A determined Jinnee, however, set her sights on becoming a dancer. She won a scholarship to the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, and, with her sister, moved to San Francisco after high school graduation to

study ballet. During this time, she also honed her skills as a sketch artist. In 1928, her sister had debuted as a dancer in New York City, and Jinnee was invited to join the same troupe, and she moved back East. However, her now-elderly father broke his leg, and Jinnee moved to Boston to care for him, giving up her dreams of becoming a professional dancer. Undaunted, she got a

job as a "sketcher"—a cartoonist and sketch artist—at the *Boston Transcript* newspaper and began to pursue a career as an artist. In the fall of 1930, at the recommendation of friends, she took a drawing class taught by Greek-born sculptor George Demetrios at the Boston Museum School; they were married the following spring. After their son Aristides (known as Aris, and now a famous modernist sculptor), was born in 1932, they moved to Folly Cove on Massachusetts' Cape Ann. In 1935, their second son, Michael (who became a successful businessman) was born. It was during this time, at the height of the Great Depression, that

Jinnee decided to try writing chil-

dren's books to supplement the family income. After some false starts, she began writing for her own children, hitting on stories that engaged them, and success soon followed. Her first published book, *Choo Choo: The Story of the Little Engine Who Ran Away* (1937), was a huge success, and enabled the family to buy a small house and barn on seven acres in Folly Cove; the house would become the basis for *The Little House*. In addition to continuing to write and illustrate children's books, Jinnee in 1938 founded Folly Cove Designers, a collective of artists that became famous for its vibrant, highly sought-after textile designs.

Jinnee's life was marked by success achieved through overcoming apparent setbacks. In a 2008 story in *Vogue* magazine, Jean Nathan writes that her "richly produc-



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tive life is an inspiring tale of fashioning new worlds," and her books reflect that pioneering spirit and determination to overcome. Her older son, Aris, says in the same article, "From her books I learned that no matter what is thrown at you, you deal with it and keep going. That theme is all through her work." She died in 1968 at the age of 59.



Critic's Corner

Acclaimed illustrator and author Virginia Lee Burton created books that were noted for their unique style and upbeat storylines concerning technological change; they featured primarily female main characters (including a female house and a female steam shovel) and happy endings. Trained as a dancer and artist, Ms. Burton also founded and led the internationally renowned Folly Cove Designers, composed of artists living on and around Cape Ann, Massachusetts, north of Boston; the group, which operated from the late 1930s until Burton's death in the late 1960s, got its start when Burton began giving art lessons to neighborhood women. Folly Cove Designers became famous and sought-after for its one-of-a-kind block-printed textiles and designs.

The Little House, published in 1942, won critical acclaim (including the 1942 Caldecott Medal) and popular success; it has never been out of print, and Burton's books together have sold nearly 7 million copies. Burton said that the house "was based on our own little house which we moved from the street into 'a field of daisies with apple trees growing around.'"

Timeline

- Long ago** A pretty, well-built Little House sits on a hill way out in the country. The man who built her predicts she will never be sold, and far into the future, his descendants will live in her.
- As time passes** The Little House watches the seasons change. She enjoys the countryside and wonders about the distant city.
- One day** A horseless carriage—a car—comes down the road. Soon there are more cars, plus trucks, steam shovels, and steam rollers.
- Soon** There is more and more traffic, more and more building, until the country-

side is overtaken by the encroaching city. The Little House is surrounded by apartment houses and tenement houses. The Little House is now living in the city. She misses the country.

Pretty soon There are trolley cars, then an elevated train, then a subway. The tenements and apartments are torn down and replaced by skyscrapers. People and traffic surround the Little House but she is sad and lonely. She has fallen into disrepair, and no one notices her anymore.

One spring day The great-great-granddaughter of the Little House's builder walks by with her husband. She recognizes the Little House. She discovers that it is the same house where she used to visit her grandmother in the country as a little girl.

Later The woman and her husband arrange to have the Little House moved back out to the country.

Finally The couple find a place for the Little House, on a hill far out in the country. They have her fixed up, and she is lived in and cared for again. The Little House, cured of any desire to know more of the city, is happy and at peace in her country home.

Bibliography:

- "Biography of Virginia Lee Burton," http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/features/mike_mulligan/biohome.shtml
- "Virginia Lee Burton," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia_Lee_Burton
- "Virginia Lee Burton Official Website," <http://virginialee-burton.com/>
- Virginia Lee Burton: A Life in Art by Barbara Elleman (2002)
- "An American Original: Few know that iconic children's book author Virginia Lee Burton also created a design collective," by Jean Nathan. Vogue, May 2008 (reprinted at www.virginialee-burton.com)

Selected Other Books by Virginia Lee Burton

- Choo Choo*, 1937
- Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, 1939
- Calico the Wonder Horse, or the Saga of Stewy Stinker*, 1941

Katy and the Big Snow, 1943
Maybelle the Cable Car, 1952
Life Story, 1962

Related Reading

BOOKS INVOLVING THE FOUR SEASONS

Ox-Cart Man, by Donald Hall
Sylvester and the Magic Pebble, by William Steig
Frog and Toad All Year, by Arnold Lobel
Summer Is . . ., by Charlotte Zolotow
Seasons, by John Burningham
Seasons, by Brian Wildsmith
Song of the Seasons, by Robert Welber
Around the Seasons, by Eleanor Farjeon
The House of Four Seasons, by Roger Duvoisin
The Year at Maple Hill Farm, by Alice and Martin Provensen
The Seasons of Arnold's Apple Trees, by Gail Gibbons
Burnie's Hill, by Eric Blegvad

BOOKS ABOUT UNUSUAL HOUSES:

A House Is a House for Me, by Mary Ann Hoberman
The Parrot in the Garret and Other Rhymes about Dwellings, selected by Lenore Blegvad
The Biggest House in the World, by Leo Lionni
The House that Jack Built, illustrated by Liz Underhill
Houses from the Sea, by Alice E. Goudey
The Three Little Pigs, retold and illustrated by Eric Blegvad
The Lost and Found House, by Consuelo Joerns
Best Little House, by Aileen Fisher
Houses, by Katherine Carter

BOOKS ON CITY VERSUS COUNTRY LIFE

Town and Country, by Alice Provensen
Tall City, Wide Country, by Seymour Chevast
Round Trip, by Ann Jonas
The City Mouse and the Country Mouse, illustrated by Jody Wheeler
The City Witch and the Country Witch, by Jay Williams
The City-Country ABC, by Marguerite Walters

OTHER RELATED BOOKS

Ming Lo Moves the Mountain, by Arnold Lobel (house moving)
The Story of an English Village, by John Goodall (change over time)

Goals and Objectives

1. Students will have opportunities to recall details, make interpretations, read critically, and respond creatively to the book
2. Students will expand their vocabulary through the use of context clues, class discussion, and word games and activities
3. Students will have opportunities for a variety of writing experiences
4. Students will gain experience in locating information in the library
5. Students will respond to the book through the use of art

Comprehension Study

1. Who is the main character in this book? When an animal or an object in a story has feelings like a person and talks and acts like a person, it is called personification. Find examples of how the Little House was personified in this story.
2. Look back through the book and think about the feelings of the Little House and how those feelings changed as the story progressed.
3. How do the pictures and the story show that many years have passed from the beginning of the book to the end?
4. Look at the picture on page 11. Notice the location of the brook. What do you think happened to the brook when the city was built up all around the Little House (p.23)? When the subway was built (p.26)? When the cellars were dug for the skyscrapers (p.28)?
5. Reread page 37. Do you think this part of the story could have happened in real life? (Discuss the need to plan ahead, and the fact that you couldn't just drive through the countryside and put a house wherever you wanted to, without owning the property.)
6. The story is told from the point of view of the Little House. How would the story be different if it was told from the point of view of one of the apple trees?
7. Many years have passed since the Little House was built. Now that she's been moved back to the country, and people are going to be living in her again, what modernization and remodeling do you think will need to be done?

Student Involvement Activities

1. On page 1, we read that the man who built the Little House said that she would live to see his great-

great grandchildren's great-great grandchildren. If the builder was 25 years old when he had his first child and built the Little House, and if each of the following generations were 25 years old when their first child was born, how much time would have passed from the start of the book to the end of the book when the builder's great-great grandchild finds the Little House? (100 years). How much time will have passed by the time the builder's great-great grandchildren's great-great grandchildren live in the house? (200 years) Write a sequel telling about the second 100 years in the life of the Little House. As you are writing, think about how life has changed since 1942 and how you think it will change in the next 50 years.

2. Try to find out who your great-great grandparents were and where they lived.
3. Go to the library and find more information on one of the following topics: horseless carriages why the seasons change what makes the leaves change color in the fall Share your information with the rest of the class by writing a report or a chart, designing a game, or giving an oral report.
4. Pages 6 to 13 describe the passing seasons on the hill where the Little House lived. Divide into four groups and assign one season to each group. Write a list of things you like to see, smell, hear, taste, and feel during that season. Have the groups work together to design a mural of the four seasons. At the top of each section of the mural, write, "Spring is ...," "Summer is ...," "Fall is ...," or "Winter is" At the bottom of each section write the five senses and some of the ideas you thought of in each category; for instance:

Spring is ...

- Seeing—the first robin
- Smelling—freshly mown grass
- Hearing—frogs croaking
- Tasting—a ripe red strawberry
- Touching—a newborn lamb

5. Find out how the neighborhood where you live has changed in the last 100 years. What is the history of your house?
6. Design your own dream house. Build a model or make a floor plan, and include a plan of the yard surrounding the house.
7. Use overlapping overhead transparencies to show all of the changes that occurred around the Little House. Draw your pictures on the transparencies and use them to retell the story of *The Little House*.

Word Study

Note to the Teacher: Following is a list of vocabulary words and phrases which may be unfamiliar to your students. The vocabulary words that will be tested are marked with an asterisk.

- *curious p.4; p.40
- seasons p.6
- buds p.6
- blossom p.6
- *brook p.6
- ripen p.8
- *harvest p.8
- coasting p.10
- *horseless carriage p.14
- *surveyor/surveying p.14
- steam shovel p.14
- steam roller p.14
- lots p.18
- tenement p.18
- trolley cars p.22
- elevated train p.24
- subway p.26
- *stories p.26
- *shabby p.31
- jacked up p.34
- rather p.37
- *foundation p.38

Sometimes the illustrations in a book help you to figure out unfamiliar words. How many of the vocabulary words listed above can you find in the illustrations of this book? How do the illustrations give you clues about the meanings of some of the other words?

Vocabulary Test

Part II Vocabulary (40 points)

Find the correct definition below for each **boldfaced** word. Write the letter of the correct definition in each blank.

- _____ 1. The Little House was **curious** about the lights of the city that she saw in the distance.
- _____ 2. In the summer the children liked to swim in the **brook** that ran past the Little House.
- _____ 3. In the fall all the apples were picked and the **harvest** was gathered.
- _____ 4. The Little House began to see more **horseless carriages** driving past on her road.
- _____ 5. **Surveyors** came to figure out where the new road should go and to mark its path with stakes.
- _____ 6. A skyscraper thirty-five **stories** high was built next to the Little House.
- _____ 7. No one was living in the Little House and she became very dirty and **shabby**.
- _____ 8. The Little House was moved back out into the country and set down on a new **foundation**.

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| A. automobiles; cars | E. wanting to know more about |
| B. floors of a building | F. a small river, creek, or stream |
| C. food grown by farmers | G. the base or bottom of a house |
| D. messy; worn out | H. people who measure land |

Comprehension Test

Part I: Fill-in (40 points)

Fill in the blank in each sentence with the correct word from the list below.

spring	country	moved	lights
city	winter	road	houses

1. When the Little House was built, she was out in the _____ on a hill with apple trees.
2. The Little House was curious about the _____ of the far away city.
3. In the _____ the apple trees blossomed and the first robin came back from the South.
4. The children went coasting and sledding in _____ when the days grew short.
5. A steam shovel came and dug a new _____ in front of the Little House.
6. More and more _____ were built all around the Little House.
7. The Little House became part of the _____ when apartments and subways were built beside her.
8. The great-great granddaughter of the builder _____ the Little House back to the country.

Part II: Essay Questions (20 points)

Choose one of the questions to answer. Write a short paragraph.

1. Explain how the Little House went from living in the country to living in the city to living back in the country again.
2. If you had been the Little House, would you have preferred to live in the city or the country? Compare your feelings to the feelings the Little House had in the book.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY TEST

1. E
2. F
3. C
4. A
5. H
6. B
7. D
8. G

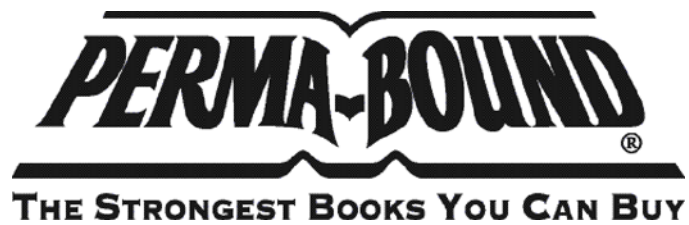
Comprehension Test

Part I: Fill-In (40 points)

1. country
2. lights
3. spring
4. winter
5. road
6. houses
7. city
8. moved

Part II: Essay Questions (20 points)

Answers will vary.



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