

Skylark

by Patricia MacLachlan

Classroom Favorites

Teacher's Guide by Kathy Sammis

A Perma-Bound Production

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SYNOPSIS

This sequel to the Newbery Medal-winning *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, reintroduces us to the loving Witting family as they struggle to cope with a terrible drought devastating their prairie farm and its surrounding community. As in *Sarah*, this novel is narrated by Anna, daughter of Jacob and stepdaughter of independent-minded Sarah, who came from Maine nearly two years ago as a prospective mail-order bride for the widowed Jacob. Interspersed through the narrative are short italic passages in which Anna recalls earlier, drought-free days with Sarah and contemplates drought and feelings about home. The fourth Witting is young Caleb, who always speaks what is on his mind with disarming childish candor. Rounding out the family are an assortment of animals, notably the dogs Nick and Lottie, and Sarah's cat, Seal.

Chap. 1: In a preceding italic passage, Anna recalls the cloudless summer day when Papa and Sarah married: "Everyone was happy." As the chapter opens, Jacob is taking a family photograph of the Wittings so Sarah can send a copy to her aunts back in Maine, whom she clearly misses. Jacob recalls a previous drought, which caused his grandfather to pack up his family and leave, never to return. Jacob declares they will never leave: "We were born here. Our names are written in this land." Caleb worries; Sarah wasn't born here. He writes her name in the dirt with a stick. In the italic passage that follows, Anna recalls how Caleb—who desperately wanted Sarah to stay and become his mother—declared they would all live "happily ever after" when Papa and Sarah married.

Chap. 2: The heat intensifies. Sarah seems wistful when she realizes Seal is going to have her first litter of kittens. Sarah, Anna, and Caleb recall how they all fell in love with one another through the letters they exchanged before Sarah came to the prairie. Sarah notes she fell in love with Papa because she loved what was between the lines—his life—in his letters. Anna recalls in the next italic passage that Sarah loved the snow the first winter, especially because "we don't have drifts of snow in Maine."

Chap. 3: At church on Sunday, the Wittings talk with their neighbors, Matthew and Maggie, who are with their young children, Rose, Violet, and baby Tom. "I am surrounded by motherhood," murmurs Sarah, thinking also of the calf and kittens that are due. Ominously, the church well is down a whole foot. Later, Anna and Caleb are excited when the calf is born; Caleb names her Moonbeam. In the next italic passage, Anna recalls happy

and tender exchanges between Sarah and Papa.

Chap. 4: Letters to everyone from the aunts in Maine arrive. But they write about daily rainfalls and lush greenery, which distresses Sarah because it makes Jacob sad and more concerned about the drought. Caleb picks up on Aunt Mattie's mention of a rain-measuring glass, and places a small glass on the fence post, waiting for rain. In her italic passage, Anna recalls the flowers and swimming in the full cow pond during Sarah's first month at the farm; now, flowers and leaves have dried up, covered with the dust which blows over everything.

Chap. 5: The Wittings' well is down a foot; they will have to find ways to conserve water even more. In town, Sarah is shocked when Caroline says she and her husband, Joseph, are leaving; their well is dry. Sarah insists they can all do more, but Maggie counters that Sarah doesn't fully understand this kind of trouble. Everyone sadly watches as Joseph and Caroline, in their fully packed wagon, drive away down the dusty street.

Chap. 6: On the way home from town, Papa asks what Sarah might like for her upcoming birthday—maybe to travel somewhere green and cool? "Do you think I would *leave*?" Sara responds. Back at the farm, they discover a prairie fire has broken out in the west meadow. Papa and Sarah manage to beat it out. Anna dreams of the coolness before a rainstorm.

Chap. 7: Maggie and her family visit; Sarah gazes at baby Tom and seems to be daydreaming about something. Then a terrible thing happens. The wells have gotten so low that the family has been hauling barrels of water from the river for the animals. The Wittings arrive at the river to discover, along with Matthew and Maggie, the river has dwindled to only a small trickle. Matthew and Maggie reveal they are thinking of leaving. Sarah and Maggie step aside for a private conversation, which Anna overhears. Sarah declares, "I hate this land," even though Jacob loves it. Maggie responds that Sarah is like the prairie lark, singing its song above the land before plunging down to earth to make its home. "But you have not come to earth, Sarah." Maggie goes on, saying you have to love this land to survive here. "You have to write your name in the land to live here." Sarah does not reply. Anna recalls Sarah drying wildflowers and singing.

Chap. 8: Jacob prepares to shoot a coyote that is drinking from the water pail. Sarah stops him, then collapses, sobbing that all the creature wanted was water, "just like us." Papa is very worried about Sarah. To cheer her up, he throws a surprise birthday party for her. All the neighbors come, and everyone happily dances to the music played by the wonderful birthday gift from the Maine aunts—a phonograph. After the party, Anna

gives Sarah her gift—a small book she has started writing: “About you. About our family.” It begins, “When my mother, Sarah, came...”

Chap. 9: Matthew and Maggie’s well goes dry, so they have to pack up their family and leave. “We’ll be back,” Maggie declares. That night, lightning sparks a fire in the field; it quickly spreads to and consumes the barn. The next day, Papa tells Anna and Caleb they are going to Maine with Sarah; Papa will stay to tend the land. He reassures the children they will stay in touch via letters.

Chap. 10: When the children arrive in Maine, they are enchanted with its greenness and with the ever-changing sea. The aunts are delightful, and happy to have Sarah, Anna, and Caleb staying with them. Anna, though, misses her home, especially Papa, terribly. Now, she says, she realizes how much Sarah missed Maine while she was living on the prairie.

Chap. 11: The children enjoy life in Maine and go fishing often with Sarah’s brother, William. But they worry about how long they will stay here and if they will ever go home and see Papa again. Papa’s letters and Sarah’s loving comfort reassure them somewhat, but Caleb has a recurring dream that Papa looks and looks for them on the farm but can’t find them. Anna remembers Jacob’s grandfather left during a drought and never came back; she begins to have Caleb’s bad dream, too. Meanwhile, Sarah sleeps late and naps a lot; when she returns from a visit to the local doctor, she smiles.

Chap. 12: The children, Sarah, and William dance on the lawn during a rainstorm. William recalls their father used to recite a poem: “‘Like a skylark Sarah sings!’ Papa said you’d never come to earth.” At a moonlight picnic on the shore, Sarah recalls past times in Maine, while the children think of Papa and home. When Caleb asks if the drought is over yet, Sarah answers sadly, “No. It may be a long time.”

Chap. 13: Papa writes letters that say how much he misses everyone; Sarah writes letters to him every day, and reads and rereads all of his. When the aunts bring up the subject of going to school in the fall, Caleb rebels: “I like you, but I don’t want to live here.” He runs off. When Anna finds him and comforts him, he asks plaintively, “Anna, will we see Papa again? Ever?” Anna has no reply.

Chap. 14: Late in August, Papa suddenly appears at the aunts’ house. The children are ecstatic. “It rained,” he says. “I never thought you’d come,” Sarah whispers. That evening, Papa and Sarah have news for the children: a baby is on the way. “Our baby!” a smiling Caleb declares. Anna is worried because Mama died giving birth to Caleb, but Sarah assures Anna the doctor has pronounced her and the baby both to be healthy.

Chap. 15: The family returns to the prairie farm. The cow pond has water, the meadow shows some green, and Seal has four kittens. As Papa and Sarah walk toward the green in the fields, Sarah suddenly stops, picks up a stick, and writes SARAH in the dirt.

TIME LINE

- two years ago** Sarah came to the prairie from Maine; she and Papa married.
- spring/summer** Drought grips the prairie. Sarah and Papa put out a fire in the meadow. The river dries up. Papa puts on a birthday party for Sarah. Matthew and Maggie’s well dries up; they leave.

The barn burns down.

Sarah and the children take the train to Maine. Letters from Papa arrive; the children get very homesick.

Sarah visits the doctor.

late August Papa arrives in Maine with word that it has rained on the prairie.

Sarah reveals she is pregnant.

soon The family returns to their prairie farm.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Patricia Pritzkau MacLachlan was born in Cheyenne, Wyoming, in 1938, the only, very imaginative, child of two schoolteachers. She grew up in Minnesota, but the western landscape and prairie of her earliest years are a continuing influence on her. In 1962, she married Robert MacLachlan, a clinical psychologist, and also earned her B.A. from the University of Connecticut. She taught English at a Connecticut junior high school from 1963 to 1979, while also raising the three MacLachlan children. When the children got older, she decided to make writing her full-time career, drawing on her experiences of family life, both as a wife and mother and as a child herself. Especially since winning the 1986 Newbery Medal for *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, MacLachlan has frequently lectured and conducted creative writing workshops; she is also a member of a long-standing writers’ group. She has been a visiting lecturer at Smith College since 1986, and has homes in western Massachusetts and Cape Cod. Along with her husband, she loves to read and play chamber music.

CRITICS’ CORNER

Skylark fulfilled the wishes of legions of *Sarah* fans for a sequel. It is typical of MacLachlan’s other books because it focuses on families and relationships, grounded in the details of everyday life; she expresses her subject with warmth, sensitivity, and perceptiveness in a lyrical and spare style. *Publishers Weekly* called *Skylark* a “magnificent sequel” and cited its “very real setting and enormously powerful dialogue and imagery.” *School Library Journal* assessed, “MacLachlan’s prose is as lyrical and graceful as ever. Packed with meaning and portent, each sentence shows the careful touch of a master of understatement.” *Horn Book* summed up, “It is suffused with joy and ultimately hope as it celebrates the lives of ordinary people who live difficult lives with dignity, courage, and, above all, love.” *The Christian Science Monitor* cited the novel’s “poetic descriptions of ordinary activities [and] whisper-quiet tenderness,” adding, “Once more, MacLachlan’s economical prose renders a touching and triumphant story about a family’s love.”

Skylark first appeared as a Hallmark of Hall of Fame presentation on television in 1993, starring Glenn Close and Christopher Walken, as with *Sarah*; MacLachlan wrote the screenplays for both. The book of *Skylark* followed in 1994. A third title in the series is *Caleb’s Story*, which was previously presented as the TV mini-series *Winter’s Fall* in 1999.

OTHER WORKS BY PATRICIA MACLACHLAN

Picture Books

- The Sick Day* (1979)
Through Grandpa’s Eyes (1980)
Mama One, Mama Two (1982)
Seven Kisses in a Row (1983)
Three Names (1991)
What You Know First (1995)

Juvenile Novels

Arthur, for the Very First Time (1980)

Moon, Stars, Frogs, and Friends (1980)

Cassie Binegar (1982)

Tomorrow's Wizard (1982)

Unclaimed Treasures (1984)

Sarah, Plain and Tall (1985)

The Facts and Fictions of Minna Pratt (1988)

Journey (1991)

Baby (1993)

All the Places to Love (1994)

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Internet Sites for Patricia MacLachlan

"Authors/Illustrators: Patricia MacLachlan" (includes an author message): <www.randomhouse.com/teachers/authors/mac.html>

"HarperChildrens.com: Patricia MacLachlan (includes "In Her Own Words")": <www.harperchildrens.com/catalog/author_xml.asp?author_ID=12425>

"MacLachlan, Patricia": <www.edupaperback.org/authorbios/MacLachlan_Patricia.html>

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To gain an understanding of life on the prairie grasslands of the United States around 1910
2. To become familiar with the water cycle and the causes and effects of droughts
3. To consider the forces that can tie you emotionally to the land

where you were born and brought up

4. To explore the emotions of homesickness and separation from loved ones
5. To become familiar with the elements of life on the seacoast of northern New England
6. To examine the nature of family love and family bonds
7. To observe the ways in which people react to the challenge of a natural disaster

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To note the effects of the drought on the Witting family, their farm, and their surrounding community.
2. To confirm understanding of how Sarah came to be part of the Witting family and of the family members' feelings for and about each other
3. To comprehend the concept of having your name "written in the land."
4. To understand the metaphor of Sarah's connection with a prairie lark, or skylark
5. To note the contrasts between the novel's two settings of drought-stricken prairie and water-rich Maine seacoast
6. To identify specific details of the novel that give clues to the children's ages and to the historical time frame
7. To trace the foreshadowing of Sarah's pregnancy, and of Sarah's longing for a baby, through the novel
8. To analyze the author's writing style

LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

To enhance students' appreciation and understanding of the novel, present them with these terms.

first-person narration: the telling of a novel or short story from the point of view of only one person, in that person's voice. In this novel, Anna relates the events, so we experience them from her **point of view**. (Anna was also the narrator of *Sarah, Plain and Tall*.)

flashback: a scene inserted into a film, play, or work of fiction showing events that happened earlier, also known as **analepsis**. The flashback device allows an author to fill in background information about characters and events, explaining things that happened before the time when the work opens. This novel, for example, opens with Anna remembering the summer day when Papa and Sarah got married. Later, Anna remembers incidents from the summer when Sarah first came to visit, which allows us to learn how Sarah, Jacob, Anna, and Caleb became a family.

foreshadowing: hints or suggestions about something that will occur later in a novel. The multiple mentions of babies as the novel moves along, the mention in Chapter 1 of Joshua's grandfather leaving during an earlier drought, and Jacob's statement that their names are "written in the land" all foreshadow later events in the novel. Critical Question #9 in the Comprehension Study section of this guide asks students to identify the instances of baby foreshadowing.

historical fiction: a narrative that presents an imaginative series of events occurring in an actual historical setting. The characters may be both fictional (for example, members of Sarah's families) and historical (the figure of Sarah, while largely fictional, was inspired by an actual mail-order bride in Patricia MacLachlan's family). The author often does considerable research to incorporate much accurate everyday detail into the novel. The details of everyday life on the prairie farm and in seaside

Maine—such as the early phonograph, the oil lamps, the clothing, and the wagons—set the novel firmly into its historical time frame.

sequel: a literary work complete in itself but continuing a story told in an earlier work. *Skylark* is a sequel to *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, and *Caleb's Story* is a sequel to those two.

SETTINGS

The novel has two main, and contrasting, settings—the Midwest prairie and seacoast Maine. Chapters 1 through 9 are set on the Wittings' prairie farm and its surroundings. The extended drought dominates this setting. The landscape is brown and dried up, the people buffeted by constant wind-blown dust and oppressive heat. The Wittings' farmhouse is simple but ample for a family of four. A barn stands nearby, with an attached corral; the destruction of the barn by fire triggers the departure of Sarah and the children for Maine. Beyond the house and barn are meadows, a paddock, the cow pond, and fields of dried-up crops. Farther off is the river, which the Wittings eventually depend on for water for their livestock; the day the river dries up, Sarah and Maggie have an important discussion on its banks. The dusty town is a wagon ride away. The Wittings attend church here, bring grain to the granary, and shop at the store. They are dismayed when the water level in the church well goes down, and when they watch friends whose well had dried up leave for good.

After the barn burns, the setting switches to Maine, which Sarah and the children reach after a days'-long train trip. Maine is a great contrast to the parched prairie; it is intensely green thanks to the frequent rain. Sarah, Anna, and Caleb stay in the large, shuttered and shingled seaside house of Sarah's aunts. The vista from the house and its surrounding lawns is of the sea, ever-changing in mood and color; the children are amazed at the sight of all this water. Life here in Maine is very much involved with the sea; the children go fishing with Sarah's brother, they all have seaside picnics, Caleb goes swimming every day, and Sarah walks by the water every morning and evening.

The final chapter of the book returns to the prairie setting, which has become more friendly since some amounts of rain have returned—the cow pond has water, and the meadow shows some green. *Home*, Anna thinks with intense pleasure.

CROSS-CURRICULAR SOURCES

Fiction

Jennifer Armstrong, *Black-Eyed Susan*
Avi, *The Barn*
Barbara Cooney, *Island Boy*
Karen Hesse, *Out of the Dust*
Ellen Howard, *The Chickenhouse House*
Laurie Lawlor, *Addie Across the Prairie* and sequels
Roger L. MacBride, *Rocky Ridge* series about Rose Wilder
Joan Lowery Nixon, *Circle of Love*
Joyce C. Thomas, *I Have Heard of a Land*
Ann Turner, *Grasshopper Summer*
Kate Douglas Wiggin, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*
Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House* series

Nonfiction

Jo Bannatyne-Cugnet, *A Prairie Year*
Melvin and Gilda Berger, *Water, Water Everywhere: A Book About the Water Cycle*
Raymond Bial, *Frontier Home*

Jim Brandenburg, *An American Safari: Adventures on the North American Prairie*

Joanna Cole, *The Magic School Bus on the Ocean Floor*

Dennis B. Fradin, *Maine*

Robert Gardner, *Science Project Ideas About Rain*

Ty Harrington, *Maine*

Bobbie Kalman, *Historic Communities* series

Milton Meltzer, *Driven from the Land: The Story of the Dust Bowl*

Steve Parker, *Seashore*

Dorothy Hinshaw Patent, *Prairies*

Gail B. Stewart, *1900s and 1910s*

David W. Toht, *Sodbuster*

Sally M. Walker, *Water Up, Water Down: The Hydrologic Cycle CD-ROM*

American Journey History in Your Hands—Westward Expansion (Primary Source Media)

The American Pioneering Experience (SVE)

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Go West! The Homesteader's Challenge (Steck-Vaughn)

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"The Day of the Black Blizzard": <www.discovery.com/area/history/dustbowl/dustbowl1.3.html>

"The Definitive Laura Ingalls Wilder Pages": <www.vvv.com/~jenslegg/>

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"Living Wise: Learning to Be Waterwise": <www.getwise.org/>

"1900 vs. Now—TIMEwarp": <www.time.com/time/time100/timewarp/timewarp.html>

"Pioneer Spirit": <www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/ndirs/exhibitions/pioneer/>

"Properties of Water" (including "The Hydrologic Cycle"): <www.ec.gc.ca/water/en/nature/prop/e_prop.htm>

"Technology in 1900": <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/amexkids/tech1900/index.html>

"Undersea and Oversee" (exploring the seashore): <www.fi.edu/oceans/oceans.html>

"Year of the Ocean 1998—Kids' and Teachers' Corner": <www.yoto98.noaa.gov/kids.htm>

Video/DVD

Amazing Grains (Learning Seed)

America's Prairie (Discovery Channel School)

America's Westward Expansion (Knowledge Unlimited)

The Confident Years (1865-1915) (American Heritage)

Farming and Storm (Bill Nye the Science Guy Sampler V Series) (Buena Vista TV/WCTS)

Grassland Biomes: Essential and Endangered (Cochran Communications/Rainbow Educational Media)
Grasslands (Canadian Broadcasting Corp./Bullfrog Films)
Tall Grass Prairie: An American Story (National Geographic)
Westward Expansion: The Pioneer Challenge (Rainbow Educational Video)
Wheat (DeBeck Educational Video)
Women of the West (United Learning)

THEMES AND MOTIFS

A study of the central issues and situations in *Skylark* should include these aspects.

Themes

- family love and family bonds
- hope and courage
- ties to your homeland
- impact of natural disaster / drought
- homesickness
- separation
- prairie / seascape contrasts

Motifs

- babies
- water
- music
- family animals
- the sea
- wind and dust
- heat / coolness
- brown / green
- colors

MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, or sentences that have a particular meaning in the novel. Explain each as it relates to the book. Use the page numbers given in parentheses to reread the term in context if you wish.

1. The dogs walked slowly through the dry prairie grass. (Chap. 1, p. 3)
(A prairie is a large area of level or rolling land with deep fertile soil covered with tall coarse grasses and few trees; much of the midwestern part of the United States is, or was originally, prairie. Jacob, Anna, and Caleb were born on the prairie; their names are written in the land. But Sarah's heart is in her native Maine.)
2. Caleb said it when he fell through the ice on the slough. (Chap. 1, p. 7)
(A slough is an inlet from a river, or a swamp. Caleb broke through the ice and soaked himself, and now he has to warm himself up in a tub of warm water.)
3. "I loved what was between the lines most." (Chap. 2, p. 11)
(When a person expresses meaning through words in an indirect way, we say the real meaning is found between the written or spoken lines. Sarah is saying she discovered Jacob's true nature within his descriptions of the farm, the land, the animals, and the children.)
4. It was evening, the oil lamp bright in the kitchen. (Chap. 4, p. 20)
(The Wittings light their home at night with lamps fueled by oil, which is an indication of the time frame of the book; electricity did not reach much of rural America until the 1930s and 1940s, while oil lamps came into widespread use

in the mid-1800s.)

5. Papa left the wagon in the shade of the granary. (Chap. 5, p. 27)
(A granary is a storehouse for threshed grain—seed that has been separated from the rest of the plant. Papa has brought what is probably the last grain from the parched fields.)
6. By the paddock fence... (Chap. 8, p. 43).flames around the corral. (Chap. 9, p. 53)
(A paddock is an enclosed area for pasturing or exercising animals; Caleb is afraid the coyote will attack the calf Moonbeam, who is kept in the paddock. A corral is a pen or enclosure for confining or capturing livestock, smaller than a paddock; the flames threaten the horses in the corral.)
7. There was a phonograph. I handed Papa a record. (Chap. 8, p. 47)
(A phonograph is an instrument that produces sound via vibrations of a needle that follows a groove on a revolving disc—a record—or a cylinder. The phonograph was first patented in 1878, by Thomas Edison; mass production of records began in 1901, another indication of the novel's time frame. The aunts have sent the phonograph and records to Sarah as a birthday gift, because she and they love music.)
8. For a little while, everyone forgot about the drought. (Chap. 8, p. 48)
(A drought is a prolonged period of dryness; the drought on the prairie has been described from the first page of this novel, but this is the first use of the term drought itself.)
9. I covered Sarah with a shawl. (Chap. 10, p. 58)
(In a motherly gesture of caring, Anna covers the resting Sarah with a shawl, a garment or wrapper used to cover the head and/or shoulders.)
10. the tide going in and going out...(Chap. 10, p. 63); ...out in the bay (Chap. 11, p. 66); ...the bell buoy (Chap. 12, p. 75); ...pulled up lobster pots in the cove (Chap. 14, p. 81)
(These are all terms related to the seascape Sarah so loves. Tides are the alternate rising and falling of the sea surface, twice a day, caused by the pull of gravity from the moon and sun. A bay is an inlet of the sea, smaller than a gulf, larger than a cove; a cove is a small sheltered inlet. A buoy is a floating object moored to the bottom to mark a channel or a hazard like a submerged shoal; a bell buoy is a buoy with a bell made to ring by the action of the waves. A lobster pot is a crate made of wooden slats or wire mesh, with a funnel-shaped net, used as a baited trap to catch lobsters, hauled up from the sea bottom by a lobster catcher working from a boat.)
11. "Where was your dune, Sarah?" asked Caleb. (Chap. 11, p. 65)
(A dune is a hill or ridge of sand piled up by the wind. Caleb is recalling an incident related in Sarah, Plain and Tall, when Sarah tells the children about a favorite sand dune she and her brother enjoyed as children in Maine, and Papa responds by making a dune out of hay that they all slide down.)
12. One day Sarah showed him the woolly ragwort that grew in Maine, but it didn't make Caleb laugh the way it used to. (Chap. 13, p. 76)
(Woolly ragwort is a flowering herb with fuzzy leaves that

grows along the eastern coastal plain. Anna is referring to an incident in Sarah, Plain and Tall, when Sarah tells Caleb the names of some seashore plants, and Caleb whoops when he hears the name "woolly ragwort" and makes up an impromptu song about it.)

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 1-4 (Literal Level)

1. Describe Sarah's prairie family and Sarah's Maine family. (On the prairie farm, Sarah is married to Jacob Witting, a kind and hard-working farmer; she is stepmother to Anna, a bright and articulate girl who narrates the story, and Caleb, a candid and lively little boy whose mother died after giving birth to him. In Maine, Sarah has a brother, William, a good-natured fisherman with whom she used to live until he married his wife, Meg. In the same seacoast town, Sarah has three aunts, Mattie, Harriet, and Lou, all independent and happily self-sufficient.)
2. What effects has the drought had on the Witting family, their farm, and the surrounding community? (The stress of worrying about the drought and wondering when and if rain will ever come weighs on each family member more and more heavily as time goes on. They have to ration water use, for drinking and washing, and then they have to haul water in barrels from the river for the livestock. Crops and the pastures dry up, flowers don't bloom, and the cow pond goes dry. The brown, parched landscape, constant heat, and always-blowing dust depress everyone. Then a fire started by lightning (without rain) destroys the family's barn. The Wittings and all the other members of the community worry about wells running dry, because that would force people to leave their land, and they might not ever return. This disaster does strike two families—first Caroline and Joseph, then Maggie and Matthew pack up and leave when their wells dry up.)
3. Why do Anna and Caleb fear Sarah may leave the prairie farm, and them, and never return? (They know Sarah misses her native Maine, which is green and cool and abundantly watered, and they know she misses her aunts and her brother, William. When Papa declares they will never leave, because they were born on the prairie and have their names written in the land, the children are uneasy—Sarah wasn't born on the prairie, and her name is not written in the land. The children can tell Sarah doesn't love this land and she yearns for the sea she does love back in Maine.)
4. Why does Sarah take Anna and Caleb to Maine? Why does Jacob/Papa come to Maine at last? (The river has run dry, the Wittings' well is getting dangerously low, and Sarah is increasingly oppressed by the drought and heat. The final straw comes when the barn burns to the ground. It is no longer practical for Sarah and the children to stay on the farm, so they take the train east to Maine, where they can live comfortably, and comfortingly, with Sarah's delightful aunts. As time goes by, the children miss their home and their father more and more, and

they begin to worry they never will go back to the prairie and will never see their father again. Jacob/Papa finally comes to Maine after some rain returns to the prairie. With water in the cow pond, the barn rebuilt, and some green returning to the fields, Sarah and the children can return to the farm.)

Questions 5-7 (Interpretive Level)

5. Why does Sarah write her name in the dirt with a stick? (In the opening chapter, Jacob has said they will never leave the land because "We were born here. Our names are written in this land." Sarah feels quite different; she tells Maggie she hates the land, and adds, "Jacob once said his name was written in this land, but mine isn't. It isn't!" Maggie warns that until Sarah feels a strong connection with the land, she will not be able to survive on the prairie. While she is staying in Maine, Sarah misses Jacob deeply and sees how strongly connected the children are to their prairie land. When they finally return to the farm, Sarah makes a declaration of her new-found connection to the land by literally writing her name in the dirt of the land, adopting Jacob's attitude.)
6. Compare the prairie and Maine landscapes. (The prairie, in this time of drought, is brown, parched, oppressively hot, and filled with wind-blown dust. Maine is green and cool, and water is very much a part of the landscape, with frequent rain and the ever-moving and ever-changing sea stretching out to the horizon. [In Sarah, Plain and Tall, the prairie and the sea seem sometimes similar, with the waving prairie grasses stretching out to the horizon like the sea, but the parched prairie of Skylark does not suggest this comparison.]
7. How old do you think Anna and Caleb are? In what year do you think the events of the novel take place? Support your answers with evidence from the novel. (Answers will vary. Anna seems about ten or eleven years old, Caleb perhaps six or seven. Anna is old enough to understand some of Sarah's thoughts and to interpret interactions between Sarah and Papa, while Caleb is oblivious to that and has the cheerful candor of a younger child. The time frame seems to be the early 1900s, probably the 1910s, since Chub drives an open car, yet the houses are lit by oil lamps rather than electricity. Also, the aunts send Sarah a phonograph and records for her birthday, and mass production of records began in 1901.)

Questions 8-11 (Critical Level)

8. What is the meaning of the novel's title? (In Chapter 7, Maggie tells Sarah that Sarah is like the prairie lark, singing its song above the land before it finally plunges to earth to make its home. "But you have not come to earth, Sarah," Maggie says. She means Sarah has not yet made a commitment to the land; she has not embraced it as her true home. Later, in Maine, Sarah's brother William recalls their father used to recite a poem: "Like a skylark Sarah sings!" William adds, "Papa said you'd never come to earth," because Sarah was such an active child, running and climbing and never staying still. At the end of the novel, Sarah makes her commitment to the land of the prairie by writing her name in the dirt; she will stay here. Like the skylark, she has finally come to earth.)

9. What hints do you find throughout the novel Sarah wants to have a baby, and then may be pregnant?
(Sarah is quite taken with the fact her cat Seal is going to have kittens. When she holds baby Tom and thinks about the calf and kittens that are due to be born, Sarah says, "I am surrounded by motherhood," speaking softly as though the idea appeals to her. In Chapter 7, when Maggie is visiting, Sarah watches baby Tom and speaks of daydreaming about something you wish for; Anna realizes Sarah is not daydreaming about Maine, but about something else, unknown to Anna. In Maine, Chapter 11 hints Sarah is pregnant; she sleeps late in the morning, naps in the afternoon, and comes home from a visit to the local doctor with a happy smile.)
10. How would you describe the author's writing style?
(Answers will vary somewhat according to students' level. Critics describe MacLachlan's style as understated, lyrical, tender, sensitive, and evocative, expressing love and joy and hope, with gentle touches of humor, fine dialogue, and a sure focus on the details of everyday life and family relationships.)
11. What is the purpose of the passages in the novel that are in italics, on separate pages?
(They are Anna's thoughts, perhaps as written in her journal, that stand apart from the narrative of events. In the first part of the novel, they reveal events that occurred in the last year or two, when Sarah came to the prairie farm and married Papa and times were good. The entries also reveal Anna's worries—first, about the drought and dreaming of coolness, then, in Maine, about her homesickness and missing Papa. Anna's final italic entry describes the family firmly reattached to their land and expresses a strong hope for joy in the coming spring.)

Questions 12-15 (Creative Level)

12. Describe Papa's life alone on the farm, in the form of a journal, letters, or short chapters of a book.
13. Write more letters between the family in Maine and Papa on the prairie.
14. Role-play the discussion between Jacob and Sarah about Sarah leaving the farm and taking the children to Maine.
15. Describe some scenes of the novel from Caleb's point of view.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Art

1. Draw a plan of the Wittings' farm, including buildings, enclosures for the animals, the cow pond, meadows, pastures, and crop fields.
2. Paint a scene with watercolors, creating the main effect with your choice of colors.
3. Draw the Wittings' prairie farmhouse and/or the aunts' house in Maine.
4. Sketch the novel's main characters, who are not physically described in much detail in the book.

History and Social Studies

1. Learn more about the practice of single or widowed males in the U.S. Midwest or West arranging for mail-order brides from the East.
2. Research and report on the Dust Bowl in the United States in the 1930s.

3. Create a class presentation on railroad travel in the United States in the early 1900s. Include pictures of passenger train travel. First-hand accounts of train trips at this time would add a lot to your presentation. Show on a map the network of cross-country railroads at this time.
4. Find a pen pal who lives in a very different region of your country, or in a foreign country. As you write back and forth, notice the differences and similarities between the places where you live.
5. On a map of the United States, locate a likely place where the Witting farm is located, and a likely place where Sarah's aunts live.

Language Arts

1. View the *Skylark* video, and compare it with the novel. Are they very similar? (Teacher note: After students complete this activity, you can let them know that the screenplay came before the novel; much of the dialogue in the video is repeated in the book.)
2. Try your hand at writing with images, as in "The prairie land is like a giant quilt tossed out" or "The light lay like a blanket over the water below."
3. Read *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, and compare it with *Skylark*. Consider elements such as writing style, family relationships, themes, and emotional feelings. What specific events and situations in *Sarah* are mentioned in *Skylark*?
4. Wordplay on page 74 of the novel compares two different meanings of the word *dashing*. Aunt Harriet mentions a "dashing man"—here, the word is an adjective that means spirited and attractive. Then Aunt Lou says she is "dashing into the water"—here, the word is a verb that means to rush or hurry. How many other pairs of words can you think of that are spelled the same but mean different things and are different parts of speech?
5. Write physical descriptions of the novel's main characters.
6. William mentions a line from a poem that their father used to say: "Like a skylark Sarah sings!" Write your own poem about a skylark, or any other bird of your choice.

Mathematics

1. After selecting likely places where the Witting farm and the aunts' house are located, figure out how many miles Sarah and the children traveled on the train from the farm to the aunts' home.
2. Count up the total number of humans and animals who live on the Wittings' farm, before and after Seal has her kittens.

Music

1. Find and play a recording of the "mockingbird" song on page 70 of the novel. Or give a choral performance of the song with classmates.
2. Select music of the early 1900s Sarah and her guests might have played at her birthday party.

Science

1. Research and report on prairie ecosystems. Include information on wildfires caused by lightning strikes (or other causes).
2. In poster form, explain the process of photography as Jacob would have carried it out in Chapter 1 of the novel.
3. Explain how a phonograph transmits sound via a needle and a record.

4. Create an illustrated guide to some of the fish, mammal, and bird life of the Maine seacoast, especially the creatures mentioned in the novel.
5. Research and report on the water cycle and the causes and effects of droughts.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. View the video of *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. As you watch, note the elements in the *Sarah* story that are mentioned in *Skylark*.
2. Find out where your home's water supply comes from, and how it gets to your faucets.
3. With classmates, act out favorite scenes from the novel.
4. If you do not already keep a journal, start one. Record interesting events and situations, and your thoughts about yourself, your friends and family, and your life.
5. Draw up a list of instructions on how to care for a kitten.
6. Set up a rain gauge outside your home. Record the amounts of rain that fall during each rainfall over a period of one or two weeks. Is this a normal, above-normal, or below-normal amount of rain for this time of year in your location?
7. Record some of your dreams. What events or feelings do you think triggered each dream?
8. Create an illustrated travel brochure designed to convince people to visit the seacoast of Maine.
9. Create a class display of cars of the 1900s and 1910s, like the car Chub drives in the novel.

ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. Write physical descriptions or create artworks of the novel's main characters.
2. Explain how Sarah's feelings in the first part of the novel, on the prairie, are mirrored by the children's feelings in the second part of the novel.
3. Tell about the part animals play in the novel, naming each animal and describing its role.

VOCABULARY TEST

Match each **boldfaced** word with its meaning listed below. Write the letter of the meaning in the space next to the sentence number.

- | | | | |
|----------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| a. draw up | e. in a tired way | i. uneven, harsh | m. in a very steady way |
| b. solemn | f. head covering | j. burning slowly | n. in a grumpy way |
| c. slight flow | g. water containers | k. full of foliage | o. doctor of animals |
| d. collapsed | h. having little color | l. fall into small pieces | |

- ___ 1. "I know that, Caleb," I said **crossly**. "Papa knows it, too."
- ___ 2. "Your Papa says her face is as **pale** as the winter moon."
- ___ 3. "The grass is green. The trees are **lush**."
- ___ 4. "We can do that, too," Sarah said **firmly**.
- ___ 5. "We could **haul** water, Maggie. We would all work harder."
- ___ 6. "Any news in town?" asked Sarah **wearily**.
- ___ 7. And then there was only smoke, the grasses all black and **smoldering**.
- ___ 8. The river was nearly dry, only a small **trickle** in the red prairie dirt.
- ___ 9. "Leaving?" Sarah said, her voice **rough** and dry like the fields.
- ___ 10. Sarah took a handful of dry prairie grass in her hands, letting it **crumble** through her fingers.
- ___ 11. Sarah **slumped** to the ground and put her hands over her face as she cried.
- ___ 12. "**Buckets!**" shouted Papa. "Get buckets!"
- ___ 13. "'When Sarah came, she wore a yellow **bonnet**,'" I read.
- ___ 14. Aunt Mattie danced with a long scarf and a **serious** look that made Caleb laugh.
- ___ 15. "Lou works with a **veterinarian**," said Aunt Lou.

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Read each character description. In the list below, find the character who matches the description. Write the letter of the character in the space next to the description number. Use each name only once.

- | | |
|---|---------------|
| _____ 1. Sarah's neighbor and friend. | a. Sarah |
| _____ 2. Person who narrates (tells) this story. | b. Caleb |
| _____ 3. Prairie "mail-order" bride. | c. Anna |
| _____ 4. Sarah's brother. | d. Nick |
| _____ 5. A barefoot Maine aunt. | e. Jacob/Papa |
| _____ 6. Sarah's cat, who has kittens. | f. Maggie |
| _____ 7. Youngest human member of the prairie Witting family. | g. Mattie |
| _____ 8. Matthew and Maggie's baby. | h. Tom |
| _____ 9. One of the two dogs on the Wittings' farm. | i. William |
| _____ 10. Farmer who stays on his land through the drought. | j. Seal |

Part II: Fill-In (20 points)

Write one or two words in each blank to make each statement true.

1. Papa says, "Our _____ are written in this land."
2. The long period with no rain is called a(n) _____.
3. The wind blows unending amounts of _____ into the farmhouse.
4. A _____ destroys the farm's barn.
5. Maggie tells Sarah that Sarah is like a prairie _____ that has not yet come to earth.
6. Sarah and the children used to swim in the farm's _____.
7. Sarah describes herself as plain and _____.
8. Papa sends Sarah and the children to Maine so they can be in a place that is _____ and green.
9. Chub brings Sarah and the children to the aunts' house in a _____.
10. The author of this novel is Patricia _____.

Part III: Multiple Choice (30 points)

Underline the choice that correctly completes each of these sentences.

1. The prairie is mostly covered with (trees, swamps, grass, buffalo herds).
2. Moonbeam is a baby (horse, cow, kitten, dog).
3. The first thing Sarah loved about the children and their father was their (photographs, voices, music, letters).
4. As a birthday gift, Anna gives Sarah her (journal, hair ribbon, seashells, cat).
5. Sarah comes to the prairie region by (wagon, train, car, stagecoach).
6. Sarah doesn't say so, but she daydreams about having a (baby, piano, parakeet, car).
7. Sarah stops Jacob from shooting a thirsty (bison, antelope, raccoon, coyote).
8. At the party, Sarah and Papa (argue, drink wine, dance, fall down).
9. Sarah has been away from her family in Maine for (two, three, four, five) years.
10. Chub calls the Maine aunts (witches, old maids, hens, rascals), with affection.
11. Living in Maine makes Anna and Caleb feel (ill, homesick, relieved, itchy).
12. A small inlet along the seacoast is called a (gulf, slough, bay, cove).
13. The main color of the prairie in this novel is (brown, green, bronze, yellow).
14. Maine is on the (west, northwest, east, south) coast of the United States.
15. When Aunt Lou goes skinny-dipping, she wears (a bikini, nothing, a towel, a tee-shirt).

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose any two to answer. Write a paragraph for each.

1. What forces Sarah and the children to go to Maine? When and why do they go back to the prairie?
2. How were times happier for the prairie family before the drought, as described by Anna?
3. Describe the relationship between Sarah and the two children.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Read each character description. In the list below, find the character who matches the description. Write the letter of the character in the space next to the description number. Use each name only once.

- | | | | | |
|----------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------------|
| a. Sarah | c. Anna | e. Jacob/Papa | g. Lou | i. William |
| b. Caleb | d. Lottie | f. Maggie | h. Joshua | j. Moonbeam |

- ___ 1. Maine aunt who works for an animal doctor and goes skinny-dipping in the ocean.
- ___ 2. Young boy who becomes terribly homesick for his prairie farm.
- ___ 3. Native of the prairies who travels alone to Maine.
- ___ 4. Maine fisherman, married to Meg.
- ___ 5. One of the two dogs on the Wittings' prairie farm.
- ___ 6. Prairie wife who has to leave her farm with her husband and three children.
- ___ 7. Native of Maine who moves to the prairie.
- ___ 8. Caleb's name for the newborn calf.
- ___ 9. Photographer whose grandfather left the prairie during a drought and never returned.
- ___ 10. Person who writes in a personal journal.

Part II: Fill-In (20 points)

Write one or two words in each blank to make each statement true.

1. Sarah, Jacob, and the children travel to town by _____.
2. Sarah writes her _____ in the dirt of the farm.
3. Families are forced to leave their farms when their _____ go dry.
4. On the farm, Caleb dreams of _____; in Maine, he dreams of Papa.
5. Sarah, Jacob, and their neighbors have to go to the _____ to get water for their animals.
6. Sarah tells Maggie that she hates the _____.
7. Sarah describes herself as _____ and tall.
8. The aunts in Maine send Sarah a _____ for a birthday present.
9. Papa sends Sarah and the children to Maine so they can be in a place that is cool and _____.
10. Papa, Sarah, and the children look forward to a new _____ next spring.

Part III: Multiple Choice (30 points)

Underline the choice that correctly completes each of these sentences.

1. The farm livestock includes (sheep, horses, goats, turkeys).
2. Joshua, who appears in the first chapter of the book, is a (minister, storekeeper, schoolteacher, photographer).
3. Seal gives birth to (kittens, puppies, a calf, chicks).
4. Both of Sarah's families light their homes with (electricity, candles, oil lamps, gas lights).
5. Caleb sets a (water glass, compass, tin can, ruler) on the fence post, waiting for rain.
6. Sarah and the children travel to Maine by (car, wagon, bus, train).
7. Papa gives Sarah a party for her (anniversary, birthday, graduation, marriage).
8. While they are away from each other, Papa and Sarah and the children keep in touch by (phone calls, letters, e-mail, telegrams).
9. The aunts' home is beside the (sea, lake, river, prairie).
10. The name of the Maine family's dog is (Nick, Sam, Brutus, Chub).
11. When the children are out fishing with William, they sometimes see these sea mammals: (seals, sharks, flounder, lobsters).
12. When Sarah travels, she wears a yellow (dress, shawl, petticoat, bonnet).
13. Three of the new kittens are gray, and one is (calico, black, orange, brown), like its father.
14. This novel takes place during the years around (1880, 1910, 1930, 1950).
15. The prairie farm is most likely to be in this U.S. state: (Florida, Vermont, Kansas, California).

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose any two to answer. Write a paragraph for each.

1. What brought Sarah to the prairie? Why did she stay there? Why does she return to Maine during this novel?
2. What hardships does the lack of rain create on the prairie?
3. Describe the relationship between Sarah and Jacob/Papa.

ANSWER KEY

VOCABULARY TEST

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. n | 6. e | 11. d |
| 2. h | 7. j | 12. g |
| 3. k | 8. c | 13. f |
| 4. m | 9. i | 14. b |
| 5. a | 10. l | 15. o |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

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

Part II: Fill-In (20 points)

- | | |
|------------|----------------|
| 1. names | 6. cow pond |
| 2. drought | 7. tall |
| 3. dust | 8. cool |
| 4. fire | 9. c |
| 5. lark | 10. MacLachlan |

Part III: Multiple Choice (30 points)

- | | | |
|------------|-----------|--------------|
| 1. grass | 6. baby | 11. homesick |
| 2. cow | 7. coyote | 12. cove |
| 3. letters | 8. dance | 13. brown |
| 4. journal | 9. two | 14. east |
| 5. train | 10. hens | 15. nothing |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Matching (20 points)

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

Part II: Fill-In (20 points)

- | | |
|----------|---------------|
| 1. wagon | 6. land |
| 2. name | 7. plain |
| 3. wells | 8. phonograph |
| 4. rain | 9. green |
| 5. river | 10. baby |

Part III: Multiple Choice (30 points)

- | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|------------|
| 1. horses | 6. train | 11. seals |
| 2. photographer | 7. birthday | 12. bonnet |
| 3. kittens | 8. letters | 13. orange |
| 4. oil lamps | 9. sea | 14. 1910 |
| 5. water glass | 10. Brutus | 15. Kansas |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

TEACHER'S NOTES



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