

Historical
Fiction

OUR TEACHER, THE HERO



BY TERRY MILLER SHANNON
ILLUSTRATED BY GINA CAPALDI

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PAIRED
READ

The Life of Sarah Winnemucca

STRATEGIES & SKILLS

Comprehension

Strategy: Reread

Skill: Theme

Vocabulary

ancestors, despise, endurance,
forfeit, honor, intensity,
irritating, retreats

Vocabulary Strategy

Connotation and Denotation

Content Standards

Social Studies

History

Word Count: 1,888**

**The total word count is based on words in the running text and headings only. Numerals and words in captions, labels, diagrams, charts, and sidebars are not included.



Education

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A

**Essential Question**

How do traditions connect people?

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Chapter 1

A New School..... 2

Chapter 2

Money Problems..... 7

Chapter 3

Our Hero.....10

Respond to Reading.....16

**PAIRED
READ**

The Life of Sarah Winnemucca...17

Focus on Genre.....20

CHAPTER 1 **A NEW SCHOOL**

It's the beginning of the school year, and I have just started at my new school. It's called the Peabody Indian School. My parents are excited about it, but they are even more thrilled about my teacher, Sarah Winnemucca.

“She is a hero to our people,” they keep telling me. “You should honor her for all she does to help her people.”

I've heard a lot of Paiute talk about Sarah—even the ones who don't live here in Lovelock.

So far, Sarah has been a nice teacher. She doesn't scold or punish us as some teachers do. I like the way she teaches too.

Every morning, my friends and I walk to school together. We talk about our classmates. We talk about our schoolwork and people in the town.



Sometimes we also talk about the boarding schools. We've all heard stories about kids who are taken away from their parents and sent to faraway schools where they have to learn to be like white people.

One day, my friend Grace tells me something surprising. "My uncle thinks that Sarah works for the white people," she said.

"I don't believe you," I reply. "Everyone admires Sarah."

"That's not what he said," Grace replied. "My uncle said that some Paiute don't want us to learn English. They despise Sarah for trying to help our people get along in the white world and adopting some of the white people's ways."

When I tell my parents what Grace said about Sarah, they disagree. My father says, “Sarah wants her students to have the best of both worlds. She wants young people to keep the traditions of our ancestors and to learn our people’s language.”

“But she’s teaching us to read and write in English, too,” I point out.

“Yes, you also need to be able to speak good English,” my father replies.

After this, I become suspicious of Sarah. I wonder if what Grace’s uncle says is true.

We don’t have a proper schoolhouse. Instead we have classes in a shelter that Sarah and her brother Natchez built on his ranch. It’s a wooden frame covered with branches, leaves, and grasses.





In class, we speak in both English and Paiute. We read and write in both languages too. We also study arithmetic, sing songs, and even do exercises.

Sarah thinks it's funny when we act out English words. When she says "Up!" we jump up, lifting the roof of the shelter. When she says "Down," we lie down on the ground. Sarah laughs and says we should know what those words mean.

In the afternoon, the sun's irritating heat drives us out of our little shelter. We go outside and help Natchez on the farm. We work in the gardens and feed the animals.

One day when we are walking through Lovelock, Grace and I get a little bit carried away after she shows me her new pencil.

I notice a plain brown fence and stop short. It needs a few English words on it to make it look fancy! Soon we have used Grace's pencil to write English words on most of the fences in town! Our parents are proud of us when we point to each word and tell them what it means in Paiute.



Unfortunately, some white people don't like having their fences decorated. Sarah stands up for us. She says it shows how much we've learned. But Sarah also asks us not to write on people's fences again.

CHAPTER 2 **MONEY PROBLEMS**

It's January now, and there are problems at the school. Sarah isn't well. She has something wrong with her joints, and her shoulders are stooped. When she walks, she is in pain. Sometimes she lies down while she teaches us. Although she isn't well, her courage and endurance allow her to keep teaching.

Another problem is that Sarah doesn't have any money to buy books for us or to build a real schoolhouse. She has two white friends back east. They're sisters. Sarah says she met them when she was giving a speech to help our people.

The sisters asked the United States government to help pay for Sarah's school. They also tried to get other people to donate money to the school. One of the sisters gave Sarah some of her own money to help, but it isn't enough. The school is struggling to stay open.



Some white people heard about our school, and they visited it to see the work Sarah is doing. They are impressed by our enthusiasm for learning. They say we know more than students in white schools. Yet they don't seem to notice that we have no school building. We don't even have desks, and we sit on the ground. We have to use our benches as desks.

My parents tell me I should be grateful that Sarah Winnemucca is my teacher. Sometimes, though, I wish we had a real schoolhouse and a real classroom. I'd like to sit in a chair at a desk and read and learn from books.



Besides the problems at our school, the adults in our community are worried. They say the government wants to send all native children to boarding schools. In these schools, the children are taught only white ways. They aren't allowed to speak their language or practice their traditions. They don't even live with their families. The government wants native children to pretend to be white.

“Sarah Winnemucca knows it's wrong for children to forfeit their native ways,” my mother says. “I'm sure she will fight against the government boarding schools.”

CHAPTER 3 **OUR HERO**

One day when I walk to school, I notice tender green buds on the trees. It looks like spring is here. Little do I know that this day in 1887 will be unlike any other.

Our school day begins as usual. We do our exercises, huffing and puffing as we jump up and down and bend to reach our toes. We begin singing before we hear a strange shrieking sound. We all quit singing at once, as if someone has clapped hands over our mouths. We stare at each other, wide-eyed. I swallow although my mouth has gone as dry as desert sand.



The high-pitched wailing grows louder. I feel the hairs on my arms and legs rise as a chill chases down my spine. What is making that eerie noise?

Frowning, Sarah hobbles over to see what's going on. I glimpse Grace's mother and George's grandmother and a small mob of Paiute women. Most of them are wailing loudly. My mother stands behind them. She looks terrified.

Sarah speaks softly to them, touching one woman's hair, patting another's arm. She puts her arm around Grace's mother. I glance over at Grace, who is staring at the women, paralyzed with fear. In that small shelter, the air is still for a long time, as if we have all forgotten to breathe.

Sarah listens to the women, who are all speaking at once. I catch a phrase here and there: "take George away," "coming now," "to the government boarding school," and "nothing we can do."

Then Grace's mother says in an urgent whisper that carries through the school, "We need to take the children and hide—now."

Sarah stares over her shoulder into the classroom. Her eyes meet mine for a few seconds. I'm sure she grows taller at that moment. Her bent shoulders appear to widen. Her back, normally hunched over, seems to straighten. Her face becomes flushed, hiding the circles under her eyes. Above those pink cheeks, her eyes glow like the embers in a bonfire.

"Look at her," Grace whispers to no one in particular. But we are already gazing at our old, sick teacher, our jaws dropping in disbelief at her transformation. She is no longer old and sick at all. She looks like a warrior.

"Listen to me," Sarah says, speaking to our parents with an intensity that makes her voice carry clearly. "The children will not go to the government boarding school unless you say they can go." She turns to us. "You hear me, children? Don't be afraid. You won't go."

Although Sarah looks fearless, I am still afraid. She is one person. How can one person stand up to the government?

Then we hear horses trot up to the school. My heart catches in my throat. I want to run and hide, but I am frozen in place and can't move.

I see Sarah march forward. I see the legs of a horse and a man's black boots.

"I've come to take the children to Colorado," the man says in a deep voice. "It's government orders. The children will go to the boarding school there."

One of the mothers whimpers. We all hold our breath. How can Sarah save us?

"You will not take one child," she says in a quiet, no-nonsense voice. "They do not belong to you. You must have the agreement of the parents to take a child. And none of the parents here give their consent."

That is the beginning of a discussion that seems to go on and on. But Sarah stands firm. She argues quietly but powerfully. Finally, the official retreats.



We're so relieved!

Sarah isn't finished expressing her opinion about the government's plan, though. She tells the local newspaper that there is only one right place to teach native children. That place is in their homeland with their parents. It is not far away from home and among strangers.

Thanks to Sarah, none of the children from our school are sent to the boarding school in Colorado. The Paiute who had spoken out against Sarah change their minds about her.

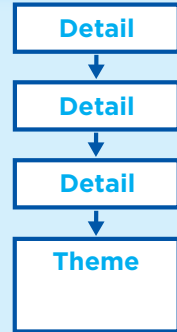
So when anyone mentions courageous people, I tell them I know one. I say, "My teacher is a true hero."



Respond to Reading

Summarize

Summarize the main events in *Our Teacher, the Hero*. Your graphic organizer may help you.



Text Evidence

1. How can you tell this story is historical fiction?

GENRE

2. Reread Chapter 1. How does Sarah want her students to stay connected to their traditions?

THEME

3. On page 13, the narrator sees “Sarah march forward.” What other words could the author use instead of *march*? Why do you think the author used the word *march* instead of another word?

CONNOTATION AND DENOTATION

4. Write to describe Sarah’s views on sending native children to boarding schools. Use details from the story in your answer. **WRITE ABOUT READING**

Compare Texts

Read more about Sarah Winnemucca's life.

The Life of Sarah Winnemucca

Sarah Winnemucca (1844–1891) belonged to the northern Paiute. The northern Paiute came from California, Nevada, and Oregon.

Throughout her life, Winnemucca tried to help her people get along with white people. She hoped this would make life better for the Paiute.

Winnemucca's grandfather believed some of the white people's ways were valuable. When Sarah was a child, he took her to California, where she learned to speak English.

The government moved the Paiute to reservations in the 1860s and 1870s. White settlers wanted their land. The Paiute despised the move and Winnemucca tried to help them return to their native land. In 1880, she asked President Rutherford Hayes to help the Paiute. The President promised to help, but eventually broke his promise.

In 1883, Winnemucca wrote a book called *Life Among the Paiutes*. It was the first book published by a Native American woman. It showed the views of a Native American as white people took over her homeland.

Native American Boarding Schools

The government began forcing Native American people to move onto government lands called reservations in the early 1800s. This was usually land that white people didn't want because it wasn't suitable for farming.

The government also believed that Native American children should attend boarding schools so they could be taught white ways. They weren't allowed to speak their language, practice their traditions, or wear their traditional clothing at the boarding schools.

Winnemucca opened the Peabody Indian School for Native American children near Lovelock, Nevada, in 1885.

Winnemucca's school was open for four years. It closed because of her poor health and because there wasn't enough money. Although it ran for only a short time, the school proved that students should be taught in a way that respected their heritage.

Winnemucca once promised that she would work to help the Paiute "while there was life in my body." Throughout her life, she helped Native Americans and white people to live together peacefully.



This photo of Sarah Winnemucca was taken in about 1880 when she was 36 years old.



Make Connections

How did Sarah Winnemucca help the Paiute?

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did *The Life of Sarah Winnemucca* help you understand more about the characters in *Our Teacher, the Hero*? **TEXT TO TEXT**

Focus on Genre

Historical Fiction Historical fiction tells a story that is set in the past. It often gives information about real events and can include real people who were living at the time. Historical fiction gives the reader an understanding of life in the past.

Read and Find *Our Teacher, the Hero* is based on real events in Sarah Winnemucca's life, but it is not a biography. The other characters in the story are made up, but the situation is based on facts. Compare *The Life of Sarah Winnemucca* with the experiences of the narrator in *Our Teacher, the Hero*.

Your Turn

Native Americans have a tradition of telling familiar stories aloud. The stories tell about the past and keep their culture alive. Choose a person or an event in your family that you could tell a story about. You can make up some details to add interest, but base your story on facts that are real. Practice telling your story until it sounds and feels right and then share it with others in your group or class.

Literature Circles

Fiction

Thinkmark

Characters

How would you describe Sarah Winnemucca?
Who were the other characters in the story?

Setting

Where did *Our Teacher, the Hero* take place?
When did it take place?

Conclusions

What conclusions can you draw about the importance of storytelling to Native Americans?

Author's Purpose

Why do you think the author wrote *Our Teacher, the Hero*?

Make Connections

What connections can you make with other stories you know about people who had to leave their homes and move far away?

Old and New

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