

Lance Novak
Booktalk Plan
Young Adult Literature

Title: *Worth*
Author: A. LaFaye
Publisher: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers
Date Published: 2004
Genre: Historical Fiction

Grade Level: Preferably for grades 6-8 but depends on literacy level of student; could work for secondary school students as well.

Booktalker: Lance Novak

Background note about the author/selection: A. LaFaye (the “A” standing for Alexandria) has lived in numerous places in the United States, including Wisconsin, Virginia, New York, and California. She is the author of several books, and she currently teaches at California State University at San Bernardino and Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia. A. LaFaye’s *Worth* is significant in that it tells the story of a coming-of-age, nineteenth century country boy whose hard work is replaced by the work of a city boy who knows very little about farming in Nebraska. Soon after being published, LaFaye’s poignant and thought-provoking novel won the Scott O’Dell Award for Historical Fiction.

Booktalk: Have you ever thought about what it would be like to live and work on a farm? Have you ever thought about the toils and burdens that go into harvesting crops? If being a farmer was all you had ever known, what would you do if your farm was constantly in danger of failing because of drought, disease, or evil ranchers who were intent on ruining or stealing your land? More importantly, what would you do if your farm was in danger of failing because you had broken your leg and were bed-ridden for a month—or maybe even for life?

These are exactly the issues that Nathaniel James and his family must face soon after Nathaniel badly injures his leg in the beginning of A. LaFaye’s *Worth*—a story that takes place in the late nineteenth century. All Nathaniel has ever known is hard work and little play on his family’s farm in Nebraska, but he seems to enjoy it immensely. He takes pride in the fact that he and his father spend long hours working in the fields and tending the crops together, and he enjoys coming home to the smells of the kitchen where he can eat a peaceful dinner with his parents after a long day’s work. But what will he do now? How will he be able to help his father keep the crops tended and harvested so that they can make enough money to survive without the banks stepping in and taking the farm from them?

Soon after his injury, Nathaniel is forced into a bed-ridden state, and it is here that he begins reading a book of Greek mythology that seems to intrigue and inspire him to become a better reader and student. Meanwhile, something unthinkable happens:

Nathaniel's father has hired an orphan boy from New York City to help him keep up on the farm work! At first, Nathaniel is furious and dumbfounded; he cannot believe his father would do such a thing, and he feels betrayed. On the other hand, he realizes that they have no other way of keeping up on the farm. If Nathaniel's father doesn't get sufficient help, their little Nebraska farm will inevitably fail, and the bank will be forced to step in and take everything away.

At first, Nathaniel doesn't know what to think of John Worth—a city boy from the alleys of New York City who has absolutely no idea how to rake up hay, clean a stall, or put a saddle on a horse. Nathaniel can't believe how incompetent John is in the fields, and he does little to befriend the orphan that he knows so little about. Slowly but surely however, because of numerous circumstances that force them to understand their cultural differences, they begin to bond, and Nathaniel and John soon find out each other's backgrounds and dark secrets. Indeed, they begin to realize that a farm-raised country boy and alley-raised city boy are not so different after all. But will their bonding help them keep Nathaniel's father from losing the farm? In a dramatic conclusion that will keep you in nervous apprehension right up until the novel's climax, Nathaniel and John find out if their newfound friendship is powerful enough to stop some evil ranchers from wreaking havoc on their peaceful farm!

Curriculum Connection: LaFaye's novel could easily be assimilated into a Social Studies or United States History curriculum in which middle school students are learning about numerous occurrences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For the most part, the "Orphan Trains" that saw several thousand orphaned children shipped west in an effort to provide them with families and work is an unknown, esoteric concept; many students might become intrinsically motivated to learn more about how these unfortunate orphans lived through their daily toils in places such as Nebraska and Oklahoma. Also, a language arts educator might wish to expatiate upon any number of the literary elements provided in LaFaye's award-winning novel; he or she could discuss the effects of the narrator's voice, dialog, character development, symbolism, and/or the theme of "family bonding" with his or her students in an effort to get them thinking about how an author employs numerous literary devices in order to make his or her story more poignant and more viable for the reader.

Curriculum Suggestion: The presenter may wish to use a Powerpoint presentation in which he or she displays slides of numerous images pertaining to the novel; the educator can find numerous images on Google that would help portray some of the characters, images, and motifs in LaFaye's book. For instance, one might employ pictures of: a Nebraska cornfield, a farmhouse, cattle and horses, an orphan, a family of four (for Nathaniel, John, and Nathaniel's parents), a four-wheel wagon (symbolizing Nathaniel's unfortunate accident), and numerous depictions of Greek gods and goddesses (representing the stories Nathaniel is reading and mesmerized by). Ultimately, employing a Powerpoint presentation filled with tangible, colorful images would bring more visual excitement to a novel that is sometimes vague in terms of its imagery.