



Secret Signs

Jacqueline Guest

Interest level: ages 8–11

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AR Quiz # 110020

Consider the following question as you read *Secret Signs*:

How can a sign communicate without using any words?

Story

Know-it-all Henry Dafoe is fed up—with his sister and with his mother's plan to send him to Nova Scotia. When he runs away and becomes a hobo, Henry learns the hard way that a soft bed, a home-cooked meal, a loving family and the company of good friends are things that should never be taken for granted.

Author

Jacqueline Guest is the author of more than a dozen books for children, including *Belle of Batoche*, which was inspired by Jacqueline's family history. When she's not traveling across Canada promoting literacy and the love of books, she's at home in Bragg Creek, Alberta, researching and writing and, of course, reading.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Language Arts

- There are many sets of signs and symbols that visually represent meaning. For example: road signs, semaphore, sign language for the deaf, Braille for the blind and international signs and symbols. Divide students into small groups. Assign each group a category of signs. Have them do research to find out how their assigned style of communication works and what the signs and symbols mean. Have each group share their findings with the class. Use this as an opportunity for students to practice their note-taking skills.
- Using hobo signs from the book and from other sources, assign students to write a letter to a classmate using as few words as possible.
- *Before reading chapter 4:* Henry is disappointed that he doesn't find his father when he gets to Winnipeg. He finds himself alone, huddled under a tarp with no blanket to fend off the cold. Write about how you think Henry is feeling and what his plan of action will be now that he hasn't been reunited with his father.
- The Great Depression affected many people around the world. Brainstorm with students to create a list of the effects of this event. Brainstorm another list of the sights, sounds, smells, feelings and tastes that might have been part of the Depression. Using these lists, have students create poems that highlight the struggle to survive during this challenging time.
- A railway train can be made up of different types of cars: engine, freight cars, passenger cars, tanker cars, hopper cars, flat cars and, of course, a caboose. Divide the class into groups. Have each group research one type of car. Where was it first manufactured? Where was/is it most used? Why is it the most appropriate kind of car for its cargo? Have groups draw a large picture of their assigned car and find out more information about it. Display the pictures and have students share their information.
- Invite students to choose a hobo from *Secret Signs* who captured their imagination. Have them draw a portrait of this man and write a descriptive paragraph about what they think his life might have been like before the Depression hit. In another paragraph, have students contrast this to what their chosen hobo's life is like now.
- Have students write journal entries for each of the days Henry is on the road, looking for his father. In each entry, be sure to include descriptions of the people Henry meets and the situations he finds himself in.
- Ask students to imagine themselves as either Henry or Clickety Clack. Write a letter from one to the other—five years after the story's ending. What's happening in that character's world that he wants to tell his old traveling companion about? What has changed?

- Henry is very young when he sets out by himself. As a class, explore whether it was common for young people to ride the rails. Discuss the challenges these children faced on the road. Write about what might make a young boy or girl leave home during the Depression.

Social Studies

- The Great Depression was a catastrophic environmental and financial event that was felt worldwide from 1929–1939. Divide students into groups. Assign one group to research how the Great Depression affected people in North America. Assign another to find out whether the effects were different in other parts of the world. A third group should research what brought the Depression to an end. When students are finished researching, rearrange groups so that there's an "expert" in each subject in each new group. Using this "jigsaw" learning strategy, have students teach each other what they know about the Great Depression.
- The Glenmore Dam and Reservoir Relief Project was built on the Elbow River in Calgary during the Depression. Today it provides drinking water for part of the city of Calgary. Have students find out what a dam is and how it works. Then find out if there is a dam in your area.
- The Canadian Pacific Railway, completed in 1889, connected the two coasts of Canada, as well as places in between. Henry hitches an illegal ride on a freight car going from Winnipeg to Calgary. As a class, find out more about the building of the CPR and the people who jumped on trains without permission.
- John Palliser was an Irish landowner who spent time in the mid-nineteenth century exploring different countries around the world. He was part of the British North American Exploring Expedition who explored and surveyed the Canadian prairies. Have students read about his work and how it impacted the growth of Canada.
- Richard Trevithick, James Watt, Thomas Newcomen, George Stephenson, John Stevens and George Pullman all have something in common. Divide students into small groups and assign each group to briefly research one of these men online. Gather as a class and have each group present its findings. Together, figure out the connection and what they have to do with *Secret Signs*.
- Henry talks about putting a three-cent stamp on a letter to his mother and sister. Today a stamp costs much more than that. Research stamps of Canada to find out more about their history. Extension: have students choose another country to find out about the history of their stamps.

Science

- Research the effects of weather on the land during the Depression: dust storms, insects, drought, crop failure, crop diseases, excessive heat etc. Choose specific places that Henry traveled through and compare his descriptions with today's landscape.
- On a map of Canada, have students draw the route Henry and Clickety Clack take from Winnipeg to Calgary. Label cities, provinces and major landforms. Write short comments describing the places they stop along the way.
- Trains used to run on coal. Have students choose an area of interest from the following research topics: how a steam engine works; how a diesel engine works; why and how diesel replaced coal as a main engine type; where steam engines were used and for how long; historical railway routes in North America and their uses; modern railway routes in North America and their current uses. Have each group design a poster and multimedia presentation to share with their class.

Mathematics

- Have students compare the price of mailing a letter now to what it used to cost in 1932. Discuss inflation using the following website as a launching point. The lesson covers inflation and the Consumer Price Index, while providing students with an opportunity to develop their graphing skills.

www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/03/lp298-02.shtml

- Have students compare the prairie weather during the Depression with prairie weather today. Look at annual rainfall, hours of sunshine, wind patterns, etc. Chart the differences in five-year intervals.

Health/Personal Planning

- Henry takes many risks on his journey to find his father. Brainstorm as a class some of these risks. For example: stealing money from his mother, running away from home, and talking to strangers. In groups, have students discuss each of these risks from the perspective of the story and from real life.

Art

- Hoboes or transients still use their own set of signs and symbols to communicate with each other. Research hobo symbols and give some appropriate ones to students to decipher. Then have students create their own set of hobo signs and see if others can guess their meaning.
- Have students create new signs that Henry might leave in the places he travels to. For instance: what sign would he leave at the bread line? At the hobo jungle?

- Invite students to choose their favorite scene with Henry and Clickety Clack and draw a comic strip to illustrate it.
- Design a series of stamps for *Secret Signs*. Have each student select a particular passage, sign, character, location or feeling to use as a guide for the stamp's image.
- Have each student design and draw their own personal secret sign. Encourage them to think first about what makes them unique and what they consider their own strengths to be.
- At the end of the book, Henry says he's going to draw a special sign for Clickety Clack so that Clickety Clack will be able to find Henry's house. Have students draw what they think that sign would look like.

Drama

- Henry accepts a ride from a stranger when he runs away from home. In today's world, that is a dangerous and unacceptable thing to do. But during the Depression things were different—or were they? Henry is wakened by the stranger trying to rob him. Henry manages to get away. Have students create short skits that change the way this situation ends.
- Think about how Henry is traveling across the country, and create short scenarios where he talks aloud about his travels and the situation he finds himself in.
- “On the road, everyone's got a special name.” Clickety Clack gives Henry the name High-handed Hank. In groups have students give each other (respectful!) hobo names and get them to act out their new names.
- What would have happened to Clickety Clack if Henry hadn't come back? Have students write and perform a short monologue for Clickety Clack that expresses how he feels when he finds out that Henry has abandoned him.

Connecting to the Text

- Metaphors are a type of literary device that authors use to intensify description in a book. In chapter 1, Guest writes: “The wind was a black fist hammering their house.” Discuss with students the imagery in this phrase. Look for other examples of metaphors in the book. Divide students into groups and have them brainstorm five to ten metaphors for storms, trains or other topics related to *Secret Signs*.
- The Henry Dafoe we meet at the beginning of the book is a much different boy than the one who finishes the story. Have students create a character development timeline that shows the major turning points in Henry's character. Each entry should be illustrated and have a short paragraph that describes Henry's growth at that point in the story.

- In their reading response journals, invite students to write an *epilogue* for the story. Their epilogue should definitely address what happens to Henry after the story, but could also include information about Henry's father, mother and sister and what they do. Share the responses with the class.
- Like plot, setting and characters, *theme* is also an important literary element in any novel. Theme is an idea or message about life revealed in a work of literature. It's not really a moral, but it's kind of a guiding message all the same. Break your class into small groups and have them discuss what they understand to be the theme of *Secret Signs*.
- *Secret Signs* is written in the third person. Have students select a particularly dramatic passage from the book—perhaps one where Henry is clambering aboard a moving train—and rewrite the section in the first person.
- Authors know they can move a story along with strong verbs. Briefly review verbs with your class. Introduce them to verbs that show action in a descriptive way. For example: “[Clickety Clack] peeled the egg and sprinkled it liberally with salt before greedily chomping into it.” Discuss how the story is enriched by using strong verbs. Have students find a dozen other sentences in *Secret Signs* where the author uses strong verbs.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. During the Great Depression, many of the hobos who traveled from place to place relied on signs because they couldn't read. Even nowadays, there are still many people who can't read. What does reading mean to you? How would your life be different if you weren't able to read well? Would this have an impact on your future choices? Explain your reasoning.
2. When Henry speaks angrily to his mother about her decision to send him to Nova Scotia to help out on his uncle's fishing boat, she tells him to remember his manners. Sternly, she reminds him to treat her with the respect she deserves—and he agrees with a “Yes, ma'am.” Is this similar to the way you relate to your own parents at home? Or do you do things differently in your house?
3. Clickety Clack tells Henry about his life riding the rods. He says city folk bump into an old hobo like him and don't even see him. Think about the city or community where you live. Where do you see this kind of thing happening in your own world? Why do you think it happens?
4. When Henry and Clickety Clack leave the Fergusons' place, Henry leaves behind his blue marble shooter. Why does this make him feel so good? How do you feel when you share something that means a lot to you?

5. Henry leaves Clickety Clack at the doctor's barn but then decides to return. He feels good once he's back with his friend. What changed Henry's mind? How did he grow from that experience?
6. Henry realizes loyalty is not something that should be taken for granted. What does he mean? What things do you sometimes take for granted?
7. Why does Clickety Clack choose not to take the job at the Glenmore Reservoir and Dam project?
8. At the end of *Secret Signs*, why does Henry decide that family is worth more than "ten chests full of plunder"? Do you share his opinion? Explain your thinking.

Author's Note

Dear Readers,

Secret Signs is a story I know you will enjoy!

When I was a girl, I loved to read tales of brave kids striking out on their own, having exciting and dangerous adventures and beating the odds! All these elements are in *Secret Signs*.

While the 1930s was a harsh chapter in Canadian history, many remarkable stories of bravery and ingenuity emerged from the hardships families endured. In *Secret Signs*, I have tried to bring our history alive in a way that makes you want to keep turning the pages. To do this, I created Henry Dafoe, a boy who reminds me of Tom Sawyer, a fictional lad who also lived by his own rules. If Henry were alive today, I'm sure he would spend a lot of time in detention at school!

The remarkable hobo code in the book is real and still in use today. It is an amazing system of communication for travelers who ride the rails, and when I learned about it, I knew I had a story to write. The idea that there were cryptic messages left for others to decode was intriguing—sort of like discovering the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt.

I hope you will do more investigation of your own into this fascinating period in Canadian history. But be prepared—you won't believe some of the amazing things that actually happened!

Remember: Read to Succeed!

Jacqueline Guest

Resources**Books***Fiction*

- Bannatyne-Cugnet, Jo. *A Prairie Alphabet; A Prairie Year*
 Booth, David. *The Dust Bowl*
 Chall, Marsha Wilson. *Prairie Train*
 Curtis, Christopher Paul. *Bud, not Buddy*
 Hesse, Karen. *Out of the Dust*
 Hiatt, Joan. *Joshua's Song*
 Hannigan, Katherine. *Ida B*
 Hundel, Nancy. *A Prairie Summer*
 Kurelek, William. *A Prairie Boy's Summer; A Prairie Boy's Winter*
 Lawson, Julie. *Emma and the Silk Train; A Ribbon of Shining Steel: The Railway Diary of Kate Cameron*
 Lied, Kate. *Potato: A Tale from the Great Depression*
 Lotteridge, Celia Barker. *The Wind Wagon*
 MacLachlan, Patricia. *Sarah Plain and Tall; Skylark*
 Mowat, Farley. *A Prairie Boy's Winter*
 Newman, Patricia. *Jingle the Brass*
 Ó Flatharta, Antoine. *The Prairie Train*
 Ringgold, Faith. *Tar Beach*
 Simons, Joseph. *Under a Living Sky*
 Stewart, Sarah. *The Gardener*
 Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

Nonfiction

- Bannatyne-Cugnet, Jo. *Heartland: A Prairie Sampler* (971.2)
 Booth, David. *Images of Nature: Canadian Poets and the Group of Seven* (811)
 Bouchard, David. *If You're not from the Prairie; Prairie Born* (811.54)
 Burg, David. *The Great Depression* (Eyewitness History series) (973.91)
 Freedman, Russell. *Children of the Great Depression* (303.44)
 Hodge, Deborah. *The Kids book of Canada's Railway and How the CPR Was Built* (385)
 Johnson, Rebecca L. *A Walk in the Prairie* (577.4)
 MacLeod, Elizabeth. *Stamp Collecting for Canadian Kids* (769.56)
 Ross, Stewart. *Causes and Consequences of the Great Depression* (338.54)
 Rotter, Charles. *The Prairie: An Enduring Spirit* (577.4)
 Schaefer, Lola M. *Train* (625.1)
 Schultz, Stanley. *The Great Depression: A Primary Source History* (973.91)
 Tames, Richard. *The 1930s* (909.82)
 Warren, Andrea. *Orphan Train Rider: One Boy's True Story* (362.7)

Online

John Palliser and Henry Hind: Southern Alberta and Calgary
www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/calgary/palliser.html

Lakes of North America
www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Lakes_of_North_America

Great Depression Recipes
<http://greatdepressionrecipes.blogspot.com>

Drought in Palliser's Triangle
www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=ArchivedFeatures&Params=A220

Canadian Pacific Railway Historical Photographs
www.cprheritage.com/photo_graphics/photogallery.htm

Dust Bowl Days
www.edsiteмент.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=300

The Great Depression of Canada
www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=a1AR-TA0003425

International Signs and Symbols (images)
<http://iamtheweather.com/weather/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/symbol-signs-the-ministry-of-type.jpg>

American Sign Language Alphabet
www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Sign_Language_alphabet

Braille Alphabet
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Braille>

Semaphore Flag Signalling System
www.anbg.gov.au/flags/semaphore.html

Wikipedia —Hobo
www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hobo

Hobo Signs
www.worldpath.net/~minstrel/hobosign.htm

How Steam Engines Work

www.science.howstuffworks.com/steam.htm

Great Depression and World War II, 1929-45 (photo database)

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>

Learn About the Great Depression

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/modules/great_depression/index.cfm

Canadian Pacific Railway

www8.cpr.ca/cms/English/default.htm