



TeachersFirst READING TREKS

A Long Way from Chicago

Teacher Guide

Grade Level & Content Areas

Access Reading
Trek Map

Ages: 9–13

Grades: 4–5 (read-aloud), 6–8
(independent reading)

Reading Level: 5th grade

Lexile Measure: 750L

Guided Reading Level: V

Developmental Reading

Assessment (DRA): 50

Content Areas: English/language arts, social studies, and social development.

Synopsis of Book

Drawing inspiration from his own family's hometown and farmhouse, Richard Peck transports readers through America's past—from the Roaring Twenties to the Great Depression and the brink of World War II—in *A Long Way from Chicago*. Each summer, Joey and his younger sister, Mary Alice, leave bustling Chicago to spend a week in a small Illinois town with their larger-than-life Grandma Dowdel. Told from Joey's perspective beginning when he was nine years old, this collection of interwoven short stories captures the unforgettable escapades of their fiercely independent and often unpredictable grandmother. Whether outwitting the town gossip, outbaking the competition with her legendary gooseberry pie, aiding an eloping couple, or bringing justice in her own unique way, Grandma Dowdel proves time and again that life in a quiet town is anything but dull. With humor, heart, and a touch of nostalgia, this timeless novel delights readers of all ages, from middle graders to adults.

Standards

Common Core State Standards for K–5

Reading: Literature

- Key Ideas and Details

Writing

- Text Types and Purposes

- Craft and Structure
- Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Research to Build and Present Knowledge

Common Core State Standards for 6–12

Reading: Literature

- Key Ideas and Details
- Craft and Structure
- Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Writing

- Text Types and Purposes
- Research to Build and Present Knowledge

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

- Theme 1: CULTURE
- Theme 2: TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE

- Theme 3: PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS
- Theme 7: PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION

National Core Arts Standards for Visual Arts

- CREATING

Using a TeachersFirst® Reading Trek to Explore This Book

TeachersFirst Reading Treks create a virtual field trip of resources about a piece of literature or a text using the My Maps feature of Google Maps. To motivate and enrich student reading, teachers and students can reference this visual collection of web resources and images as they relate to the contents of a book.

TeachersFirst has done the hard work for you! Use the activities in this teacher guide and the accompanying [Reading Trek map](#) as you and your students explore this book. And, if you feel inspired, you (or your students) can create your own Reading Trek about this or another book!

Using This Reading Trek in Class

Below is a list of ideas for how to use this Reading Trek in your educational setting.

Working with the Map:

1. Introduce the book to the whole class by displaying the [Reading Trek map](#) on an interactive whiteboard and highlighting the *Joey and Mary Alice's Home and Train Travel to Grandma's* layer. Peck did not specifically identify Cerro Gordo as the small town in the text, but clarified in an interview that he wanted

readers to connect the story with their own ideas of small towns.

2. Several topics and themes emerge throughout the chapters, including poverty, perseverance, honesty, community, friendship, and family. Identify and discuss how each of these factor into the vignettes in the text. Using

- ReadWriteThink ([TeachersFirst review](#)), create a graphic organizer to track where each theme appears across the chapters and record the settings, acts of kindness, characters involved, outcomes, and personal reflections.
3. Discuss the difference between the economic boom enjoyed in 1929 (as depicted by clues in the first chapter), and the ensuing Great Depression. Using the activity *Where Did All the Money Go?* ([TeachersFirst review](#)), challenge students to discover clues about what caused the Great Depression.
 4. Discuss inflation over time. Compare the young waitress's wages or the cost of a soda with current prices. You can also use The Inflation Calculator ([TeachersFirst review](#)) to calculate what menu prices at the [1937 Granville cafe](#), a [1938 Key West restaurant](#), or a [1939 Baltimore restaurant](#) would be today.
 5. Create a virtual timeline of Joey and Mary Alice's yearly summer visits using Sutori ([TeachersFirst review](#)).
 6. Music played a major role in shaping the 1930s and 1940s. Students can explore the popular genres of that era, including jazz, blues, country, and folk music from diverse communities. Have them create a playlist of songs that could serve as the "soundtrack" to Grandma Dowdel's world and compare the role of music in community and storytelling across cultures. Share the songs on a podcast created on Adobe Podcast ([TeachersFirst review](#)).
 7. While many small-town stories focus on rural white communities, the Great Migration (1916–1970) saw millions of Black Americans move from the South to urban centers, changing the makeup of small towns along the way. Students can research the impact of the Great Migration on small-town economies, cultures, and demographics, then create an interactive map using Google My Maps ([TeachersFirst review](#)).

Extension Activities:

1. Use the book to stimulate discussion, ask questions, or to inspire writing prompts about living in a small town during these times. Students can draw pictures of their favorite scenes from the text, including an image of Grandma Dowdel. For a digital option, try Google Drawings ([TeachersFirst review](#)).
2. Students can listen to "[A Year Down Yonder](#)" and "[A Season of Gifts](#)," the second and third stories in the novel series, on YouTube.
3. Students can create their own Google My Maps ([TeachersFirst review](#)) depicting their home and the locations of trips they have taken or would like to take in the future, highlighting stops along the way.
4. Ask students to research the types of items people would enter into a competition at a local county fair—livestock, produce, baked and canned goods, crafts, etc. As a class, decide on two or three categories and have students make mock entries or create a picture of their entry to be judged.
5. Have students research and compare small-town life in different parts of the world during the novel's time period (1929–1942). They can examine daily life, traditions, and struggles faced by communities in rural America, Mexico, and Japan, and compare them to consider the global impact of the Great Depression on other countries. Students can compare their chosen location to the setting of *A Long Way from Chicago* and present their

findings through a slideshow, written report, or poster created with Canva ([TeachersFirst review](#)).

Helpful Resources

From TeachersFirst:

- [TeachersFirst CurriConnects Book List - Maps](#)
- [TeachersFirst Review of Google My Maps](#)
- [OK2Ask: Building Background Knowledge with Reading Treks](#)
- [OK2Ask: No Passport Required: Cross-Curricular Learning Journeys with Google My Maps](#)

Other Resources:

- [The Bement Story](#), the history of a neighboring town in Piatt County.
- [Kid Lit TV's Book Trailer Archives](#) and [Slime Kids](#) book trailer examples.
- [Vocabulary.com](#) for vocabulary practice.
- [Bookrags Study Guide](#)