

## A Curriculum Guide to

### ***Tracks***

By Diane Lee Wilson

#### **About the Book**

Shortly after the Civil War, Malachy laces on his father's boots and travels to the American West to work on the transcontinental railroad that will unite the country. In addition to the challenge of the physically grueling work, Malachy also has to adjust to working with Chinese men and boys, whom he views with suspicion and contempt. Despite everything, Malachy gets by with his love for his fierce new dog, Brina, and Blind Thomas, the most hardworking and loyal railroad horse around.

But after a Chinese boy is blamed for stealing a bag of coins, Malachy begins to reconsider his prejudices—because Malachy is the real thief, and his conscience is uneasy. He begins to notice the many ways in which the Chinese workers are mistreated. And when real danger threatens, Malachy needs to find the courage to step up and do what's right.

Diane Lee Wilson's atmospheric writing vividly depicts the western landscape of America in the 1860s, bringing readers alongside Malachy—and his beloved horse and dog—as he navigates a bumpy moral terrain and discovers a friendship he never knew was possible.

#### **Discussion Questions**

The questions below align with the following Common Core Standards: (RL.6-7.2) (SL.6-7.1, 2, 3)

These questions may be utilized throughout the novel study as reflective writing prompts, or, alternatively, they can be used as targeted questions for discussion and reflection.

1. Readers are introduced to Malachy in the prologue as he sneaks away and steals a horse. What can readers infer about him from this opening scene of the novel?
2. Why do you believe Malachy feels so compelled to take over the role of provider for his family? Do you believe he will ultimately be successful at this endeavor? Why or why not?
3. Malachy's adventures begin in 1866 before he embarks "into the grand enterprise" of working for the Central Pacific Railroad Company. In your opinion, how does he change during the two and a half years of service to the railroad?

4. Consider the novel's cover art. In what ways is the image represented symbolic of the events that transpire throughout the course of the book?
5. Consider Malachy's first interaction with Brina: What is it about the dog that he admires? In what role does Brina serve for Malachy?
6. Consider Malachy's reaction to Brina's affection toward Ducks. Why does this bother him so greatly? Do you believe you would feel similarly if you were in the same position? Why or why not?
7. After overhearing Malachy speak, a fellow train passenger named George says to him, "You can't fool me; I heard you talking. You one of them Irish? You like to fight? 'Cause your kind always do." What is it about this inquiry that gets Malachy so enraged? How does it speak to the prejudice against the Irish? What other groups of people are discriminated against?
8. Explain the significance of the title, *Tracks*. In your opinion, does it accurately describe the events and relationships portrayed in the novel?
9. As his train takes him high into the mountains, Malachy notices the clean and cold mountain air and thinks he hears, "'Welcome to the wilderness', the wind hailed, though a keen ear would have heeded the scornful laugh underlying its whistle." What is the wind trying to warn Malachy and the others of?
10. Why does Mr. Strobridge select Malachy to deliver the tea? What do you think he hopes to accomplish by giving him this menial task? Why does Malachy choose to do the work without protest?
11. Describe Malachy. What makes him a dynamic person? Is he the type of individual you would want to befriend?
12. Mr. Strobridge demands, "Tell him to get me more men first thing, Chinamen if he has to. Throw a net over them in San Francisco. They're near as good as the white laborers, and they don't cost as much." What does Mr. Strobridge's declaration about the Chinese laborers indicate about his company's position regarding the value of the Chinese?
13. Consider the variety of settings for *Tracks*; name the three places you believe to be most important to the story. Using textual evidence from the book, explain why you find them to be significant.
14. When he first encounters the Chinese railroad laborers, Malachy states, "They were, I have to say, the oddest lot I'd ever laid eyes on. Looked like a bunch of girls with their long braids dangling behind narrow shoulders, their pajamas flopping around their short legs, and instead of hats, straw baskets fitted upside down on their heads." How do you feel about Malachy's initial reaction to the Chinese laborers? Given his background, do

you think it's acceptable? In what ways does his understanding of these coworkers change throughout the course of his two-and-a-half-year experience of working for the railroad?

15. How does the loss of the lives of the eight Chinese workers impact Malachy? In what ways do you believe he is changed by their deaths?

16. After stealing the gold, Malachy realizes that his world may never be the same; in your opinion, what are the best and worst consequences of his actions?

17. While considering Blind Thomas's fate after the end of the rail project, Malachy thinks, "I'd take him with me. Somewhere, the saints were shaking their heads at how easily thievery had become a habit. But standing there with him, I suddenly felt that Blind Thomas was the one friend I still had in camp. He'd never been anything but faithful to me; I couldn't abandon him now." Do you think his decision to steal Blind Thomas is the right one? Have you ever felt a similar kinship with an animal? If so, describe your relationship.

18. Describe the relationship between Malachy and Ducks: How does it evolve over the course of the novel? By the end of the book, Malachy calls Ducks by his given name, Keung. Why is this important to their relationship?

19. Using the phrase "This is a story about . . .," supply five words to describe *Tracks*. Explain your choices.

### **Activities and Research**

The activities below align with the following Common Core Standards: (W.6-7.4) (RL.6-7.1, 5, 6)

1. Much of the story of *Tracks* focuses on the labor by men working for the Central Pacific Railroad Company. Using a variety of reference sources, have students research the role of the Central Pacific Railroad Company and the Union Pacific Railroad Company as part of the Transcontinental Railroad and consider the following:

- When and where were these companies founded?
- How were they financed?
- What were the goals of the companies?
- What was the purpose of the Golden Spike ceremony?
- How did their contributions reshape the United States?
- What is the current status of these companies?
- What are additional facts you found interesting?

After gathering their findings, have students create a digital presentation and share with the class.

2. Throughout *Tracks*, the Chinese laborers are referred to as Celestials, and a large part of the novel's focus is capturing the discrimination felt by the Chinese and other minority groups throughout this period of history. Using the library and the Internet, research this topic, being sure to consider the following:

- What is the origin of the term *Celestial* in reference to the Chinese workers?
- When and where were the Chinese called Celestials?
- Why was this term used?
- To what extent was this a derogatory term and why?
- How did the Chinese respond to this term?
- What other types of discrimination were Chinese subjected to?

### 3. Considering Character: Host a Mock Trial

After reading *Tracks* as a class, students will brainstorm "crimes" committed by the characters from the novel. Have groups of students work together to act as the prosecution or defense for the selected characters, while also acting as the jury for other groups. Students will use several sources to research their case, including the novel and Internet resources on judicial proceedings and roles of the members of a trial. All the while, students will be writing a persuasive piece to complement their trial work. Additional teaching resources for literary mock trials can be found at [www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org).

### 4. Considering Character—Create an “I AM” Poem or a Biopoem

The purpose of this strategy is to help students demonstrate knowledge of a character in *Tracks* by following written prompts to complete a poem about the individual. Students can be given the prompts to follow on a worksheet, or, alternatively, students may create an original slideshow using PowerPoint or another presentation tool.

#### “I AM” POEM

##### **FIRST STANZA:**

- I am (name the character)
- I wonder (something the character is actually curious about)
- I hear (an imaginary sound the character might hear)
- I see (an imaginary sight the character might see)
- I want (something the character truly desires)

##### **SECOND STANZA:**

- I pretend (something the character actually pretends to do)
- I feel (a feeling about something imaginary)
- I touch (an imaginary touch)
- I worry (something that really bothers the character)
- I cry (something that makes the character very sad)
- I am (the first line of the poem repeated)

##### **THIRD STANZA:**

- I understand (something the character knows is true)

I say (something that the character believes in)  
I dream (something the character might actually dream about)  
I try (something the character really makes an effort about)  
I hope (something the character actually hopes for)  
I am (the first line of the poem repeated)

BIOPOEM:

Line 1: First name  
Line 2: Three traits that describe the character  
Line 3: Relative of \_\_\_\_\_  
Line 4: Lover of \_\_\_\_\_ (three things)  
Line 5: Who feels \_\_\_\_\_ (three things)  
Line 6: Who needs \_\_\_\_\_ (three things)  
Line 7: Who fears \_\_\_\_\_ (three things)  
Line 8: Who gives \_\_\_\_\_ (three things)  
Line 9: Who would like to see \_\_\_\_\_ (three things)  
Line 10: Resident of \_\_\_\_\_  
Line 11: Last name

## 5. Essential Quotes Analysis

The language that an author uses in her work is essential to getting across the intended meaning. Select four quotes from *Tracks* that seem to signify key ideas that the author hopes that readers will take from the text. These might be quotes spoken by characters or might be from the narration, and page numbers should be included with the quotes. Have students develop a chart with the following four columns:

- Quote
- Page Number
- Relevance to the Novel
- Intended Meaning for Readers

The intended meaning should have relevance not only to the characters in the text, but to the lives of anyone who reads the book.

*This guide was created in 2013 by Rose Brock, a teacher, school librarian, and doctoral candidate at Texas Woman's University, specializing in children's and young adult literature.*

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