

# A Quest for Land during Reconstruction

by Dean Schneider

Middle school through high school

## *The Land* by Mildred D. Taylor

**T**he *Land* is a prequel to the rest of Mildred Taylor's series about the Logan family, including *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Dial, 1976). Readers familiar with the Logans and their determination to hold on to their land in the 1930s and 1940s are transported back to the 1870s and 1880s, the Reconstruction period after the Civil War.

### Background

Paul-Edward Logan is the grandfather of the Cassie Logan we have come to know in Taylor's saga. A young boy

when the story opens, Paul-Edward also has a sister named Cassie. They are the children of white plantation owner Edward Logan and Deborah, a formerly enslaved African Indian woman on the farm. So, Paul-Edward represents three heritages. Paul-Edward also has three white brothers, Edward's children from his previous marriage to a white woman. Quite a complicated family structure, especially since Edward tries to raise his children as equally as possible in a racist society.

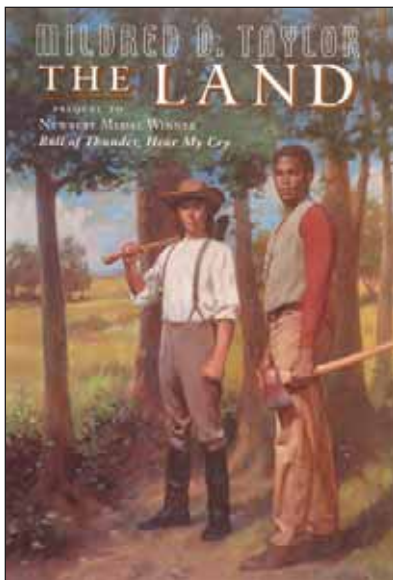
Paul-Edward feels caught between two worlds and not completely accepted by either. He is seen as acting superior to the blacks on the farm but also as being below the whites. He feels alienated, as if "there's not a thing I see here's mine." He gets beaten up by black kids for reading a book and taunted by white kids who assume he's their inferior. He cannot sit at the dinner table with his white

brothers when company comes, and he isn't allowed to call Mister Edward "Daddy."

He tells his white brother Hammond, "How could you know how it feels being caught between colored folks and white folks?" But one of the beauties of *The Land* is that it mines the layers and complexities of racism, including how it affects white characters, too. Hammond says, "I sure know how it feels to hate and resent our daddy, and I sure enough know how it feels to be caught between colored folks and white folks. I know how it feels too to resent the hell out of your own blood, your own brother and sister."

Hammond's mother died having his younger brother Robert, the same time Deborah had Paul-Edward, and Hammond had resented the children Paul-Edward's mother had with his father: "Fathering you and Cassie, then treating you the same as he did my mama's children, and making us watch out for the two of you." Mister Edward took the time to teach Paul-Edward and Cassie to read and write and expected Hammond, George, and Robert to share their school lessons with Cassie and Paul-Edward. Eventually, Hammond accepts his half-siblings. "I can promise you'll always be my family," he tells Paul-Edward.

Mitchell Thomas is not family. His family sharecrops on Logan land, and young Mitchell taunts and fights Paul-Edward. Over time and through hard times, the two boys become, if not friends, at least allies. As Paul-Edward



**Taylor, Mildred D.**  
*The Land*. 2001.  
 392p. Penguin/  
 Phyllis Fogelman,  
 \$17.99 (0-8037-  
 1950-7); Puffin,  
 paper, \$6.99 (0-14-  
 250146-8). Gr. 7-12.

gets older and realizes more about his place in the world, he says, “One day I’ll have a place like this. . . . I won’t be here, not here on my daddy’s land. One day I’ll have land of my own.”

When the boys go to a horse fair in east Texas with Mr. Logan, Paul-Edward wins a horse race but loses his home and family. He disobeys his father’s strict injunction against racing a stranger’s horse, and when the white owner refuses to pay him, Mitchell mugs the man. Both boys find themselves on the run, and they narrowly manage to escape on a train headed for the Deep South. Paul-Edward realizes “a part of my life was passing now, a part of my life I would never know again, the part of my life that was my daddy.”

After a succession of jobs—training horses, teaching, working lumber and turpentine camps, and doing carpentry—Paul-Edward finds his way to Vicksburg, where he will work as a carpenter. His first project is to make a rocking chair for Luke Perry’s wife, Rachel. Luke doesn’t have much money, but he has a farm, gardens, animals, and a houseful of children, including a high-spirited, opinionated teenage daughter named Caroline. Readers familiar with the Logan saga know she will be Cassie Logan’s grandmother, her father’s mother, known as Big Ma.

As Paul-Edward comes to know Caroline, he thinks of courting her but, in one of the surprises of the novel, Mitchell beats him to it. In the meantime, Paul-Edward makes a deal with Filmore Granger to clear 40 acres of land in two years. Mr. Granger gets the trees and Paul-Edward gets the land, but if Paul-Edward fails, he forfeits the land. Paul-Edward asks Mitchell to be his partner, and once Mitchell marries Caroline, they will live in a house on the land. If this is the plan, how does Caroline end up being Big Ma in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*? Paul-Edward’s quest for land does not develop according to plan, and he deals with violence, legal obstacles,

and loss in his efforts to achieve his dream. Though Paul-Edward faces obstacle after obstacle, he finds unexpected help from his mother, a white man named Charles Jamison, and his sister, Cassie.

## In the Classroom

One of the pleasures of reading this fine novel is recognizing how the young characters in *The Land* grow into the roles they play in Taylor’s Logan series, mostly set in the 1930s and early 1940s, and charting how the various pieces fit together. Readers who finish the whole series will have witnessed something remarkable, the saga of one family through the generations. It is an incredibly rich novel about family, racism, coming-of-age, leaving home, pursuing a dream, and finding something to call your own. *The Land* can be taught as a rich, complex novel all by itself, or it can be linked to other books with similar themes.

*The Land* can also be taught as a historical novel, rooted in the period known as Reconstruction, the decade or so after the Civil War when Union victory heralded a new future for America. It was a time when, as historian Eric Foner has written in *Who Owns History?* (Hill and Wang, 2002), “The national state became the protector of fundamental rights for all Americans.” More than 1,000 black men held public office during Radical Reconstruction (1867–77), schools were started all over the South, and social and constitutional changes were revolutionary. Though change may not have been as far-reaching or as long-lasting as necessary (making a second reconstruction necessary in the form of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s), it was, as Foner calls it, “a radical experiment in interracial democracy.” Following the discussion questions and teaching strategies below are several sources that can help teachers provide the historical context for *The Land*.

Listed below are articles from past issues of *Book Links* about Mildred Taylor’s Logan family series. For information on how to obtain back issues, see p.3.

- “*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor,” January 1995, p.12
- “*Mississippi 1941: The Road to Memphis* by Mildred D. Taylor,” January 2004, p.35

## Discussion Questions (Oral and Written)

### “Mitchell”

- Describe the relationship between Paul-Edward and Mitchell.
- Explain Paul-Edward’s place in his family.

### “The Stallion”

- Describe the Appaloosa incident and explain how the relationship between Paul-Edward and Mitchell begins to change after it.

### “Family”

- Explain why Paul-Edward and Cassie don’t call Mister Edward “Daddy.”
- Explain why Paul-Edward’s family life is different from his brothers’ because he is a “boy of color,” as his father says.
- Compare and contrast Paul-Edward’s and Hammond’s attitudes toward their family. What does Cassie have to say about it?
- Explain how racism affects the white characters.

### “Betrayal”

- Explain why Mister Edward whips Paul-Edward.

## Web Connections

The Web sites listed below, as well as additional Web sites about Reconstruction, can be accessed through the *Book Links* Web site at <http://www.ala.org/BookLinks>. Click on the “Web Connections” link to access the list. The sites were verified at the time of publication, but please check that they remain valid before using them in an educational setting.

- The *Library of Congress’ Learning Page* at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/learn/index.html> is a fine resource for any number of American history topics. Users can explore “Lesson Plans,” “Features and Activities,” and “Collection Connections” for a range of student projects and a wealth of information on Reconstruction, which could be used for reports to supplement a reading of *The Land*.
- “*African American Odyssey*” at <http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohml/exhibit/aointro.html> details African American history through the collections of documents, manuscripts, maps, and photographs of the *Library of Congress’ American Memory Project*. One section is devoted to Reconstruction.
- “*Unfinished Business: Making Democracy Work for Everyone*,” part of *Schools of California Resources for Education* at <http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/activity/unbusiness/>, is a challenging project in which students cooperate to solve some of the major problems of the Reconstruction period, such as segregation, voting restrictions, educational discrimination, lynching, and mob violence. Included are book and resource lists and suggestions for teachers.

- Explain why Paul-Edward says he has lost his brother and his best friend.

### “East Texas”

- Explain why Paul-Edward and Mitchell end up running away on a train headed for the Deep South.

### “The Land”

- List the jobs Paul-Edward has had.
- Show how the relationship between Paul-Edward and Mitchell has changed.

### “Caroline”

- Describe Caroline Perry.
- Explain why Mrs. Perry gave Paul-Edward such a cold greeting.

### “The Bargain”

- Describe the bargain made between Paul-Edward and Filmore Granger.
- Compare and contrast Harlan Granger and Wade Jamison.
- Referring to Robert, Paul-Edward says, “I wondered if he’d changed as much as I.” Explain how Paul-Edward has changed.

### “The Promise”

- Describe Paul-Edward’s promise to Mitchell.
- Explain the deal Paul-Edward made with J. T. Hollenbeck.
- Show how the events of this chapter have tested Paul-Edward’s character.

### “Family”

- Describe the reunion of Robert and Paul-Edward. Has time healed their wounded relationship?
- Explain how Paul-Edward finally gets the land in spite of Filmore Granger’s cheating.

### Epilogue

- Demonstrate how Paul-Edward’s attitude toward his family has changed since the first chapter. What does it indicate that the names of his white brothers have been passed down the Logan family tree?

### Teaching Strategies

Select one or two of the following:

- Have students select a dramatic scene from the novel and write it as a one-act play. Have them decide on a few scenes to perform for the class.
- Using the first paragraph of “Family” as a model, ask students to write a brief description of a place they love.
- Read aloud one or all of the following titles to supplement *The Land*: *Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys* by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard, *More Than Anything Else* by Marie Bradby, *A Band of Angels* by Deborah Hopkinson, *The Wagon* by Tony Johnston, and *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule* by Harriette Gillem Robinet. (See bibliography for more information.)
- Ask students to turn the last three paragraphs of the “Childhood” section into a poem by using key phrases from the text and adding

any necessary words. Or, using Naomi Shihab Nye's anthology *What Have You Lost?* (Harper-Tempest, 2001), have students try writing a poem from either Paul-Edward's point of view or their own describing the idea of "What have you lost?"

- Use the description of the landscape on p.159 as a model for students' writings about peaceful moments.
- After "The Bargain," read aloud Taylor's *The Friendship* (Dial, 1987), which revisits Tom Bee and John Wallace.
- Read aloud Langston Hughes' poem "Cross" and have students write a paper demonstrating how it reflects important themes in the novel.
- Read aloud Nikki Grimes' *Talkin' about Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman* (Orchard, 2002). Have students use it as a model for their own project of writing a series of poetic monologues celebrating Paul-Edward's accomplishments. Students can select three or four characters from *The Land*, write monologues modeled upon Grimes' book, and illustrate covers for their collections.
- Have students write papers showing how Paul-Edward has changed from the beginning to the end of the novel. They ought to examine the way he was raised, the obstacles he faced in trying to achieve his dream of owning land, the strengths of character he demonstrated, and how his feelings about family changed over the years.
- Read the first 10 chapters of Joy Hakim's *Reconstructing America: 1865–1890* with students as a supplement to *The Land*, or di-

vide up chapters among students and have them prepare brief oral reports on their chapters.

## Selected Books on the Reconstruction Period

Bolden, Tonya. *Cause: Reconstruction America 1863–1877*. 2005. 128p. Knopf, \$19.95 (0-375-82795-1).

Gr. 4–8. Bolden's latest offering is a fine resource, providing the full story of Reconstruction for young readers. The handsome volume is well researched, fully illustrated, and well written.

Bradby, Marie. *More Than Anything Else*. Illus. by Chris K. Soentpiet. 1995. 32p. Orchard, \$15.95 (0-531-09464-2).

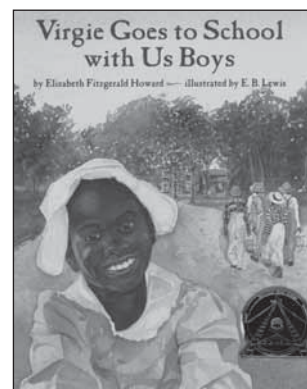
Gr. 1–4. This is a beautiful picture book about young Booker T. Washington's thirst to read, something he wants to do more than anything else. This excellent read-aloud can inspire classes to write their own group or collaborative poems about what they want to do more than anything else, each student contributing a line beginning with, "More than anything else I . . ."

Greene, Meg. *Into the Land of Freedom: African Americans in Reconstruction*. 2004. 112p. Lerner, \$26.60 (0-8225-4690-6).

Gr. 5–8. This is an excellent photo-essay about the Reconstruction era, demonstrating how freed African Americans remade their families, received wages for their work, set up schools and churches, and voted, all while facing continued racism.

Hakim, Joy. *Reconstructing America: 1865–1890*. 2002. 160p. Oxford, \$19.95 (0-19-515331-6); paper, \$15.95 (0-19-515332-4).

Gr. 4–9. Hakim's series offers one of the best examples of history writing for young people. Part of the multivolume A History of US series, this title covers Radical Reconstruction and goes on to focus on various



**Three picture books that portray the aspirations of African Americans during Reconstruction: *More Than Anything Else* by Marie Bradby, *Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys* by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard, and *A Band of Angels* by Deborah Hopkinson.**

other ways America was reconstructed from 1865 to 1890: westward expansion, inventions, railroads, and social movements. Very accessible, the volumes cry out to be used with historical novels in the classroom.

Hansen, Joyce. *I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl*. 1997. 208p. Scholastic, \$10.95 (0-590-84913-1).

Gr. 4–9. The Freedman's Bureau and the struggle for schooling and land are at the heart of Patsy's story in this fine novel from the Dear America series, told in a diary format with photographs and historical notes.

Haskins, Jim. *Separate but Not Equal: The Dream and the Struggle*. 1998. 192p. Scholastic, paper, \$4.99 (0-590-45911-2).

Gr. 7–10. Haskins starts with Little Rock, then goes back in time to present a survey of the struggle for an

equal education, from the illegality of slaves' learning to read to the current debate over affirmative action.

Hopkinson, Deborah. *A Band of Angels*. Illus. by Raúl Colón. 1999. 40p. Simon & Schuster/Atheneum, \$16.95 (0-689-81062-8); Aladdin, paper, \$6.99 (0-689-84887-0).

Gr. 1–8. Hopkinson is a master of the picture-book form, and this is picture-book making at its best—beautifully written and illustrated, and telling the important story of the Jubilee Singers' efforts to keep the all-black Fisk School from closing.

Howard, Elizabeth Fitzgerald. *Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys*. Illus. by E. B. Lewis. 2000. 32p. Simon & Schuster, \$16 (0-689-80076-2); Aladdin, paper, \$6.99 (0-689-87793-5).

Gr. 2–9. Howard's attractive picture book is based on the true family story of her grandfather and his

siblings walking to a Quaker school established after the Civil War. This is a stirring tribute to schools that served as the first rung for former slaves determined to make their way in a free society. Lewis' memorable watercolor illustrations are gorgeous.

Johnston, Tony. *The Wagon*. Illus. by James E. Ransome. 1996. 32p. Taborine, o.p.

Gr. 2–8. Another superb picture-book complement to *The Land*, this is the story of a father and son who make a wagon for their master and, when emancipation comes, ride off to freedom in it, pulled by two mules, Swing and Low. On the way to freedom, they head to Washington to pay tribute to President Lincoln, who has just been assassinated.

Lester, Julius. *To Be a Slave*. Illus. by Tom Feelings. 1968. 168p. Dial, \$20 (0-8037-2347-4); Puffin, paper, \$6.99 (0-14-131001-4).

Gr. 4–8. This classic collection of slave narratives is drawn from nineteenth-century accounts and from interviews with ex-slaves by the Federal Writers' Project during the 1930s. Lester provides commentary and historical context throughout, and Feelings' paintings are a perfect complement to the text.

Robinet, Harriette Gillem. *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule*. 1998. 144p. Simon & Schuster/Jean Karl, \$16.95 (0-689-82078-X); Aladdin, paper, \$4.99 (0-689-83317-2).

Gr. 4–7. Winner of the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction, this brief, powerful novel brings to life the people and the times immediately after the Civil War, people claiming a place of their own and the right to attend school.

*Dean Schneider* teaches seventh- and eighth-grade English at the Ensworth School in Nashville, Tennessee.

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by Denia Lewis Hester  
Illustrated by Jackie Urbanovic

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