

## Discussion Questions for *A Long Way From Chicago* by Richard Peck

Galesburg Public Library Tuesday Book Club

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### Commentary by Richard Peck (from penguin.com)

Once in a while in a long writing career, one character rises off the page and takes on special life. So it happened with Grandma Dowdel in *A Long Way from Chicago* and again in *A Year Down Yonder*. Meant to be larger than life, she became all too lifelike. The letters came in at once: "Was she YOUR grandmother", they ask? Did my own grandmother fire off both barrels of a shotgun in her own front room? Did she pour warm glue on the head of a hapless Halloween? Did she spike the punch at a DAR tea? Well, no. Writers aren't given much credit for creativity.

Yet writing is the quest for roots, and I draw on my earliest memories of visiting my grandmother in a little town cut by the tracks of the Wabash Railroad. It was, in fact, Cerro Gordo, Illinois. I use that town in my stories, though I never name it, wanting readers to think of small towns they know.

The house in the stories is certainly my grandma's; with the snowball bushes crowding the bay window and the fly strip heavy with corpses hanging down over the oilcloth kitchen table, and the path back to the privy.

I even borrow my grandmother's physical presence. My grandmother was six feet tall with a fine crown of thick white hair, and she wore aprons the size of Alaska. But she wasn't Grandma Dowdel. When you're a writer, you can give yourself the grandma you wished you had.

Perhaps she's popular with readers because she isn't an old lady at all. Maybe she's a teenager in disguise. After all, she believes the rules are for other people. She always wants her own way. And her best friend and worst enemy is the same person [Mrs. Wilcox]. Sounds like adolescence to me, and even more like puberty.

But whoever she is, she's an individual. Young readers need stories of rugged individualism because most of them live in a world completely ruled by peer-group conformity.

### From a Scholastic Interview (from scholastic.com):

**We're very curious about what happened to Grandma's parents and why she had to live with Aunt Puss?**

I took her circumstances, but not her personality, from my grandmother. My grandmother was the sole survivor of a smallpox epidemic. As an infant she was found alive in a house with two dead parents and a dead twin sister beside her in the crib. She lived to be 93. That's really why Grandma Dowdel had to live with Aunt Puss, but I don't give out that story because it's too serious for the book. And no one has ever asked that question before.

**Was there really a family like the Cowgill brothers?**

Absolutely in every small town, there is a band of bullying brothers. I've never been in a small town where there wasn't. Big, mean, and dumb.

**Why did you choose to have each chapter in *A Long Way From Chicago* based around an event rather than having the whole book unfold as a series of events? We noticed that each chapter was complete and could stand by itself.**

Yes, the reason is, it was inspired by a short story. Since the first one was a short story, my editor said, why not do a collection of short stories about Grandma. And so that gave me the idea of having each story a summer apart from the last one, so we could see Grandma, who never changes in the eyes of her grandchildren, who do change. Leading to that last moment in the book when you see the real woman.

### **What females inspired you to develop your female characters?**

Certainly, Grandma Dowdel speaks in the voices of all my great aunts, farm women born in the 1860s and 70s who ruled the world from their kitchens, spoke in her cadences, and wore her aprons. They were a big inspiration, as well was a great movie actress from my childhood named Marjorie Main.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. This novel is made up of several short stories, one for each summer that Joey and Mary Alice visited Grandma. What did you like about this short story approach?
2. Which story was your favorite and why?
3. Why do Joey and Mary Alice's parents think it's important that they get to know their Grandma. What kind of mother do you think Grandma Dowdel was to Joey and Mary Alice's father? Joey says that Grandma frightens his mother--Grandma's daughter-in-law. What characteristics of Grandma make her so frightening?
4. Joe Dowdel is an adult sharing his memories of Grandma Dowdel. He says, "Are all my memories true? Every word, and growing truer with the years." (p. 1) What does Joe mean when he says, "growing truer with years?" What kind of relationship do you think Joe Dowdel has with his grandchildren? Discuss whether the summers spent with Grandma Dowdel might have shaped the kind of grandfather he became.
5. Why does Mary Alice say, "**I don't think Grandma's a very good influence on us**"? (p. 61) How is she a good influence on her grandchildren? Is Grandma is a "bad influence" or a "good role model"?
6. Does Grandma tell lies or stories? What's the difference between the two?
7. Grandma Dowdel never seems to shows affection. How do you know that she loves her grandchildren?
8. This book is a Newbery Honor book. What about it makes it Newbery worthy? (The Newbery Medal is awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children.)
9. Why does Grandma Dowdel display the body of Shotgun Cheatham in her parlor? Discuss what Grandma means when she says, "A rumor is sometimes truth on the trail." (p. 115)
10. During their visit in 1931, Joey and Mary Alice realize that Grandma Dowdel runs illegal fish traps. They vow never to tell their dad about this. Discuss what other things Joey and Mary Alice discover about Grandma that they are likely to keep to themselves. Why does Sheriff Dickerson call Grandma a "**one-woman crime-wave**"? (p. 57)

11. One of Grandma's weapons is blackmail. Discuss the numerous times in the novel that she uses blackmail to help people. What does the phrase "larger than life" mean? How does this fit Grandma?
12. During which summer do you think Joey and Mary Alice learn the true character of Grandma?
13. Joey says, "**As the years went by, we'd seem to see a different woman every summer.**" (p.1) Discuss whether it's Grandma that changes, or Joey and Mary Alice.
14. How do Mary Alice and Joey change over the years? How does the town change?
15. Why do you think Grandma takes care of Aunt Puss?
16. Grandma often tells people that Mary Alice and Joey are, "from Chicago, so they've seen everything." Is this true? Or do they see more in the country than in the city?
17. Why did Grandma really enter the county fair pie contest?
18. In the beginning of the book, Joey says that Grandma "wasn't what you'd call a popular woman." (pg. 5). Is this true? How does Grandma play a part in town life?
19. Is it true that Grandma Dowdel doesn't "give two hoots about the town"?
20. Even though they never appear in the story, what do you think Joe's and Mary Alice's parents are like? What clues can you find in the story to their personalities?
21. Explain what Grandma Dowdel means by "apart from its historical significance" on page 117.
22. Who is the better role model for the kids: O.B. Dickerson or Grandma Dowdel? Why? What is a role model supposed to provide?
23. Look at young Weidenbach's song at the end of the book. What is its message? Is it the same message of the book?