

Name: _____

Date: _____

A Letter to the class from Betsy Byars

Dear Class,

When I was growing up, I did not want to be a writer, but I had one thing in common with every writer I know. I loved books.

The whole family knew how much I loved to read, so I got books for my birthday, books for Christmas. At Christmas I would sneak the books out from under the tree, one by one, carefully unwrap them, read them, and stick them back under the tree. I just couldn't wait.

In those days I read for one reason – to find out what was going to happen. Would the black stallion be captured? Would the boys find the pirate's treasure? Did the mummy speak?

I still read a lot, but I read differently now. I want to know what's going to happen, of course, but I also want to find out how the writer made it happen. If a writer makes me feel sad or excited, I read that part again and again until I see how the writer did it. For example, a writer makes a scene move faster by using more dialogue than description. Reading carefully is how I learned how to write.

Whether you read to find out what's going to happen or because you, too, are interested in writing, I hope you've found lots of good books this year. And, yes, I still open anything that looks like a book immediately. I still can't wait.

Happy Reading!

Betsy Byars

1. According to the letter, how has reading parts of books helped Betsy Byars become a better writer?
 - A. It has shown her how other authors create excitement and a fast pace.
 - B. It has given her ideas for books.
 - C. She has met other authors.
 - D. It has shown her that the purpose of writing is to tell what happens.

2. Which piece of advice would Betsy Byars give to someone who wants to be a good writer?
 - A. write letters to authors
 - B. ask for books as gifts
 - C. read a lot
 - D. always plan your ending first

3. What about Betsy Byars has probably NOT changed over the years?
 - A. her love of books
 - B. the way she writes
 - C. the characters she writes about
 - D. the way she reads

Journey to Freedom

by Jim Shively

While Jeb tried to sleep on his straw mattress on the dirt floor of his home in Louisiana, he heard Ma, Pa, Aunt Beulah, and Uncle Noah talking about a better life. Uncle Noah was a plantation clerk and could read most of the words on the flyer he had seen posted in town. The poster promised free land, mules, a plow, and money to those who could get to Kansas. Uncle Noah convinced the family to move.

The steamboat ride up the Mississippi River to St. Louis, Missouri, was exciting. In St. Louis, they boarded a steamboat that carried them up the Missouri River. But as they continued westward across Missouri, the family heard rumors that the Kansas promises were untrue. Pa began to worry.

The weather turned wet and cold. Uncle Noah and Jeb got sick. At Wyandotte, Kansas, Jeb heard officials say they could not land there with a boatload of sick people. By the time they got to Leavenworth, twenty-one of one hundred thirty travelers were ill. Jeb slowly recovered, but Uncle Noah continued to cough and said his chest hurt.

The ride to Ellis, Kansas, on the Kansas Pacific Railroad thrilled Jeb. But the last leg of their journey required long days of walking many miles across Kansas, and Uncle Noah needed to rest often.

One night, they camped along a creek. Jeb woke up coughing and listened for Uncle Noah's hoarse breathing. Instead, he heard Aunt Beulah sobbing. Uncle Noah had died. Jeb helped his father dig Uncle Noah's shallow grave. They had barely finished covering it with rocks when it began to rain. It would be better to turn back than to continue on this miserable journey, Jeb thought.

In the morning, the family continued to travel north. Along the way, Jeb spotted a cow stuck in a thicket. He pulled her out. When he gently tugged on the worn rope hanging around her neck, she willingly followed him.

Pa finally claimed land along a quiet stream. He and Jeb built a lean-to of willow branches so the family would have temporary shelter from the weather. Then they dug a hole into the side of a hill that was three feet deep, fourteen feet wide, and sixteen feet high. With Aunt Beulah and Ma, Jeb built walls and plastered the inside with mud. Jeb cut into three-foot pieces the damp sod that his father had plowed to clear land for crops. They piled sod over branches to roof their new house. Although the roof leaked and snakes, rodents, and insects lived there with them, they finally had their first home in Kansas!

In June, the corn and wheat they had managed to plant were knee-high. But then swarms of grasshoppers appeared. Jeb hoped the wind would blow them away, but when he went to the fields to hoe, he felt sick seeing hordes of the insects attacking the grain. All their hard work would be destroyed, Jeb thought. Fortunately, Pa managed to plant sorghum, which ripened in late fall.

During their first winter in Kansas, the blizzard winds howled. Jeb wondered if the sod roof would hold the drifting snow. He worried about his cow and how she would stay warm in the lean-to that was her shelter. Outside, Jeb thought he would freeze while shoveling a path to feed her.

By early April, the family's stored food was almost gone. Pa calmed Jeb's inner fear—he told him they would not butcher the cow. They burned buffalo chips for warmth, and the cow ate nearly all the livestock food. Jeb dug through the snow to get dried grass to twist for fuel and to feed his animal.

With the first warm days of spring, Pa and Jeb hurried to cut up more sod to make room for new crops. They used some of the sod pieces to repair the house. Pa hoped the melting snow would be enough water for the crops. Jeb came home from school every day and worked on the farm with Pa. The seeds that they planted sprouted, but then weeks without rain caused the crops to wither and die. Replanting would work only if the rains came.

One day, while looking out the school window, Jeb saw a prairie fire in the distance. The new teacher from the East did not know what to do, but Jeb did. He found a rake with a broken handle and some croker sacks that were used to cover the windows in cold weather. Jeb raked parched grass to make a bare area on the windward side to slow the advance of the fire. He choked from smoke as the fire came closer. Job shouted to the other children to carry water and beat out the flames with wet sacks. Sparks singed his hair, but he kept working. Jeb almost cried with relief when he saw men and horses pulling plows and rakes to attack the fire. When Jeb looked up, he could see rain clouds beginning to form in the distance.

Jeb, son of parents who had been born into slavery and were now free, was a hero! His quick thinking had saved the school. Life would never be easy in the West, but the family had survived its first year.

4. Why did Jeb's family decide to go to Kansas?

- A. Pa promised them that they would be happier there.
 - B. They thought it would be a good adventure.
 - C. Members of their family already lived there.
 - D. They wanted a better life and thought they would find it there.
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5. The family's first home in Kansas had walls made of

- A. mud.
 - B. branches.
 - C. straw.
 - D. logs.
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6. How did the fire at Jeb's school MOST LIKELY get put out in the end?

- A. The children put it out.
 - B. Jeb put it out.
 - C. A rainstorm and men with plows and rakes put it out.
 - D. It went out by itself after it burned all the grass around the school.
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Guardian

Tina decided to buy a dog to protect her house. First, she went to a dog show to look at different kinds of dogs. The people at the dog show recommended several types of dogs, including Doberman pinschers, chows, and German shepherds. Then Tina went to several pet stores and asked for more information about each type of dog. After much thought, Tina got a German shepherd.

Before she brought her new pet home, Tina purchased a large bed, several toys, a collar and leash, and some food. Within the first week, Tina took her new dog, Guardian, to a local veterinarian to begin the necessary round of shots for new puppies. When Guardian was six months old, Tina enrolled him in obedience school twice a week to teach him good behavior. After Tina spent her hard earned money, much time, and hard work, she was rewarded with a great pet and a guard dog all in one.

7. Which BEST describes the dog's behavior?
- A. bad
 - B. obedient
 - C. mean
 - D. silly
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8. In deciding what kind of dog to buy, what did Tina do first?
- A. She visited pet stores.
 - B. She went to a dog show.
 - C. She talked to dog trainers.
 - D. She asked for information about dogs.
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9. When Guardian was six months old, Tina
- A. found him in a pet store.
 - B. entered him in his first dog show.
 - C. began taking him to obedience school.
 - D. took him to a veterinarian for the first time.
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10. Tina took her dog to a veterinarian because the dog
- A. was sick.
 - B. needed shots.
 - C. was six months old.
 - D. needed training.

Answer Key

1. A) It has shown her how other authors create excitement and a fast pace.
2. C) read a lot
3. A) her love of books
4. D) They wanted a better life and thought they would find it there.
5. A) mud.
6. C) A rainstorm and men with plows and rakes put it out.
7. B) obedient
8. B) She went to a dog show.
9. C) began taking him to obedience school.
10. B) needed shots.