

Running Out of Time

Concept Analysis

Literary Text: *Running Out of Time* by Margaret Peterson Haddix (Aladdin Paperbacks edition)

Summary:

Thirteen-year-old Jessie Keyser was raised in Clifton, Indiana, as though it were the 1840s. When a Diphtheria epidemic strikes Clifton, Jessie's mother lets her in on the secret: Clifton is really an attraction for tourists of the 1990s. Citizens of Clifton are being filmed and thousands of tourists are able to watch every thing that happens in Clifton. The Diphtheria epidemic endangers several children in the village, but the owners of the site do not allow modern medicine to be used. Jessie's mother helps Jessie escape from Clifton to find help in Indianapolis. After a series of mishaps and dangerous situations as Jessie tries to make sense of the modern world, she is finally able to call a press conference and bring attention to the situation in Clifton. Police break in, the children are taken to a hospital, and the whole case is under investigation. The book ends with the return of Jessie to her family, and the promise of a good, safe future.

Organizational Patterns:

Running Out of Time is divided into twenty-five chapters, none of which are given titles. The chapters average 6-8 pages apiece. Chapters 1-5 comprise events and exposition in the actual village of Clifton, and the rest of the book details Jessie adventures in the twentieth century.

The Central Question/Enduring Issue

Will Jessie be able to get help in time? This is very clearly the most important issue in the book. Jessie's mission to get help-and medicine- is crucial to the lives of several children, all of which are either friends, classmates, and siblings. Their survival is up to Jessie. It doesn't seem like it would be too difficult to get the help of community authorities like doctors or policemen, but because Jessie is unfamiliar with the world of 1996, even using a phone is a struggle, and Jessie is wary of trusting anyone. The simplest tasks take more time than they should just because of Jessie's ignorance of the modern world. This adds urgency to the question, and leads the reader to think solely about the success of the mission, and the survival of Jessie and the sick children.

Issues Related to the Study of Literature:

THEME:

Trust. As Jessie makes her way into the modern world, one of her biggest struggles is deciding whom she can trust, and whom she should avoid. Many random strangers who offer to help her on the street and are given the cold shoulder because she fears that they are trying to catch her and bring her back to Clifton. In the end, she must get past this issue to save her sister and friends. There is a woman on a city bus who she chooses to trust and talk to, and by doing so, she learns about press conferences and how to use a phone book to contact the Board of Health. These two actions lead directly to the success of her mission. This also brings in to play ideas about innocence and naivety.

Time. The entire novel is based on the concept of time. The title, “Running Out of Time” has a dual meaning that is carried throughout the novel. It represents both Jessie’s emergence into a different century and the rush that she is in to get medicine and help back to Clifton. She is literally running out of time in both senses. This dual meaning brings an interesting flavor to the book. The reader is allowed to explore the contrast between centuries: different lifestyles, hobbies, struggles, and priorities that are established because of technology, wealth, and population. On the other hand, it also leaves the reader very conscious of time and the way it is used. Jessie is in such an incredible hurry that the novel leaves the reader in a hurry.

Caution vs. Bravery. Jessie continually deals with this dichotomy as she struggles to complete her task. She knows that she must be brave, but somehow she feels that when she is careful, she stops being brave. She constantly reminds herself of her older sister, the cautious one in the family. In the end, Jessie realizes that courage and bravery is doing what needs to be done while taking the care while going about it.

SETTING:

Running Out of Time is set in Indiana. Clifton is located thirty-four miles from Indianapolis. The exact distance is never explained because Jessie is completely unaware of where she is and how things work, and her mother is confused about exactly where they are. Jessie eventually goes to Indiana, exploring at least one residential area, and then walking around downtown until she finds the capitol building. The last couple of chapters are set in a hospital where Jessie and the other sick children are recovering from diphtheria.

The book is also given two different time settings, although it is 1996 for the whole book. The village of Clifton appears completely as a small frontier town would appear in the 1840s. Jessie, then, experiences both cultures and time settings.

POINT OF VIEW/NARRATIVE VOICE:

The novel is written in a third person limited point of view, through the eyes of Jessie Keyser. Because she is so young and naïve of the world around her, the narrative is very cautious and innocent, yet also stubborn and headstrong. Jessie is a very confident girl. She always saw herself as brave until she is presented with the task of saving her friends. The reader experiences her fears and shortcomings, and celebrates her successes. It is interesting to be inside the head of a character who is just

experiencing the technology of the twentieth century. Using the phone, the idea of a city bus, the electricity inside houses and the Clifton viewing museum- all of these things are incredible concepts for Jessie to swallow, and the narrative voice captures that.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

Many middle school-aged students will be able to identify with Jessie because she stands out so much. She is very different from those who surround her when she enters the twentieth century, and she is very aware and self-conscious of those differences. Many adolescents feel the same way about their surroundings. Sometimes it is very hard to fit in. Jessie struggles with this, and because of that element of her character, she is relatable.

In addition, Jessie has a large family. Those students with large families can relate to both the struggles that Jessie has with her brothers and sisters, and to the love that she has for them. Jessie loves her little sister Katie the most, and many students, I think, will be able to relate to that favoritism.

Jessie's confusion about trust and dependability is also easily relatable. It is an issue that everyone deals with, albeit that Jessie's case is a little more intense than most. Jessie has to force herself to trust the kindness and goodwill of strangers, when they have given her no reason to trust them, but every reason NOT to trust them. It is an internal conflict that Jessie has, and it relates very well with real human emotion. It is hard to trust when you have been burned or when you are entirely ignorant of social norms and customs.

Jessie also struggles with her identity. She imagines herself as a thirteen-year-old girl from the 1840s, a daughter of the town blacksmith, and bravest child of her five siblings. However, once she learns of the world of 1996, her identity goes into crisis. Everything that she had felt secure about turns is put in turmoil. She is no longer a girl of the 19th century. She is not as brave as she thought. Or as confident. She realizes that the blacksmithing her father does is for tourists. This identity crisis is something that adolescents can relate to. It can help them understand that sometimes a person just needs to figure things out and become the person they want to be.

Jessie's struggles with being different, her large family, trust, and her identity are all issues that will help adolescents relate to Jessie and *Running Out of Time* as a whole.

Vocabulary Issues

The vocabulary in this novel is very simple. It is well suited fourth-sixth grade levels. Historical terms are often explained, and very few words fall outside a normal middle-grader's vocabulary. There are cases, however, where vocabulary is more difficult. These can be used as points of discussion. One example of this is found on page 64: "voyeuristic." It is a big word, but it is explained in the next couple sentences. Readers can learn to take cues from the text and figure out meaning in context rather than get discouraged.

Background Knowledge

Knowledge of traditions and technology of the 1840s is necessary for the book to have the full affect. Students need to understand how Jessie and her family have been living to appreciate her shock upon entering the modern world. A history lesson in the case of this book then, would be necessary.

Some issues that would be helpful for students to understand are:

- Abolition: the abolitionist movement was a big deal in the nineteenth century, as was the fight to preserve slavery. A discussion on these issues would help explain Jessie's reaction upon seeing a black student at the Clifton museum. Some noted individuals are: William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass. Also, students should make a connection with regards to how the abolitionist crusade reinforced and challenged common understandings of freedom in Jacksonian America. A discussion of how abolitionist reform and efforts affected the future of the United States would also be interesting. This includes, but is not limited to, the Civil War. Also, an interesting aside that would include ideas about abolition *and* westward expansion, you could talk about the Compromise of 1850.
- Andrew Jackson: The campaign, policies, administration, affect of his decisions. Each of these factors are important to the story. Andrew Jackson is mentioned multiple times in the book. In fact, Jessie's father is noted as an ardent supporter of Andrew Jackson. Some notable issues to be mentioned: his massive popularity, reputation as a self-made man and rough-and-tumble dueler, events like the nullification crisis, trail of tears (Indian Removal Act), and the bank crisis (Jackson refused to renew the charter of the federal bank), and events that his policies led to, like the Panic of 1837. A discussion of how point of view changes as time passes would be interesting for students in this example. While Andrew Jackson was massively popular in his day, he is no longer seen as so great. Talk about why.
- The Age of Reform/Utopian Societies: Throughout 1820-1840, there were several attempts at reform in the United States. These included women's activism and abolition, but they also included attempts at the formation of a Utopian society. This is an interesting topic for background information, because in a way, Clifton was set up as such a place. The citizens of Clifton only interacted with each other, and literally left the rest of the world behind, much like people in the 1840s who joined Utopian societies. Some examples of these societies include: the Shakers, Oneida, the Owenites and New Harmony, and Brook Farm.
- Westward expansion: Because Clifton is supposedly a western community of recent settlers, a discussion of manifest destiny and westward expansion is very necessary. Examples of communities settled at the time of manifest destiny include: the plight of the Mormons

through Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and then to Utah, Oregon, California, Texas (can include the war for Texan independence and its eventual statehood), issues with Mexico for borders and land, and the changes that took place in Indian territory due to American settlers.

- A discussion of the world of 1996 would also be good. ☺
- Background information on diphtheria and the potential dangers of epidemics- especially without the convenience (and blessing) of modern medicine- should also be discussed.

Source: Foner, Eric. *Give Me Liberty!*. 1. New York: W W Norton & Co Inc, 2006. 303-436. Print. ---(Chapters 10, 12, and 13)

Implications for Students of Diversity

Running Out of Time is not a long book. It has short chapters, and the concepts are easy to understand. Students who struggle with reading it will at least be able to understand the gist of the story, but they may need help getting through the pages. Discussions of the historical background will help with comprehension, and having students work with partners to discuss what they have read will help accommodate struggling readers.

Issues with ethnicity are very few. Teaching the historical background may be a little more difficult with students who were not raised in American homes and enrolled in American history classes, but that only makes the discussion of history in the novel that much more important.

Gender Issues

Gender issues are only vaguely addressed. Haddix would have had plenty of opportunity to discuss the roles of males and females in the 1840s and compare them with more modern gender roles, but the issue is avoided. The reader understands that Jessie's mother is a nurse for patients in the night, and her father is the village blacksmith, but the contrast in roles and the relationship that the parents have in their home is not discussed. In addition, Jessie's experience in schools and in the community of Clifton made not actually be realistic to its supposed time. There is no difference between the way she is treated in the 1840s and in 1996. In reality, the difference should be noticeable. Part of the reason for this avoidance, actually, is probably an attempt to be relatable to both boys and girls. Young boys would not necessary want to get caught up in gender issues. Thus, Haddix ultimately avoids the issue.

Research Issues/Project Ideas

A Day in the 1840s. Either before beginning study of this novel, or after it is complete, have the students dress up as children from the 1840s, and act out the school

day with traditions from schools in that era. Doing this activity would help the students to understand what living in the 1840s was like. As a teacher, you can imitate the rules and regulations of 1840s schools, and require students to recite states and presidents, just as Jessie does in the novel. Trying some naturally and authentically made food would also add to the atmosphere. Part of the day could be spent learning about the careers that men and women had in the 1840s. Students could learn about blacksmiths, farmers, bakers, butchers, etc.

Attitude of Gratitude. Requiring the students to produce an essay that discusses the differences in availability of resources and modern conveniences could be a lesson in gratitude. Simply having the students imagine living without an air conditioner or a car to drive in would get them talking about the book. Allow time for students to think about what life would be like, and have them write a short essay on the topic. Students can also think about what they would be willing to give up, and what would be most important to them if they were in Jessie's situation.

Other essay/discussion questions: What do you think has changed the most during those 175 years? If you met someone in Jessie's situation, how would you explain everything to him or her?

Enrichment Resources

- Other books by Margaret Peterson Haddix: *Among the Hidden* (series of seven books), *Sent*, *Claim to Fame*, *Just Ella*, *The Girl with 500 Middle Names*, etc. See her website for a full listing, and more information (discussion questions) on *Running Out of Time*: <http://www.haddixbooks.com/home.html>
- United States history texts (like the one listed above)
- Websites geared specifically towards *Running Out of Time*: <http://library.thinkquest.org/J0110073/index.html>
- If the age group is old enough, M. Knight Shayamalan's *The Village* is very similar in concept to *Running Out of Time*. The movie puts an interesting twist on the book. This movie should not ever be viewed in class, but it could be offered as an interesting option if the students like the story in the book.
- Historical fiction novels.

