By Hook or by Crook

A Reading A–Z Level Z1 Leveled Book
Word Count: 2,307

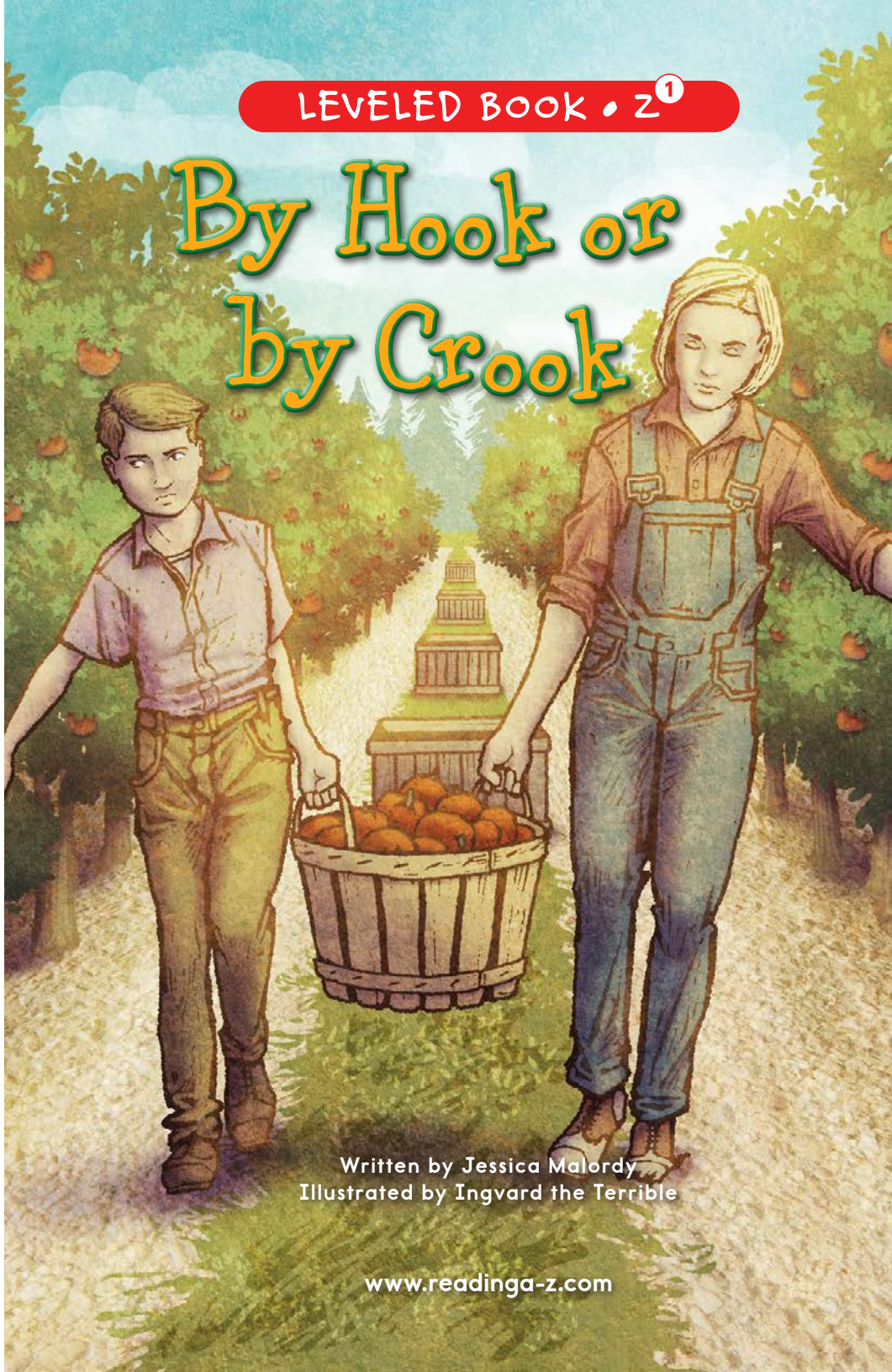
Connections

Writing

Research the phrase "by hook or by crook." Write an essay explaining why Ruth uses this phrase in the story.

Social Studies

On their train ride, Charlie and Ruth travel through the Dust Bowl region. Research the Dust Bowl, when and where it took place, and its causes and effects. Create a presentation to share your findings.



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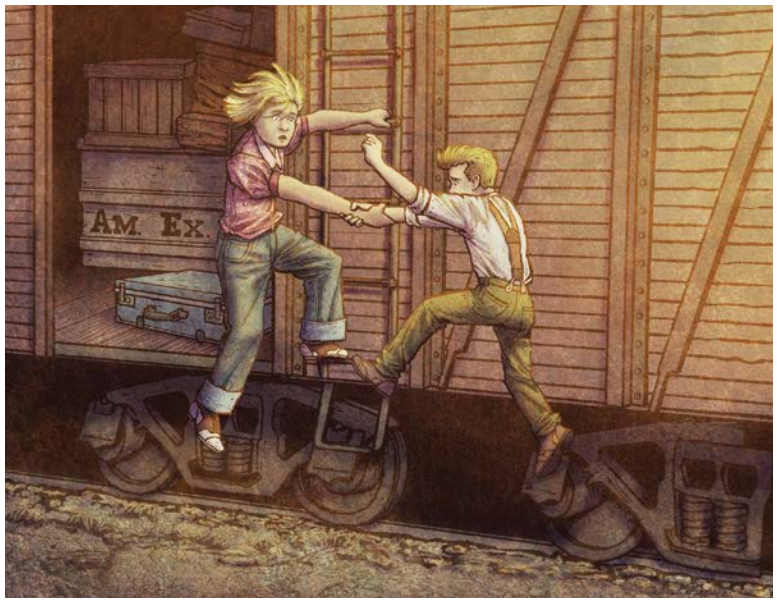

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Illustrated by Ingvard the Terrible

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Focus Question

What traits do Charlie and Ruth possess? Why are these important to their survival?

Words to Know

aghast
barren
bearings
boarders
boxcar
careened
congested
conjectured
Depression
glowered
Hooverville
meandered
noxious
pneumonia
raucous
shantytown
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soup kitchen
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traversed

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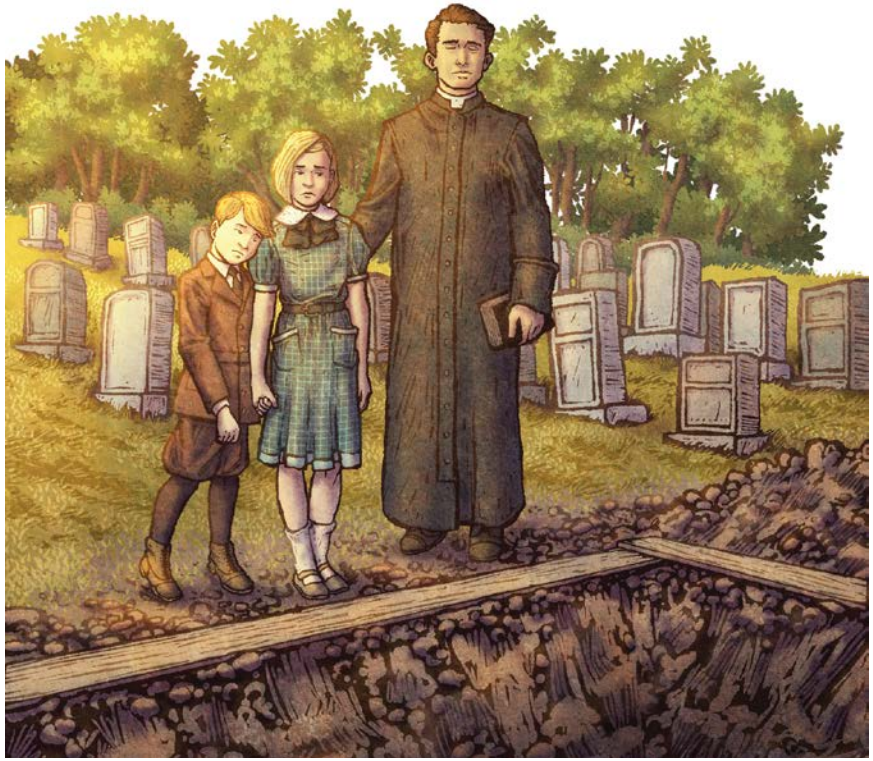
Correlation

LEVEL Z1	
Fountas & Pinnell	X–Y
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60



"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," intoned the priest, and Ruth heard nothing after that. Her eyes blurred with tears and her mind raced, leaping from one worry to the next, as she watched her mother's casket descend into the earth. Beside her stood her little brother, Charlie. He squeezed Ruth's hand as the casket sank out of view, and Ruth squeezed back, hard.

Her mind would not stop racing. It had all happened so fast: the **Depression**, her father's departure, her mother's illness, and now her mother's death.

Two years ago, when Ruth was ten, they had been a happy family living in a big, beautiful house in St. Louis, Missouri. Every morning her father had whistled while he read the newspaper, and Ruth had hummed along upstairs while she dressed for school. Back then, she had taken for granted having her own bedroom and breakfast waiting for her downstairs—but most of all, she had taken for granted her father's whistling.

It all stopped abruptly the day of the crash. After that, her father **glowered** over the paper. Kids at school whispered about failing banks, shuttered factories, and their fathers being laid off. Street corners grew **congested** with people begging for work. Months went by, and though President Hoover promised that hard times would pass, they only got worse, until one evening Ruth's father did not come home for dinner. He stumbled in long after dark; Ruth heard the door slam and tiptoed to the top of the stairs.

"Where have you been?" Ruth's mother demanded. "I've been worried sick!"

Ruth's father mumbled something in reply, his head hung low. Ruth's mother began to weep, and that was when Ruth knew: her father had lost his job, too.

Six months later—after milk dwindled and then disappeared from the icebox; after **boarders** moved into the attic and the bedrooms; after Ruth had almost become accustomed to standing in line at the **soup kitchen**—her father left. He wrote a note saying he had gone to find work and would send for them as soon as he was back on his feet. But he never did, and then the **pneumonia** came for her mother.

"What are we going to do?" fretted Charlie, after the funeral.

At first, Ruth had no answer. Gram and Gramps might have been their final hope, but in her shock and grief, Ruth had spent their final pennies on food before she even thought to telegraph their grandparents in California.

Just then, the sound of a train whistle reached them on the wind, long and low. It sent prickles up Ruth's spine—and suddenly, she had an idea.

As the Sun set, Ruth and Charlie tramped across a field between boarded-up factories and the train tracks that crisscrossed St. Louis, each of them lugging a leather suitcase.

"Once it's dark, all we have to do is hop on board a train and hide inside," Ruth explained. "Then we can ride all the way west, to California, where Gram and Gramps live."

Charlie's eyes were wide with worry. "That's an awfully long way," he said.

"Oh, only a couple thousand miles," Ruth replied, as cheerfully as she could manage.

"Isn't it dangerous?" Charlie persisted.

"People hop trains all the time," said Ruth, and it was true. She had heard folks discussing it at the soup kitchen. Despite the danger, thousands of Americans were traveling the country by train in search of work, or family, or an escape from the Depression. They called it "riding the rails," and now Ruth and Charlie were going to join them.

After waiting for hours, perched on their luggage, chins nestled in their hands, and Charlie drumming his heels against his suitcase, they heard the whistle. Both children tightened their

shoelaces and got ready to run. The train rounded a curve, blinding them both with its bright headlights, and Ruth blinked desperately, trying to spot an open **boxcar** door. Finally, near the end of the train, she saw their opportunity. "Now!" she shouted.

Ruth and Charlie began to run. Ruth's palms were slick with sweat, and the suitcase was heavy, but she managed to swing it up into the boxcar, then leap onto the ladder on the side. When she looked back for Charlie, he was barely keeping up with the train.

"Let go!" she hollered. "Let go of the suitcase!"

Charlie did, and began to sprint, arms pumping like pistons. Ruth extended down a hand. Charlie reached up. Their fingers connected. Ruth squeezed, hard, and heaved her brother up onto the ladder. For one terrifying moment they swung wildly from the rungs, and as the train **careened** down the track, Ruth held her breath, certain they would fall and be crushed. But then she found her balance and clambered into the boxcar, pulling Charlie with her. They collapsed in a heap and gazed out the boxcar door, watching as the lights of St. Louis flew by before finally vanishing behind them.

"We did it," Charlie gasped. He was still out of breath.

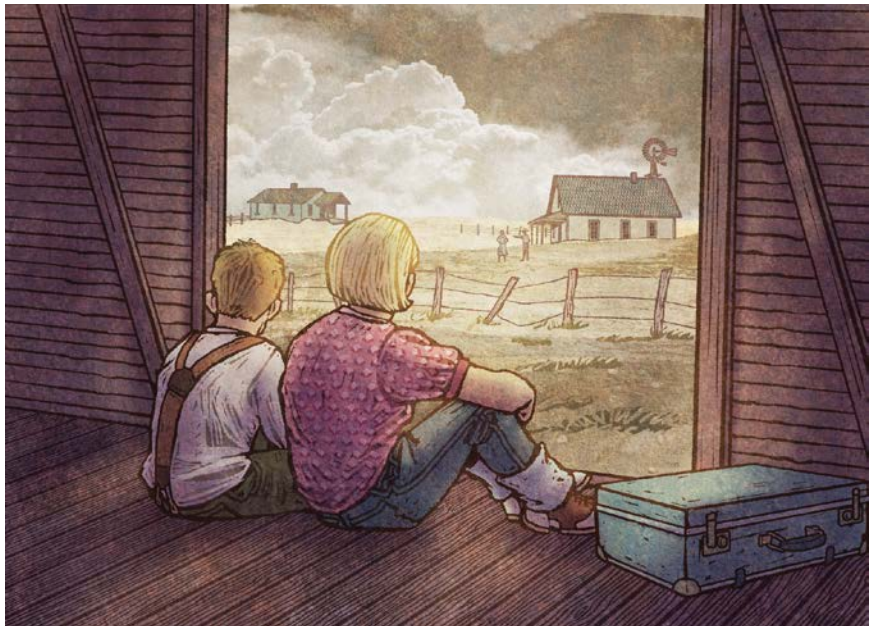
"We sure did," Ruth replied, and with that, they both fell asleep.

In the morning, Ruth and Charlie woke to a novel sight: the Great Plains. All day, they watched in awe as the train crossed mile after mile of prairie, the rippling grass stretching on under the Sun as far as the eye could see. But as afternoon approached, Charlie spotted a black cloud on the horizon.

"What's that?" he asked fretfully.

"Must be a rainstorm, or maybe a fire," Ruth **conjectured**, but as the train chugged closer and closer, she realized with a start that it was a dust storm, billowing like black smoke as it whirled across the **barren** prairie, whipping through farms and fields. As the train passed through, the children covered their noses and sealed their lips tight, but even an hour later they couldn't stop coughing. The dust, thick and **noxious**, lay streaked across their faces and clung to their hair.

"No wonder everybody's out of work," Ruth murmured, **aghast**, as the train rumbled past farmhands with downturned faces and slack suspenders, their cheeks hollow from hunger.



As evening fell, the train pulled into a depot, and though Ruth and Charlie huddled in the corner, the brakeman discovered them in the boxcar. "I won't snitch," he said, "but you kids better **skedaddle**." He shined his flashlight onto the path alongside the tracks.

So Ruth and Charlie skedaddled. A signpost outside the depot told them this was Dodge City, Kansas. Smoke and **raucous** laughter filled the air, and Ruth swallowed nervously as they neared an empty lot with an immense bonfire burning at the center. Her instinct was to hurry away into the shadows . . . but in front of a homespun tent sat a boy, playing the harmonica. It was the same song Ruth's father had always whistled, and though Charlie tugged on his sister's hand, Ruth could not help but linger and hum along.

"You know this tune?" called out the harmonica player. "I reckon that makes you a friend! This here is the finest **Hooverville** west of the Mississippi. Why don't you join us?"

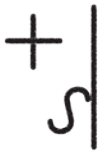
He introduced himself as Joe, the first resident of Dodge City's **shantytown**. His neighbors, who had been warming themselves by the fire, were riding the rails just like Ruth and Charlie. When they heard where the children were headed, they grew excited.

"California!" one young man exclaimed. "Rumor has it the Sun never stops shining out there, and there's plenty of work. Maybe you'll even find a job with the moving pictures!" The man did a little jig, like Charlie Chaplin. "Ain't he something?" he chuckled. "Always brings a smile to my face, at least."

In the morning, Joe took Ruth and Charlie for a stroll, sharing the knowledge he had picked up as a hobo. "You've got to keep your eyes peeled," he said, gesturing toward some markings carved into a nearby fence. "For instance, this mark here means 'Food for work,' and that one means 'Tell a good story.' So if you knock on that door looking for shelter, you better be ready to invent a real yarn. But if you see this—" Joe grabbed a stick and scratched a box in the dirt, then a circle inside the box— "that means danger, and you get yourself out of there quick!"

Hobo Hieroglyphs

kind woman



food for work

tell a good story

can sleep in barn

danger

dog

The term *hobo* began in the western United States around 1890. It means someone who works but keeps moving—often by hopping trains. Sometimes hobos would communicate by using a code, or system of symbols. Hobos would write this code with chalk or coal to provide information and warnings to other hobos. In this way, they helped each other, because a hobo's life wasn't easy.

After teaching them a few more symbols that hobos used to communicate, Joe walked Ruth and Charlie back to the train tracks and even boosted them into the boxcar so they didn't have to run and jump like last time. "Good luck!" he shouted, waving as they departed. "I hope you make it to California!"

For the next few months, Ruth and Charlie **traversed** the country by train, slowly working their way west. They hopped off in search of food and shelter in cities and small towns alike, and found their **bearings** using the hobo markings Joe had taught them. At one house in Oklahoma, a girl **smuggled** them fresh eggs from her

family's chicken coop. At another in Colorado, a woman who never told Ruth her name stayed up late helping Ruth scrub laundry. Before the siblings left, she insisted on outfitting Ruth in boys' clothing.

"You're growing into a woman," she said, cupping a hand to Ruth's cheek, "but men don't need to know that—not until you get where you're going."

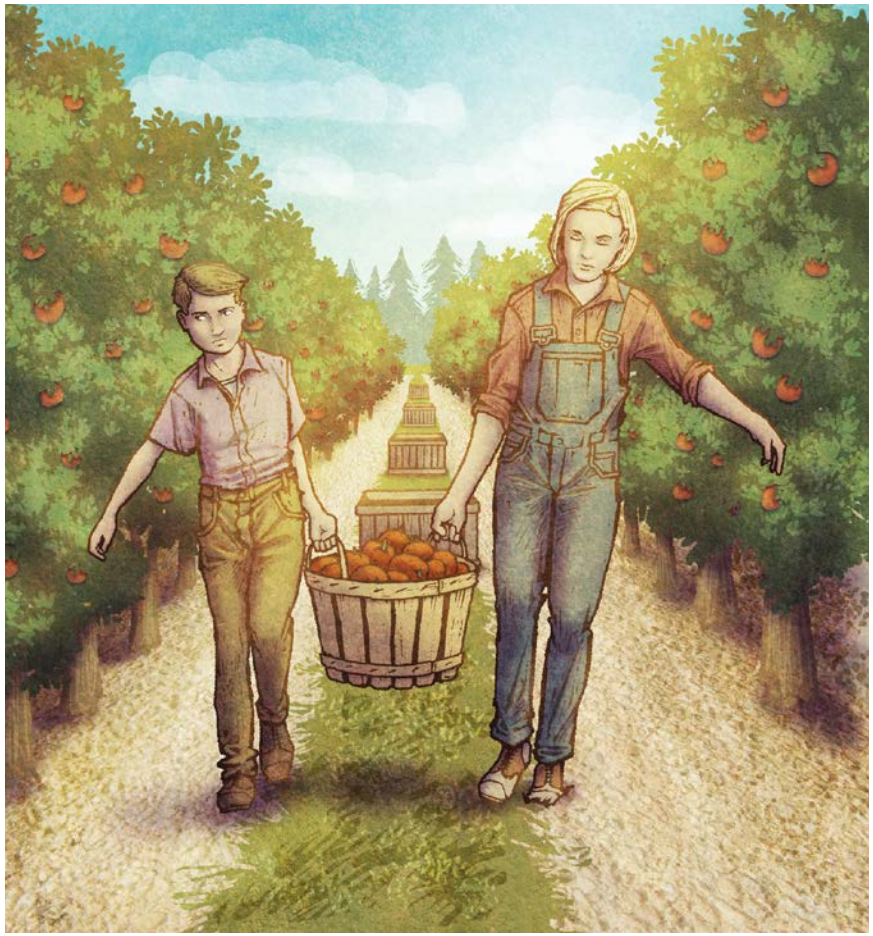
It was a conversation Ruth might have had with her mother. She felt a lump rise in her throat as the sadness she had been striving to keep at bay washed over her like a wave.

"Be safe now," the woman said.

In Nevada, a man chased them off his ranch with a shotgun. They left in such a hurry that they accidentally hopped a train north, to Oregon, where they **meandered** through the countryside for hours before discovering a big apple orchard. The old couple who lived there, the Werners, hired Ruth and Charlie to help with the harvest.

Charlie loved apple picking: he loved climbing trees and sneaking bites of apple when he thought no one was looking. Ruth knew that Mr. Werner had spotted him, but the old man was fond of Charlie and never said a word. All day long, the two siblings picked apples, and at night they joined the farmhands for supper before sleeping alongside them in the bunkhouse.

At first, Ruth was grateful for the rest. Apple picking was hard work, but it was a welcome change after the danger of riding the rails, when she had never been certain when their next meal would come or where they might rest their heads at night. Still, she never stopped reminding Charlie that eventually they needed to move on. "Don't forget Gram and Gramps," Ruth repeated, as they dragged their ever-heavier bucket of apples through the orchard.



"How do you even know they're still in California?" Charlie asked. "How do you know they didn't leave like Dad did? Or get sick and die?"

"I don't," Ruth admitted, "but they're our only family. We have to try."

Charlie scowled. "I like it here. I don't want to go."

Ruth sighed. From each new state she'd sent a postcard telling her grandparents they would be there soon, but she had no idea whether they'd received them. Still, Ruth had to believe that Gram and Gramps would look after her and Charlie, if only they could reach them. "By hook or by crook," Ruth muttered under her breath, "we have got to get to California!"

Another week passed. Ruth kept on picking apples and **stowing** away her wages. She noticed that the leaves were changing colors and knew that meant the harvest would soon end. She noticed, too, that the Werners were doting on Charlie more and more: they served him extra helpings and were teaching him his multiplication tables. Still, Ruth did not expect Mrs. Werner to pull her aside one day and ask if they could adopt Charlie after the harvest ended. "We'd love to keep you both," she said, twisting a handkerchief in her hand. "But we just can't afford to, I'm afraid. You'd be welcome back next year, of course."

Ruth said she would think about it, but that night she packed the leather suitcase and shook Charlie awake. She told him what Mrs. Werner had offered, and though at first he was excited, his smile wilted when she told him they did not want to adopt Ruth, too.

"Gram and Gramps would never separate us!" Charlie protested.

"Of course not," Ruth said as she buckled the suitcase. "That's why it's time to go."

The train down through California wound through mountains and valleys with trees so tall, Ruth could scarcely believe her eyes. Then the landscape changed to vast fields, putting to shame the little orchard they had labored in. At last, the train slunk down to the big city where Ruth and Charlie's grandparents lived: Los Angeles, California.

They knew exactly where to go because the address was stitched neatly on a label inside their mother's old suitcase. After hopping off the train, Ruth inquired after directions from a helpful hobo. They walked for hours in the sun until at last they reached a bungalow with a wide wraparound porch. Ruth checked the number on the mailbox against the address inside the suitcase.

"This is it," she said, and reached for the gate. That was when she spotted the markings: *Kind woman,* read the first. *Food for work,* read the second.

And the last? *Tell a good story.*

"Come on, Charlie," Ruth said with a smile, and though her feet were tired, she bounded up the steps. "We've got a good story to tell—and I don't believe we will have to invent one word."

Glossary

aghast *(adj.)* filled with worry, shock, or horror (p. 9)

barren *(adj.)* lacking vegetation (p. 9)

bearings *(n.)* understanding of one's location or situation as it relates to one's surroundings (p. 12)

boarders *(n.)* people who pay for food and a place to live at a school or another person's house (p. 5)

boxcar *(n.)* a railroad freight car that has a roof and sliding doors on the sides (p. 7)

careened *(v.)* swerved or swayed from side to side while moving; leaned sideways or in an unsteady way (p. 8)

congested *(adj.)* filled up or blocked (p. 4)

conjectured *(v.)* formed an opinion based on little evidence; guessed (p. 9)

Depression *(n.)* an international economic crisis that originated in the United States in 1929 and lasted through the 1930s (p. 3)

glowered *(v.)* looked angrily at someone or something (p. 4)

Hooverville *(n.)* any shantytown built by poor and out-of-work people during the Great Depression of the 1930s, named for President Herbert Hoover (1929–1933) (p. 10)

meandered *(v.)* followed a winding path or course; wandered without a destination (p. 14)

noxious *(adj.)* unwholesome; harmful to health or well-being (p. 9)

pneumonia *(n.)* a sometimes-deadly disease of the lungs, caused by infection, that makes it difficult to breathe (p. 5)

raucous *(adj.)* very noisy, disorderly, rough, or harsh (p. 10)

shantytown *(n.)* a town or section of a town made up poor people living in small, rough buildings (p. 10)

skedaddle *(v.)* to hurry from a place (p. 10)

smuggled *(v.)* took out of or brought into a place secretly and sometimes illegally (p. 12)

soup kitchen *(n.)* a place where free food is given to people who are homeless or have little money (p. 5)

stowing *(v.)* putting away or storing (p. 16)

traversed *(v.)* moved through or across an area (p. 12)