

## A GUIDE TO

## Let the Circle Be Unbroken

Mildred D. Taylor

*“I figured that before I died, I’d like to enjoy a little of that liberty and justice the constitution kept talking about. . . .”*

**THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE**

*Let the Circle Be Unbroken* is the third book in a series of historical novels about the Logans, an African American family struggling against racial prejudice, poverty, and injustice.

**Setting:** 1930s, the Logan homestead in rural Mississippi, an area of huge cotton plantations and small sharecropping farms.

**Protagonist:** Cassie Logan, the first-person narrator, who comes of age in a racist society and is a perceptive observer of the people around her: young and old, rich and poor, black and white.

**Conflicts:** Cassie’s internal conflict between accepting her cousin Suzella as part of the family and wishing Suzella would go back home; Mr. Logan’s external conflict with plantation owners who want to take over his land; the landowners’ external conflict with the tenant farmers who are being cheated out of their money.

**Resolution:** Cassie resolves her jealousy of Suzella when Suzella settles a conflict between Cassie and the teacher, and Suzella reveals how much she admires Cassie’s courage; Mr. Logan refuses to sell his land and goes away to work in order to pay taxes on it; the landowners win—they put the tenant farmers off their land—and the external conflict between landowners and tenant farmers ends in a series of turbulent events.

**Themes:** The support of a loving family, an “unbroken circle,” can help people endure hard times. People have self-respect and will stand up for their rights. People will struggle for a better life against all odds.

**Of Special Note:** Historically accurate depiction of time and place.

*nothin’*. And, since the novel is realistic, some characters use racially offensive language. There is some violence: a murder, an attempted lynching, a beating, a riot. In the end, however, courage, love, and understanding keep the family and community together.

**BACKGROUND**

**Sharecropping.** Sharecropping is a system in which a tenant farms a piece of land for a share of the crop. Sharecropping was established for the cultivation of cotton in the United States at the end of the Civil War. The owner of the land provides the tenant with the land, animals, farm equipment, and seed. Tenants buy their food and personal supplies on credit extended by the landowner. When a crop is sold, sharecroppers receive a share of the money only after their debts have been deducted.

**The Great Depression.** Between 1929 and 1939, the United States experienced a period of severe economic depression. Banks collapsed, the stock market crashed, businesses failed, factories closed, and unemployment skyrocketed. Homeowners lost their homes, farmers lost their farms, and hungry people stood in long lines for free food.

**The New Deal.** Under the leadership of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Congress passed laws and the government instituted programs to help the country recover from the Great Depression. Roosevelt called this sweeping legislation the New Deal.

**Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA).** One of the New Deal’s agencies was the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, created to advise and help farmers. The AAA attempted to raise farm prices by limiting crop production. Farmers were paid to reduce crop size by not planting all of their land. Farm income rose, but the crop reductions kept food from the hungry and cotton from those needing clothes. In 1936, parts of the AAA were declared unconstitutional.

**SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Students reading on or even below grade level should have no problems with the novel. The characters use regional pronunciations such as *gonna*, *gotta*, *’em*, and

**MAIN CHARACTERS**

**David Logan (Papa)**, a man of strong character, hard-working, a leader; father of four children; one of the few African Americans to own land at this time in Mississippi.

**Mary Logan (Mama)**, his wife and the children's mother; tall, thin, beautiful; a teacher; fired for organizing a boycott against a plantation store.

**Stacey Logan**, the oldest Logan child; age 13; a serious boy ready to take on adult responsibilities.

**Cassie Logan**, the only girl in the Logan family; in fifth grade; headstrong, sensitive, intelligent, caring.

**Christopher-John Logan**, the third Logan child; in third grade; chubby; doesn't always agree with his big sister but follows along nonetheless.

**Clayton Chester Logan (Little Man)**, the youngest Logan child; in second grade; rational thinker, clean and neat.

**Big Ma**, David Logan's mother, tall and physically strong; lives with the Logan family.

**Mr. L. T. Morrison**, works on Logan farm; 7 feet tall, muscular, age 63, gentle nature.

**Mrs. Lee Annie Lees**, a plantation tenant; mid-60s, heavysset, beautiful, fun-loving.

**Wordell Lees**, grandson of Mrs. Lee Annie and raised by her; age 15; smiles and talks little; considered "peculiar."

**Uncle Hammer**, David Logan's brother; unmarried; lives in Chicago but visits the Logans.

**Cousin Bud Rankin**, son of Mary Logan's sister; handsome, with a pleasant personality; lives in New York.

**Cousin Suzella**, Bud's daughter; age 15, pretty and popular.

**Mr. Harlan Granger**, plantation owner; ruthless, powerful, greedy; wants the Logans' land.

## PLOT

**Chapter 1.** The chapter opens with a description of the rural Mississippi **setting**: sprawling plantations, weathered school buildings, and poor farms. Through the eyes of the **first-person narrator**, Cassie Logan, we meet Papa Logan and the other Logan children. They are visiting a neighboring farm, the Ellis place—a "tenant shack"—where Papa helps attend a sick mule and the adults visit. Trouble is **foreshadowed** as talk centers on a local boy, T. J. Avery, who is in jail, accused of murdering a shopkeeper.

**Chapter 2.** The news spreads that T. J. Avery is to go on trial. We meet another **character**, Mama. The children learn from her that everyone expects T. J., a black boy, to be convicted by the white judge and jury. Although T. J. broke into the store with two white boys (R. W. and Melvin Simms), he was the only one arrested.

**Chapter 3.** At T. J.'s trial the shopkeeper's wife testifies that three "Negroes" broke into the shop and that R. W. and Melvin Simms came to help her. T. J.'s lawyer, Mr. Jamison, asks her to estimate the height of the men who were beating her husband. He then points out that T. J.

is much shorter. When T. J. takes the stand, he testifies that R. W. and Melvin were with him and that they were wearing black stockings over their heads. It was R. W. Simms, T. J. says, who hit the shopkeeper with an axe. T. J. explains that when he tried to run, they beat him up, too. Mr. Jamison establishes that R. W. Simms owns a truck that was seen near the crime scene. Despite the evidence, T. J. is convicted and receives the death penalty.

**Chapter 4.** During the following winter students come to the Logan house to get help from Mama with their schoolwork. In mid-March, school will end and the children will go to work in the cotton fields. The county extension agent stops by the house to explain that Papa can't cash the check he received for his cotton because it is made out to Mr. Granger, a local plantation owner. This signals the nature of Papa's **conflict** with those who are trying to take his land. Claiming he has the first mortgage on the crop, Granger offers to pay Papa's taxes. Papa refuses, realizing that the offer is a trick aimed at getting Granger's name on the tax record so that he can claim the land. A larger **conflict** emerges—between those who own land and those who sharecrop. It's the Great Depression and cotton prices are low. Meanwhile, the government is limiting the amount of cotton that can be grown—assuming that if cotton is scarce, prices will rise. As a result, landowners rather than sharecroppers are getting the money.

**Chapter 5.** Students continue to come to the Logan home for school lessons, and we see the importance of the **setting**. For families of poor day laborers and sharecroppers, the five-room Logan house, with its fireplaces and sturdy furniture, is unique. Cassie begins to understand the importance of owning some land. The **conflict** between landowners and workers begins to simmer in this chapter. Men from the Farm Workers' Union visit Papa to discuss improving conditions for tenants, sharecroppers, and day laborers—both black and white. Knowing Papa is well respected, they want his help. During this time Papa's brother, Uncle Hammer, arrives from Chicago.

**Chapter 6.** Cousin Bud, Mama's nephew, arrives from New York, surprising the Logans at church. He has come to bring his wife back to New York and wants to send their daughter, Suzella, to stay with the Logans. Uncle Hammer calls Bud a fool for marrying a white woman.

**Chapter 7.** In an important scene between Papa and Cassie, Papa tells Cassie, who will soon turn fourteen, that boys will be looking at her. He cautions her that white boys will be looking, too, but she is not to look back. Despite a warning from the sheriff, Papa allows a union meeting to take place in his barn. Soon afterward, in order to get money to pay taxes, Papa decides to return to his railroad job in Louisiana. The breakup of the family circle saddens everyone. During May and June, everyone works in the cotton fields. Stacey tries to get work at the site of a proposed hospital but finds

dozens of men, all of them white, waiting in line to apply for the jobs.

**Chapter 8.** A new **conflict** emerges when Cousin Bud brings Suzella to stay with the Logans. She is charming and everyone likes her immediately—everyone, that is, except Cassie, who is jealous. Suzella tries to befriend Cassie, but Cassie is unresponsive. On a visit to the Turner place, the Logans hear Mr. Peck, the county agent, inform Mr. Turner, a sharecropper, that a government requirement dictates that he plow under most of his cotton crop. It seems he has planted too much. In a daze, Mr. Turner uproots the plants as his son Moe sobs. This tragic scene dramatizes the **conflict** between sharecroppers and plantation owners.

**Chapter 9.** Other sharecroppers are ordered to plow under their crops. When it is learned that the plowing was not ordered by the government and was, in fact, a scheme of the plantation owners, another union meeting is planned. As tension rises, the house where union men are staying is burned down, and John Moses, a union supporter, is found dead. No union meeting takes place. The **conflict** between Cassie and Suzella intensifies when Cassie sees Suzella “acting white” with the son of a plantation owner. In a confrontation, Suzella says that she likes it when people think she is white and that she wants to marry a white man. The chapter ends with the Logan family finding a note from Stacey. He has left home to take a job. The family circle is again broken up.

**Chapter 10.** The family learns that Stacey and Moe Turner left together, and neighbors gather to help the Logans and Turners look for them. Papa returns and calls Hammer, and the two go off to search. They search for three weeks but return home without them. Finally, Papa decides to wait to hear from Stacey. Because Mama doesn’t want him to give up searching, she and Papa argue. Cassie cries that night, worrying about Stacey and hating her parents’ quarreling.

**Chapter 11.** The conflict between Cassie and Suzella lessens when Cassie gets into a fight at school and Suzella helps her out of trouble. As there has been no word from Stacey, who has been gone eight weeks, the tension between Mama and Papa continues. Papa decides to check out a lead in bayou country.

**Chapter 12.** Uncle Hammer comes for Christmas; meanwhile, Papa returns on Christmas Eve—alone. On Christmas morning, everyone sings “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” With Stacey missing from the family circle, the song becomes especially poignant. A few days after Christmas, Mr. Walker evicts twelve families from his plantation as the **conflict** between landowners and sharecroppers intensifies. Amid this turmoil, Cousin Bud arrives to take Suzella to live with her mother. Cassie is surprised to realize that she will miss Suzella.

**Chapter 13.** Papa, Mama, and Cassie travel into town to hear word that Stacey is in Louisiana. In town they

see a procession of displaced families assemble near the courthouse, demanding to keep their farms. As the **conflict** reaches a **climax**, bottles are thrown; then shots are fired. Finally, a **resolution** is reached when the sheriff stops the riot, and the families move on.

**Chapter 14.** The Logans—Papa, Mama, Cassie, Uncle Hammer—decide to drive to Louisiana at once. There they find Stacey and Moe, in poor health, at the sheriff’s office. Stacey tells of hard work for no pay, wretched living conditions, and lack of medical care. The Logans stop to thank a woman who cared for the boys when they were sick. Despite the hardships of the past and the uncertainty of the future, they all are happy to go home, an unbroken circle once again.

## APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Set in the 1930s in the deep South, this novel makes an excellent addition to social studies courses covering that period and place in U.S. history. The characters bring a human dimension to the economic, racial, and social issues that form the background for the action. Students doing independent research or forming discussion groups might focus on the following activities.

### 1. Comparing Characters

Cassie Logan is the same age as the character Lizbeth in the short story “Marigolds.” Students, on their own or in pairs, could read this Eugenia Collier story and explore other similarities between the two young girls and what they learn from their experiences.

- What setting and family situation do the two girls share? How does the time period (the Great Depression) affect their lives and the lives of their families?
- What family values do they share?
- How does each character respond to the external conflicts that exist in the world around them? How do these events change them?
- What does each character learn about taking responsibility for her actions?

### 2. Experiment with Point of View

Students can choose one of the conflicts in the novel, and retell it from the point of view of one of the characters involved. They might consider taking Suzella’s view of her relationship with Cassie. What are her thoughts about Cassie and the rest of the Logan family? Why would she want people to think she was white? Is it to change her life? Why might Cassie’s life look good to her? Or students might want to think about Cassie’s older brother, Stacey, and his point of view. How does he feel about the family’s troubles? Why does he leave home? What are his thoughts when he is found?

### 3. The Saga of the Logans

Interested students might read the first two chronicles of the Logan family, *Song of the Trees* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Working alone or in groups, they could chart the major events in the lives of the family. They could also trace the development of Cassie and her brothers as they grow up. From what they learn in the three novels, they could make predictions about the Logan family. To check their predictions, they can read *The Road to Memphis*, which takes the Logans into the year 1941.

#### MEET THE WRITER

**Mildred D. Taylor** (1913– ) was born in Jackson, Mississippi. She grew up in Ohio, but her father's family had lived in Mississippi from the time of slavery. Throughout her childhood, Taylor heard stories of these ancestors. Later, as a novelist, she would draw on their experiences. She has said that the story of her family is one of ordinary people who have done nothing more extraordinary than survive in a society committed to their destruction. Taylor graduated from the University of Toledo and taught English and history with the Peace Corps in Ethiopia.

*Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (1981) has received the Coretta Scott King Award and has been chosen as an

ALA Best Book for Young Adults and an NCSS-CBC Notable Children's Book in the Field of Social Studies.

#### READ ON

**Mildred D. Taylor, *Song of the Trees*.** The first novel about the Logan family, also set during the Great Depression.

**Mildred D. Taylor, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*.** The second novel about the Logans, who face night riders, fires, and the worst years of the Depression. (Newbery Medal)

**Eugenia Collier, "Marigolds."** A poignant short story about a young girl in the rural South struggling to find herself in a world of racism and poverty.

**Truman Capote, "A Christmas Memory."** A touching short story that explores the mystery of friendship.

**John Lewis, "The March to Montgomery."** An oral history of the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

**Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston, "It Can't Be Helped."** An excerpt from the memoirs of a Japanese American girl confined in an internment camp during World War II.

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