A Guide to
Lyddie
Katherine Paterson

“We can still hop.”

The Novel at a Glance
Lyddie is a coming-of-age historical novel about a poor, uneducated farm girl who triumphs over hardship through wit and hard work in a factory in nineteenth-century Lowell, Massachusetts.

Setting: New England, 1840s.

Protagonist: Lyddie Worthen, a poor thirteen-year-old Vermont farm girl who takes a job in a mill factory in order to save the family farm and reunite her siblings.

Conflicts: An encounter with a bear in the opening pages of the book becomes symbolic of all the obstacles—internal and external—Lyddie overcomes in her passage from childhood to maturity. These conflicts include Lyddie’s internal conflict between her determination to make enough money to save her family and her desire to speak out against abusive work conditions in the factory; her internal conflict between her efforts to be independent and her need to interact with others; and the external conflicts between Lyddie and the terrible living conditions she faces both on the farm and in the factory.

Resolution: Lyddie finally decides to join the movement lobbying for better working conditions and loses her job when she rescues a fellow factory girl from an unwanted advance by the boss. She doesn’t save the farm or rejoin her younger siblings, who have been taken in by a kindly family, but she does gain the confidence and the freedom to pursue a new goal in life: a college degree, which she hopes will make her truly independent and open her mind to all of life’s possibilities.

Themes: The themes of slavery and freedom run throughout the book: A narrow, closed mind can be enslaving; independence does not preclude the forging and nurturing of relationships. Worthy concerns about oneself and one’s family must be weighed against those of the larger community. Moral dilemmas are rarely cut and dried.

Of Special Note: The historical setting has been well researched and graphically depicted.

Special Considerations
This novel is a page turner that should appeal to students reading at the middle-school level. The protagonist is a feisty, determined heroine with whom both boys and girls can identify. Her personal growth in the face of tremendous hardship is inspirational. Her life is a hard, sad one in which adults are generally unreliable and unsupportive, and loved ones often disappoint. Still, an indefatigable spirit and true grit help Lyddie rise above her seemingly hopeless plight.

Background
Historical setting: The American Industrial Revolution is in full swing. The founding of labor unions is decades away, so there are no protections for workers or prohibitions against child labor. Factory conditions are appalling, and reformers are rewarded with dismissal, which blacklists them from further employment. The country has yet to fight the Civil War but is already divided over the issue of slavery. There are bounties offered for runaway slaves, and many sympathetic folk risk their lives to help slaves reach freedom.

Main Characters
(in order of appearance)
Lyddie, the oldest child in the impoverished Worthen family.  
Charles Worthen, Lyddie’s ten-year-old brother and closest friend.  
Mama, Lyddie’s mother, a mentally unstable woman.  
Rachel, Lyddie’s six-year-old sister.  
Agnes, her four-year-old sister.  
Luke Stevens, the youngest son of a Quaker farmer.  
Triphena, a kindly cook who takes Lyddie under her wing when Lyddie start her first job.  
Mrs. Bedlow, the mistress of a boardinghouse in Lowell who gets Lyddie her job in the factory.  
Diana Goss, a “factory girl” and reform activist who befriends Lyddie.  
Amelia, Prudence, and Betsy, Lyddie’s roommates in the boardinghouse.  
Mr. Marsden, the overseer at the factory.  
Brigid, a young Irish girl at the factory.
Chapter 1. We meet the main character, Lyddie, and her family members when a big black bear stumbles into their small farm cabin. The bear precipitates the break-up of the family and becomes symbolic of the obstacles Lyddie will meet on her life journey. Lyddie takes control of the dangerous situation and ensures her family's safety by boldly staring the bear down. But their unstable mother sees the bear as a sign of the end of the world and decides to take her younger children away to live with relatives. Lyddie stays behind to tend the farm, and her brother Charles rejoins her once the family has arrived safely at their destination. Lyddie and Charles survive the winter and on the first warm day of March, a young calf is born to their only cow. That same day, a letter arrives from their mother informing them that she has rented the farm and hired the two of them out to pay debts. One line in the mother's letter, “We can still hop,” amuses the children and becomes an ironic joke between them. The arrival of the letter is a turning point in the plot.

Chapter 2. Lyddie and Charlie leave their cabin and sell the calf to their kindly neighbor, Quaker Stevens. His youngest son, Luke, drives Charles and Lyddie in his horse and wagon to their new workplaces. Charles is dropped off at Baker’s Mill and Lyddie is left at Cutler’s Tavern where she is to work as a maid.

Chapter 3. Lyddie arrives at the tavern, realizing that once she walks through the gate she will lose her freedom. Just then, in a foreshadowing of her own future, Lyddie encounters a kindly, elegant lady as the woman disembarks from a stagecoach outside the tavern. (Months later, she learns that the lady is a “factory girl” who earns good money at a mill in Lowell, Massachusetts.) Outside the tavern, the dirty and barefoot Lyddie is mistaken for a beggar by Mistress Cutler. Under the watchful eye of the mistress, a beleaguered Lyddie works even harder than she did on the farm. The only comfort she has comes late at night when she counts the money she has saved from the sale of the calf.

Chapter 4. Lyddie is befriended by Triphena, the tavern cook, who tells her an allegory about two frogs who fell into a pail of milk. One drowned immediately, but the other kicked so hard it made a pat of butter on which it was found perched in the morning. “Some folks are natural born kickers,” says Triphena, obviously referring to Lyddie. Lyddie misses Charlie, who pays her a short visit, but memories of her mother, father, and sisters gradually fade. Lyddie hears talk of the generous bounty paid for runaway slaves.

Chapter 5. When Mistress Cutler goes to Boston to sell her maple sugar, Triphena urges Lyddie to pay a visit home. Lyddie stops at the mill to see Charlie but learns he is at school. She resents the new family that has taken her brother in. She travels on to the farm. When she gets in through the window, she sees a shadowy form at the fireplace. She is face to face with the first black man she has ever seen.

Chapter 6. Lyddie’s encounter with Ezekial Abernathy, a runaway slave, is a turning point in her development. She sees the parallels between her own quest for freedom and Ezekial’s. As she is leaving, she impulsively gives him the calf money she has saved so carefully. When she returns to the tavern, she is fired from her job—a turning point. Lyddie decides to set off for Lowell, Massachusetts, to become a factory girl.

Chapter 7. Triphena gives Lyddie money to make the long journey to Lowell by carriage. When the coach gets stuck, the girl takes control of the situation and helps the hapless male passengers right the carriage. The grateful coachman is impressed with Lyddie and brings her to his sister’s boardinghouse in Lowell.

Chapter 8. The coachman’s sister Mrs. Bedlow befriends Lyddie, giving her money to buy new clothes and arranging for her employment at a factory run by the Concord Corporation. Lyddie meets her roommates in the boarding house, Amelia, Prudence, and Betsy, who also work at the factory.

Chapter 9. Lyddie starts work in the noisy, dusty weaving room. Mr. Marsden, the overseer, assigns her to kindly Diana Goss, an experienced factory girl, who takes Lyddie under her wing and teaches her how to read. Though her roommates warn her that Diana is a radical agitator for better working conditions, Lyddie sees only her kindness. Diana encourages Lyddie to write to her mother and brother of her new employment and posts the letters for her. In the reaction of Lyddie’s roommates to Diana, we see a foreshadowing of the conflict Lyddie faces throughout much of the book.

Chapter 10. Lyddie has trouble adjusting to her new life and the terrible conditions in which she works. One night her roommate Betsy asks if she can read to the exhausted Lyddie. Lyddie agrees and fights off sleep as she devours every word of Charles Dickens’s Oliver Twist.

Chapter 11. Lyddie’s spirit is lifted by Betsy’s reading, and Betsy confides that she is working to put herself through Oberlin College. Lyddie declines Diana’s invitation to a mass meeting of the ten-hour movement to limit the length of the workday. During the summer break when the other girls go home, Lyddie works even harder for extra money. She borrows Oliver Twist from the library and soon after decides to buy her very own copy of the book.

Chapter 12. Lyddie pastes pages of Oliver Twist before her as she works and sees parallels with her own life. She receives a letter from her mother asking for more money and informing her of her little sister Agnes’s death. Lyddie works harder than ever for her family, the lone girl not to complain when the machines are speeded up to increase productivity. Prudence, wracked by a nagging cough, is the first of the roommates to quit the factory, leaving Betsy and Lyddie, the two
bookworms, with Amelia, the pious Christian. **Conflict** among the three is highlighted as the girls discuss signing the petition for better working conditions. Betsy insists that they are all slaves and threatens to sign the petition. Lyddie is in favor of the status quo—desperately wanting to make as much money as she can despite the wretched conditions in which she works.

**Chapter 13.** Lyddie tries to convince herself that she is not a slave and begins to avoid Diana and Betsy. Lyddie now is so efficient that she operates four looms on her own. She writes to both her mother and brother telling them of her efforts to pay off the family debt. Betsy announces that she will sign the petition and then apply to Oberlin College when she is fired for it, a decision that foreshadows Lyddie's future. Lyddie is so single-minded that she pays no attention to the needs or cares of others. But when she is hurt on the job, the generous and considerate Diana tends to her injury and arranges for a doctor friend to look at Lyddie's wound—free of charge.

**Chapter 14.** Amelia is the next girl to leave, tired by the speeded-up pace. Lyddie, now considered Marsden's best girl, is given a new operator called Brigid to train. Lyddie resents the time away from her own machines. She is impatient with the new girl, an Irish immigrant, and dismisses all the Irish as fools. Diana gently corrects her and chides her about signing the petition. Betsy, who has come down with a cough, signs the petition, which angers Lyddie. But Betsy is not fired or blacklisted; she's forced to leave because of her poor health. Lyddie treats herself to more books and slips from Mr. Marsden's unwelcome pawing advances by dumping a bucket full of water over his head.

Instead, the thirteen-year-old comes to visit her in person. The meeting is awkward. Charlie tells her that the Phinneys treat him like their own son and want to care for little Rachel as well. A desolate Lyddie agrees to let Rachel go. Charlie also tells her that the farm will be sold and that the profits will go to their uncle. Finally, he gives Lyddie a letter from Luke Stevens. The son of the kindly Quaker tells Lyddie that his father has bought the farm, and proposes marriage. Lyddie is insulted by the suggestion that she can be bought. Once again she sees the parallels between slavery and her situation. She tears the letter into bits and, uncharacteristically, bursts into tears. The visit by Charlie is a turning point in the story: Lyddie no longer has to weigh concerns for her family against concerns about factory conditions and her own life.

**Chapter 15.** Just as Lyddie is convinced she has nearly paid off her debt, her uncle arrives at the boardinghouse with her sister Rachel in tow. He tells her that their mother is now in an asylum and that the farm is going to be sold. Lyddie convinces the kindly Mrs. Bedlow to let Rachel stay with her. She writes to Charles begging Phinney to stop the sale of the farm. At work, when the overseer Marsden threatens to fire Brigid, Lyddie offers to help the struggling girl. Lyddie finds her only comfort in the familiar words of *Oliver Twist.*

**Chapter 16.** Lyddie spends more than two weeks' wages buying new clothes and books for Rachel; Lyddie and Rachel are happy together. Work improves as well after Lyddie gives Brigid money to pay a doctor's bill. One evening, Mr. Marsden keeps Lyddie after work and puts his arms around her. Feverish, Lyddie kicks him and escapes from his clutches. Lyddie's fever rages for many days, during which Mrs. Bedlow, Diana, Brigid, and Rachel all tend to her.

**Chapter 17.** Lyddie finally recovers her strength and returns to the mill with considerable trepidation at the prospect of seeing Marsden again. But nothing happens when the two meet. Mrs. Bedlow gets little Rachel a job at the mill as a doffer. Rachel softens Lyddie, whom the other girls regard as mean and distant. Lyddie worries when the child's coughing awakens her from her night's sleep. She knows her heart will break if she loses Rachel.

**Chapter 18.** Charlie never answers Lyddie's letter. Instead, the thirteen-year-old comes to visit her in person. The meeting is awkward. Charlie tells her that the Phinneys treat him like their own son and want to care for little Rachel as well. A desolate Lyddie agrees to let Rachel go. Charlie also tells her that the farm will be sold and that the profits will go to their uncle. Finally, he gives Lyddie a letter from Luke Stevens. The son of the kindly Quaker tells Lyddie that his father has bought the farm, and proposes marriage. Lyddie is insulted by the suggestion that she can be bought. Once again she sees the parallels between slavery and her situation. She tears the letter into bits and, uncharacteristically, bursts into tears. The visit by Charlie is a turning point in the story: Lyddie no longer has to weigh concerns for her family against concerns about factory conditions and her own life.

**Chapter 19.** Lyddie feels the loneliness in her heart like a physical pain. Work drags on and she realizes that she no longer has a purpose in life. Having lost her family, Lyddie has only her work. Diana seems preoccupied and looks sickly. Lyddie goes to a meeting where she declares that she is finally ready to sign the petition, only to be told that she is too late. Lyddie feels that she has been too late in all her endeavors—from keeping her family together to joining the movement. On the way home Diana confides that she is leaving the factory because she is pregnant. She is determined to leave before her condition brings shame on the association.

**Chapter 20.** Lyddie treats herself to more books and slips into the role that Diana once played in the factory. She coaches the new girls and helps Brigid learn how to read. She receives a letter from Charlie telling her that all is well and reminding her to reply to Luke's letter. A letter from the asylum informs Lyddie of her mother's death. Now, the person closest to her is Brigid. Lyddie saves Brigid from Mr. Marsden's unwelcome pawing advances by dumping a bucket full of water over his head.

**Chapter 21.** In the big climax of the book, Lyddie is summoned to the agent's office at the mill because Marsden has reported her as a troublemaker on the floor. Lyddie denies the charge and asks that Marsden be called to confront her with his complaints. When Marsden repeats the charges, Lyddie leaps to her feet in her own defense. But she is silenced by her own ignorance when told the problem is one of “moral turpitude.” Not understanding the meaning of the word *turpitude,* she falls silent. Lyddie is dismissed without a
certificate of honorable discharge, making employment at other mills impossible.

Chapter 22. Lyddie feels that the bear—the symbol of all the obstacles in her life—has won. She withdraws her $243.87 savings from the bank. Then she buys another copy of *Oliver Twist* for Rachel and a dictionary for herself. When she learns the meaning of *moral turpitude*, she is outraged and runs to Brigid’s home. She tells Brigid of her own dismissal and of a letter she has written to Marsden warning him of the consequences should he decide to dismiss Brigid as well. That evening, she waits for Marsden to leave work and steps out of the shadows to confront him. The next day, Lyddie takes a stage to Boston and looks up her old friend Diana, hoping to be of some help to her. But Diana is happily settled with a widowed shopkeeper and her daughter as she awaits the birth of her child. Lyddie is happy at Diana’s happiness but cries in despair most of the way home to Vermont.

Chapter 23. Lyddie makes her way back to Cutler’s Tavern and falls into Triphena’s arms. Lyddie tells Triphena of her losses and of her newfound freedom. She asks for her old job back, but it has been filled. Lyddie makes her way to the Phinney residence the next day to see her two remaining siblings. Charlie and Rachel are at school, so Lyddie keeps on walking all the way up to the old farm. Lyddie enters, lights a fire, and pulls her mother’s rocker up to the hearth. She feels nearly content. Her reverie is interrupted by Luke Stevens. Luke apologizes for his letter and asks Lyddie of her plans. In the resolution of the novel, Lyddie knows without even thinking. She will stare down the bear that she thought was outside herself but was in her own narrow spirit. She announces that she will go to college. Luke is admiring of her spirit, and Lyddie looks up into the face of the man whom she will someday marry.

**Approaches for Post-Reading Activities**

The outstanding element of this novel is its historical setting. This focus makes the novel an excellent adjunct to social studies courses focusing on U.S. history. Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. **Investigating the Historical Background**

One of the first things young readers might want to talk about in regard to this novel is “Did things like this really happen?” That question could lead to an investigation of several features of the novel’s historical setting:

- Working conditions in New England textile mills
- Educational opportunities available to women in the 1840s
- Employment opportunities for women in the 1840s
- The impact of women’s activism on the abolition of slavery

2. **Extending the Novel**

Proficient readers might want to compare *Lyddie* to the novel that has such a profound effect on Lyddie: Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*.

- *How are the main characters similar?*
- *To what extent are they different?*
- *What about the settings? How does Victorian England compare to industrial New England?*
- *In what ways did events in *Oliver Twist* influence Lyddie?*

**Meet the Writer**

Katherine Paterson is a much acclaimed author whose books have been published in eighteen languages. Among her many literary honors are two Newbery Medals and two National Book Awards. She and her husband have four children and live in Barre, Vermont. *Lyddie* came out of her participation in the Women’s History Project celebrating Vermont’s bicentennial in 1991.

**Read On**


Blanche Hannalis, *The Secret Garden*. This play, based on the famous novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett, shows how a bitter orphan comes to realize the importance of friendship and nurturing relationships.

Mildred D. Taylor, “Song of the Trees.” The young heroine of this story fights overwhelming forces to save the trees that grow on her family’s land.

Dorothy M. Johnson, “Too Soon a Woman.” A short story about a courageous young woman who risks her life to save a family that has befriended her.