

Color Me Dark, Patricia McKissack

(McKissack. *Color Me Dark*. New York: Scholastic, Inc. 2000.)

Interest level Grades 6-8, Reading level 6.5, Lexile 750

Available, Scholastic books, \$5 (approx.)

Annotated Journal Activity

Patricia McKissack Biography (p. 213-214)

McKissack's grandfather migrated to Chicago just as the 1919 riots began.

She is committed to sharing her cultural history.

McKissack says the time period of the novel is "a dark period in American history....But giving up should never be an option" and her characters "will show young readers that difficult situations can be overcome by education, kindness, dedication and above all, love."

Migration pictures (p. 201-208) Student responses will vary

Historical Note (p. 189-199) Student responses will vary

January, 1919 (p. 3-30)

1. Push— ___ talks about how most of the people (but not her family) who live around Bradford corners are sharecroppers who "end up in debt no matter how hard they try" and their children have to help in the fields and rarely attend school. (4-5)

Push— ___ hears her parents talk about the Ku Klux Klan; ___ doesn't like them, and her father says if they took off their sheets they wouldn't like themselves either. (14)

Push— ___ and her sister Erma Jean pass the white only school on the way to the one-room colored school; the roof is so bad they have to let school out when it rains. (15)

Push—The Love family men are members of the NAACP, and read the *Crisis* every month; however, they find out that the Klan is going after members, and the sheriff won't allow the *Crisis* to be sold there any more. (28)

2. The narrator and her sister, Erma Jean, are 9 months apart in age, and best friends. The Love family (grandparents, narrator, brother, sister, parents, and 3 uncles) lives in a large house in town; the narrator's father runs the funeral parlor. The Love family is very loving, and well respected in the town, at least on the colored side of the tracks.

3. Why doesn't the author tell us the narrator's name?

February, 1919 (p. 30-52)

1. Push/Pull—Uncle Meese refuses to move back to the South from Chicago because "The

Klan would lynch me in two days because I won't look at my feet while I'm talking to a white man." (42)

Pull—one of the families in town is moving to Cleveland because "There's work there and better schooling for my children" (49)

Reception—One man says they are just as prejudiced in the North as in the South and that there had been lynchings there too, as well as riots. (50)

2. The family is awaiting the arrival of Uncle Pace, who has been fighting in the war in Europe; the sheriff brings his battered body in, saying he must have gotten drunk and been hit by a train, and he dies two days later. No one really believes that. Erma Jean has not spoken since she was with Uncle Pace when he died. Her father is taking her to Chicago to a hospital to see if they can help her. The girls overhear their father say that he's going to look around, and think about moving the family there.
3. What did Erma Jean hear or see that made her unable to speak?

March-May 20, 1919 (p. 52-78)

1. Pull—Daddy says that in Chicago some Colored people have mansions, some own businesses, and there are places to eat and shop—"There are possibilities in Chicago that we can't even dream about here." (61)

Pull—Papa Till says Chicago is just a "pie-in-the-sky dream" of promises." (62)

2. A tornado hits the town while Erma Jean and the narrator's father are in Chicago. Two people died, and there was a lot of damage, but the Love house stood firm. Erma Jean will stay with a family friend in Chicago so the doctors can do more tests. Daddy informs the family that he is taking Mama and the narrator to Chicago to open a funeral home there. We finally find out the narrator's name is Nellie Lee when her father introduces her to Mr. Hill on the train to Chicago. He says things are not as good as they used to be in Chicago because "poor, ignorant Negroes...bring disgrace to the whole race" and are causing problems
3. Is Mr. Hill, the man on the train, a black racist?

May 20- June 1919 (p. 81-107)

1. The family settles in an apartment in a black community in Chicago's South Side. (84)
Adjustment—Uncle Meese takes the girls to a Colored baseball game. (107)
Employment/Entrepreneur—Daddy is having trouble beginning his funeral business. (102)

Entrepreneur—Uncle Meese owns a supper club that is doing very well. (101)

2. The family moves into an apartment with two rooms, and sleep on cots. They find a church to attend. Daddy can openly attend NAACP meetings, and is selected to go to a conference in Cleveland to give a speech; mama joins the Ida B. Wells Club (Wells helped found the NAACP). Daddy is turned down by the city when he applies for a funeral home license.
3. Is Daddy turned down because he did not offer a bribe to the city officials?

July, 1919 (p. 108-129)

1. Push—The Klux burned down the barbershop in Nellie's old town. (109)

Discrimination?—Uncle Meese tries to convince Daddy that he will never get a business license unless he bribes the officials. (108)

Entrepreneur—Miz Hamilton, the downstairs neighbor, is accepted at the Madame C. J. Walker Beauty School. (110)

Reception—The girls are taunted by a group of white boys; one of them is the bully who used to taunt them in their old home. (111)

Segregation/Race riots—At the beach a young black boy accidentally crosses over the invisible line into the white swimming area, drowning when white people chase him into deep water. A black police officer is shot when a riot breaks out. (121)
This is the beginning of the 1919 Red Summer, with the horrible blood loss from riots and violence.

2. The girls are attending Youth classes at church; the reverend teaches about DuBois, and Black pride. Daddy is turned down again for his license, and Nellie is afraid they might have to go back to Tennessee. A riot breaks out at the beach, and continues every night in the streets. When Daddy says he's going out in the streets to fight for his family Erma speaks for the first time since Uncle Pace died, begging him to stay. She tells them how Uncle Pace told her he was attacked by white men for sitting in the white only section of the train when the colored section was full, and left on the railroad tracks. Nell goes out to find Mother Doris's cat, and is saved from a mob attack by the bully from Tennessee. Uncle Meese and William narrowly escaped a mob. The riots cool down.

3. Will the newspaper man recommended by Mr. Hill be able to help Daddy get his license, or will it just stir up trouble?

August- September, 1919 (129-150)

1. Segregation—de facto—After the riot the white people no longer come to the Colored neighborhoods, and Black people “dare not go beyond the South Side—especially after dark. (131)

Reception/Reaction—Mama participates in an anti-lynching protest, and some white women join them when a mob tries to break it up. (134)

Assimilation—Nell's friend Rosie has her hair straightened. (136) Nell and Erma get theirs done when Rosie's mom finishes at the Walker Beauty School. She says now they will have “white folk's hair, which infuriates Nell. (141)

Assistance—The editor of the Black newspaper got Daddy an interview with the first Black city alderman, who promises to help Daddy get his license. (150)

Segregation/Discrimination—Nell and Erma start attending the Colored school, which has far too many students in each class, and old wobbly desks. (142)

2. The riots finally calm down, but now the price of everything is going up. Nell's father takes a job so he will look more stable when he applies again for a license. William left for St. Louis to work as a Pullman porter. Nell and Erma are placed in the third grade after placement tests. When Nell is mean to a country girl from her old town, her mother lectures her on good behavior: “Don't ever fall into that trap of thinking you're better off than somebody because you've got stuff and things. It is better to act beautiful than to be beautiful. And it is far better to be smart than to act smart.” (146)

3. Will Daddy finally get his business license without offering a bribe?

October-November, 1919 (p. 150-168)

1. Work/mobility—Daddy finally gets his license without lowering himself to bribery and opens the funeral home. (159)
Adjustment/Assistance—Aunt Thannie comes from Harlem to visit; she has join the Universal Negro Improvement Association headed by Marcus Garvey (162)
Black Entrepreneurs—Uncle Meese is opening an “establishment” in France, where Colored people are welcomed and all can enjoy “Colored people’s music, dance are, and books.” (165)
2. Nell survives a terrible case of measles, with the help of the hospital; she probably wouldn’t have survived if they still lived in the South. WWI is finally officially over, but Nell isn’t excited for the parade because all she thinks of is how Uncle Pace should be there marching as a proud veteran. Their apartment building has a giant Thanksgiving meal together, and Nell’s daddy gave the blessing, thanking God for bringing all of them “through so many trials and tribulations” without getting discouraged. The funeral home finally opens.
3. Will Miss Franklin and Reverend Prince get married? That would mean Miss Franklin could no longer be their teacher; married women have to quit.

December-Epilogue, (p.168-185)

1. Black Entrepreneurs—Daddy is a member of the Wabash Businessmen’s Alliance. (168)
Black Writers—Reverend Prince read “If We Must Die,” the famous Claude McKay poem about fighting back against violence and lynching. (171)
Assistance—Daddy helps Reverend Prince get a new, bigger building for his growing church, and when the Reverend asks how he can ever repay him, Daddy says, “Pass it on...Pass it on.” (173)
2. Christmas comes, and Nell’s family spends the day at the YMCA, serving dinner to homeless people. They have a lovely day with gifts and letters from home. Nell’s family throws a surprise party for her. The epilogue finishes each character’s life. Nell, always the fighter, worked in the White House, for Eleanor Roosevelt, advising her on issues of race and race relations. At her funeral, her granddaughter explained how, surrounded by the love of her family, she was an “unmovable force” as she fought for justice, peace, and equality.