

Approved for use in English III

Summary of the Work:

The Big Sky is the first of A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s epic adventure novels of America's vast frontier, introducing Boone Caudill, Jim Deakins, and Dick Summers, three of the most memorable characters in Western American literature. Traveling the Missouri River from St. Louis to the Rockies, these frontiers-men live as trappers, traders, guides, and explorers. The story centers on Caudill, a young Kentuckian driven by a raging hunger for life and a longing for the blue sky and brown earth of big, wild places. Caught up in the freedom and savagery of the wilderness, Caudill becomes an untamed mountain man in 1830's Montana.

Rationale:

The Big Sky keys in on the time period of westward expansion and aptly exemplifies this epoch in American history. The novel dovetails nicely with juniors' concurrent study of American history.

Although some of the subject matter is somewhat graphically described, Guthrie sought to portray the mountain man, not as the fictional "virtuous Leather stocking," but as a realistic character naturalistically at the mercy of his savage environment. Likewise, the supporting characters, including 19th century women, Native Americans, and others are shown as observed through the eyes of the fictional mountain men. These character depictions provide fertile ground for classroom discussions dealing with the mythical West versus the realistic West.

Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

Stegner, Wallace. "Foreward" *The Big Sky*, 1947. Bantam Books: Toronto.

* Print resources are available from the library media center and libraries in the district. Contact any library media specialist to view the scholarly sources.

* Scholarly reviews are also available online through Books in Print and Gale. Contact the library media specialist to obtain username and password information to access the subscription database of full-text reviews.

Noted Distinction:

- See Titlewave for Awards.

Readability:

- Lexile Score: 960
- Readability Level: 8.5

Learning Resources Guidelines:

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

Standard Alignment: [\(link\)](#)

Approval:

Submitted to Committee:

Approved for Adoption: 1975

Notes on the Text:

(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)

As the majority of the action in the novel takes place in Montana, students have the opportunity to broaden their background in Montana history, and to have a real world connection to the surroundings depicted in the novel.

Connection to the Curriculum:

As the District junior curriculum delineates the study of naturalism, this novel meets that mandate well. The major themes of American literature, loss of innocence, coming of age, relationship with nature, alienation and isolation, survival of the fittest, disillusionment, and the American Dream, as listed in the curriculum, are woven dominantly throughout the novel.

Additional Connections:

(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)

The Montana Endowment for the Humanities has produced a film on A. B. Guthrie Jr.'s life entitled *Vanishing Paradise* that is available through the IMC. Although it is somewhat dated, the material in it provides valuable background on Guthrie and his subject matter, themes, and philosophy.