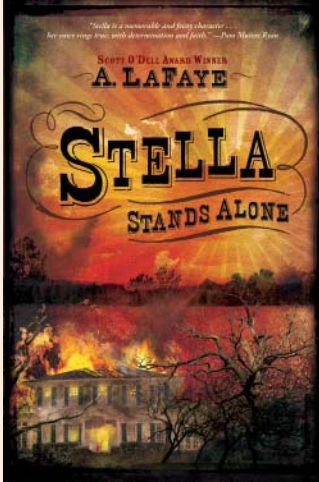


Stella Stands Alone: A Teaching Guide



Stella Stands Alone
by A. LaFaye

A. LaFaye
www.alafaye.com
ALaFayeBooks@aol.com

About the Book

When her father is murdered and her mother succumbs to yellow fever, fourteen-year-old Stella Reid finds herself orphaned—and her beloved home in jeopardy. Because of her age and her gender, Stella has no claim to her family’s plantation. She might have a chance if only her father, and his progressive ideas about slavery, hadn’t alienated the Reids from their neighbors. Now the bank has repossessed Oak Grove. Even though Stella and the folks who work the plantation have few rights in the antebellum South, Stella fights against incredible odds in order to preserve the only home she’s ever known.

Pre-Reading

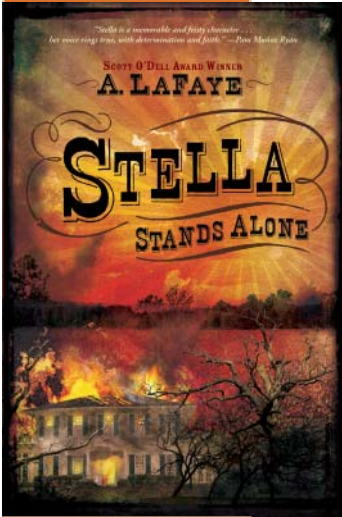
Read the letter from the author at the beginning of the book. Then discuss the idea of alternative history. What American or worldwide events from history would you most like to change? What would the domino effect of that decision be? Why do you think the author chose to write this story with an alternative historical approach? Predict what you think will be most important about using this literary device.

Discussion Guide

1. After reading the first chapter, fill out the following graphic organizer:

Main Character	Conflict	Setting	Prediction

2. Explain why Stella’s upbringing is extraordinarily different from that of most daughters from that time period and location. Why is she peculiar to the point that some people even call her “touched?” How does it add to her conflicts with those around her?
3. Do you think Hattie’s problem is even worse than Stella’s? Why or why not? What about Miss Rosie? What memories haunt her? Whose shoes would you least like to be inside? Why?
4. What promise had Stella’s father made to the folks who worked at Oak Grove? Why couldn’t he keep that promise? Is it better to break a promise or never to have made one in the first place?

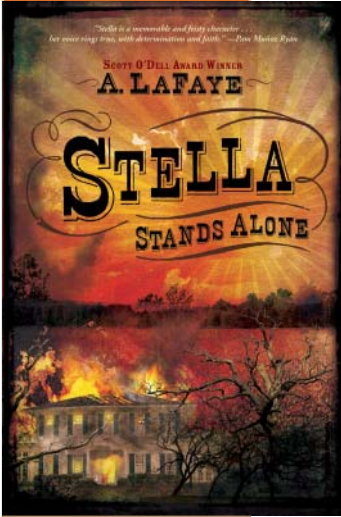


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5. What plan do the people of Oak Grove make to stay on the land? How is cooperation imperative for this to work? What could go wrong with the plan? How does Stella plan to keep her home? What would you do to keep yours?
6. How is the money Stella finds “blood money?” Do you think there is ever a circumstance where blood money should be used? What would you do if you found yourself in possession of something that had been gotten through the suffering of others? What would you do?
7. What happened to Mr. Reid and Mr. Beeman? Were they targeted? Why? Do people still act out in violence against those with whom they disagree?
8. Mr. Vinson suspects that Stella might try to outbid the folks on the fallow land. Why does he have no trust in Stella? How is trust developed? How is it fixed when damaged? Have you ever had to rebuild trust?
9. Richardson is a formidable antagonist and adversary to Stella. What has he done to hold Stella and the folks of Oak Grove down? How did things sour between the Reids and the Richardsons? What events can be traced back to Richardson? Why was Stella’s family targeted?
10. Stella is stumped on the combination to daddy’s safe. Is she ever able to find out what’s inside? Does it solve her problems? What numbers would be important to you or your family?
11. How does cousin Mertle come to aid Stella? Why does she choose to get involved? Who would you turn to if you needed help? Can you imagine Stella living inside Miss Mertle’s world or not? Why?
12. Stella listens to the voice of God to lead her actions as she prays for advice. How does she show her faith? What solace does it bring her?
13. Why is Stella’s plan to use a Yankee such a bold move against the community? Why are Yankees so hated in the south? How does Mr. Dooley aide Stella? What does he expect in return? Do the people of Oak Grove fair well in the auction or not?
14. “I’ve always been one to follow my own path—cutting through the woods while most people take the road, using an open window rather than a door, sitting on a roof ‘stead of a porch. . . .I followed my mind.” (p. 13) Do you, like Stella, care little for what others think you should do or do you feel bound by expectations? Do you think Stella’s ways hinder or help her reach her goals?

15. How do the day-to-day operations at Oak Grove work? How is it not what Mr. Dooley expected? Contrast it to the way most plantations in the Delta were run during this period. In the end what happens to Oak Grove?



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16. Why do you think the author decided to write this novel with an alternative history approach? For a definition of "alternative history" see the author's note at the opening of the novel. How does it lend itself to new perspectives on the time period? What setting would you choose for an alternative history story that you might write? Why?

17. What weapon does Richardson use against Oak Grove and the folks on it? What techniques do they have to fight against fire in this time? Besides fire, what other forms of intimidation do they use? Would you be scared enough to fall in line given similar circumstances? What are the long-term effects for both land and people?

18. Miss Rosie lost all three of her sons--not to death, but slavery. How does this haunt her? In the end is she able to reconnect with any of them? How difficult would it be for former slaves to find each other? Without literacy how could people reconnect?

19. How are matters of ownership of Oak Grove finally figured out? What happens to Mr. Dooley? Why has Mr. Dooley felt like a failure despite his wealth and opportunities? How is Hattie's contract finally resolved? How were African American people often controlled despite the end of slavery?

20. LaFaye's language is both rich and lyrical, "Day hadn't even shaken the night out of his coat"(p. 20) as well as colloquial, "That man had him more secrets than a family of five daughters." (p. 191) Find your favorite examples of both and discuss what the language contributes to story.

It's Your Turn to Ask Questions

What question would you ask Stella, if you could?

What would Stella Say in Response?

What question would you ask the author if you could?

Go ahead and ask --email A. LaFaye at alafayebooks@aol.com

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*Are You Ready
for
Some Projects?*

Classroom Projects

History:

Research the sharecropping system of the post-Civil War era in America. How did the economic system work? For more on sharecropping visit:

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/reconstruction/section3/section3_intro.html

Share what you've learned in the mode of your choice using a(n) written, illustrated, audio, or visual presentation.

Math:

The folks on Oak Grove would only be paid \$2.50 a week by the time the upkeep of the cabins and the fees for a teacher were deducted from their pay. Research the cost of typical goods and services of that time period and create a budget based on this wage. How could people survive?

Oak Grove (1700 acres and all buildings p. 125-126) sold for a whopping \$56,000 just after the Civil War. How much would a property like this cost today? Create a chart that shows the inflation of real estate in the United States in the last 100 years.

Reading:

As you read *Stella Stands Alone*, write a prediction at the end of each chapter about what you think will happen next. Be sure to use clues from the story and what you know about novels to make your predictions logical. If your predictions don't come true, look at how the author advanced the story by using the element of surprise to develop character, suspense, or subplots.

Writing:

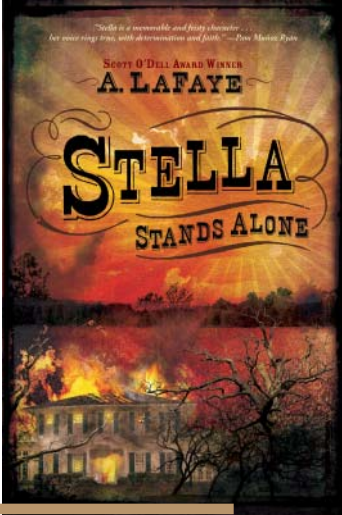
One of the best ways to become a better writer is by studying the writing of published authors. Find something in this novel that you thought was well written. Was it the descriptions? The dialogue? The character development? Choose one element of writing (i.e. character or voice) and make a list of what this author does well to create that element. Provide an example of each. Like this:

- Details:
1. **Unique** "pop a vocal chord like a fiddle string" (p. 3)
 2. **Concrete** "felt hog-tied and ready to be thrown in a pot for boiling" (p. 32)
 3. **Sensory** "on my knees like a dog, panting between coughs, begging for air" (p. 198)

And so on ...

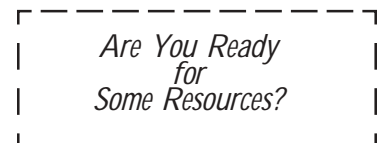
Use that list to create elements of your own.

Write a short story which is based on an alternative historical event. Play master to the past! Then, as a class, discuss which story would have the most repercussions to modern society.

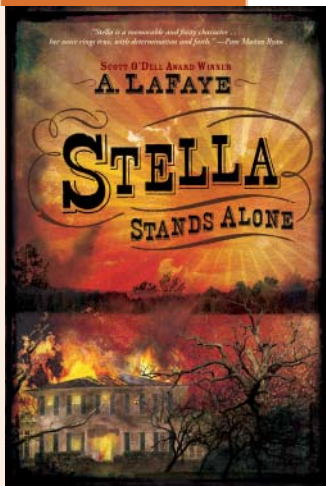


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Web Resources for Further Study



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<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/reconstruction/index.html>

http://www.besthistorysites.net/USHistory_SouthSlavery.shtml

http://www.hist.unt.edu/web_resources_mil/pre_civil_war.htm

http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/tr_gateway/research_guides/history/civwar.shtml

Can You Keep a Promise?

In *Stella Stands Alone*, Stella struggles to keep her father's promise to turn Oak Grove into a cooperative plantation and will bequeath part of the land to each of the people who had been enslaved by the Reid family. Keeping this promise did one small thing to improve the world Stella lived in.

What promise can you make to improve your world?

For more information on how to make a difference in your community visit:

<http://www.kidscanmakeadifference.org/>

<http://www.tolerance.org/index.jsp>

<http://www.nslexchange.org>

<http://www.learnandserve.org>

Also check out:*The Complete Guide to Service Learning* by Cathy Kaye

About the Author

A. LaFaye's first name is Alexandria. When she started school, she was a bit like Stella and did things her own way--not to be contrary, but to be herself. Her unusual ways made it tough to make friends, so Alexandria wanted to learn to do something that would make other people want to be her friend. She chose writing. She started writing when she was eight years old and wrote her first novel in sixth grade. And before you say, "I can't do that!" you should know that Alexandria has dyslexia, which is a learning disability that makes it really hard to learn to read and write. If she can do it, so can you!

So go out there and make your own dreams come true!



You can visit
A. LaFaye at
www.alafaye.com