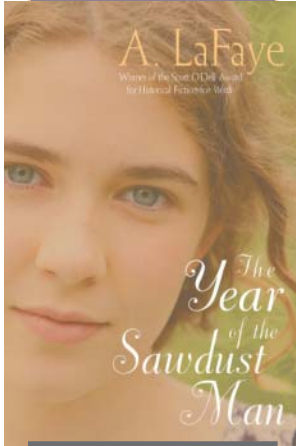


# *The Year of the Sawdust Man: Teaching Guide*

## *About the Book*



*The Year of the  
Sawdust Man*  
by A. LaFaye

Most folks in Harper Louisiana, think that Heirah, Nissa Bergen’s free-spirited mother, is crazy. Bringing your daughter onto the roof to look at the stars and chasing butterflies at afternoon picnics is simply not the way to raise a proper young lady. But Nissa loves her mama. They’re best friends, so when Nissa returns home after school to find that all the flowers have been cut from her mama’s prized purple rose bushes, she knows her mama has left for good. Only Heirah would do such a thing.

Nissa can’t understand why her mama would leave, but the gossiping townsfolk have plenty of ideas. Some think Heirah ran off with another man. Nissa remembers her mother coming home on Sundays, smelling of sawdust. Could she have gone away with “The Sawdust Man”? If so, does it mean she is gone forever? And now that Nissa’s papa has begun to see Miss Lara Ross, Nissa fears her family will never be the same again. In this beautifully crafted and evocative debut novel, A. LaFaye delves into the conflicting emotions of a young girl struggling to understand that her mother can leave her yet still love her, yet realizing that she must accept the new shape her family is taking.

## *Pre-Reading*

**What do you think the title could mean? If you had to title your own life now it would be “The Year of the....” what?**

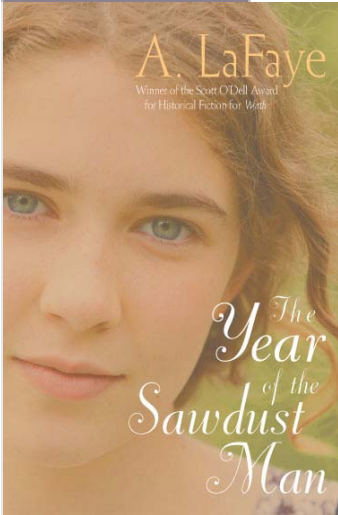
## *Discussion Guide*

1. The novel opens with Nissa’s mama disappearing. What clues does Nissa have that she is gone for good? Why does she not seem particularly surprised? Can you imagine how she must feel?
2. Explain the meaning of each chapter title. Why do you think the author chose the titles that she did? Can you find a line that best represents each chapter? Or a description that best fits each character?
3. Describe the town of Harper, Louisiana. What did Mama mean when she called it a “canned town”? How does Mama fit in there? How do you think Nissa will fit in as an adult? Do you think she will stay?
4. Nissa thinks, “Adults are so phony—you’d think they were all auditioning for a picture show.” (p.58) Do you agree or not? Are kids more authentic?
5. Describe Nissa’s mother, Heirah. Do you think she was good for Nissa or not? What options were available to most women during this time period? How does Heirah feel? What memories haunt Nissa about life with her mother? What do we learn about Mama that makes her more sympathetic? Do you blame Mama?

A. LaFaye  
[www.alafaye.com](http://www.alafaye.com)  
[ALaFayeBooks@aol.com](mailto:ALaFayeBooks@aol.com)

## *More Questions to Ponder*

6. Who is Miss Ross? How would you feel watching your father court a new woman? Do you blame Papa for pursuing a new life or not? Why? Does Nissa need a new mama? Compare Miss Ross to Heirah. Are they alike at all? How are they different?
7. Who is Nissa's best friend? How do their parents feel about them being friends? Do you argue with your best friend too? Why are some friendships better able to handle conflict than others? How do you know if someone is a true friend? How did Mary show that she was Nissa's true friend?
8. Nissa acts out in several dramatic ways against her frustration and anger at the world and her Mama. What things does she do? How does Miss Ross teach her to deal with her anger instead? What do you do when you are very irritated?
9. "Love is a feeling and it drives you to do many crazy and wonderful things, but it doesn't make you loyal. Devotion's what makes you stay." Do you agree with Grandma Dee's distinction between love and devotion? Which one do you think is more important? If you had to choose between one of them which one would you choose? Why?
10. Nissa seems to have an old soul inside her young body. Was she born like this or was she taught to ask pointed questions? Which do you think is more important-heredity (what you are born with) or the environment (how you are raised)? Why?
11. What was the relationship between people of different races during the time period of the novel? How did Heirah ignore them? Do you think you would have been brave enough to step outside of social expectations of that time period?
12. Describe Nissa's relationships with both her father and her Grandma Dee. Do you think they could make up for the loss of her mother? How did they try? What family relationships are most important for you?
13. By the end of the novel which characters do you feel the most sympathy for? Who are you rooting for and believing in? How do authors develop a reader's feelings toward a character? How was LaFaye able to pull you into the lives of these characters? If she wrote a sequel to the novel, what would you most like to know?
14. In the end, what conclusions did Nissa come to about her mother and why she left? Do you think Nissa will be better off with Miss Ross as a day-to-day mama? Will Mama find peace and happiness out in the world on her own? What do you think would've happened to Heirah if she'd never left Harper?



*The Year of the Sawdust Man* by A. LaFaye

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

Are You Ready  
for  
Some Projects?

## Classroom Projects

### History:

Research and explore the south before the Civil Rights Movement. Find out about Jim Crow laws and the expectations of people who were African American during this time. To learn more, visit:

[http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories\\_events\\_depression.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_depression.html)

Show what you've learned in a(n) written, illustrated, audio, or video presentation.

Explore the rights of women during the time period of the novel. Create a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the expectations and opportunities that were available for most women. <http://www.legacy98.org/>

As a class, discuss what you learned.

### Reading:

Create a cause and effect chart as you read the novel. Be sure to show how one action leads to the next. Circle events which you think change the direction of the novel. In a short journal, explain why you chose those scenes as most important.

### Language Arts:

Write letters from one character to another as you read the story. Be sure to summarize important events for the other character and try to write believable responses with a similar voice.

### Art:

Create a piece of collage on an old shoe box made from any materials you like that show Nissa's perspective of the events in the novel. On the inside of the box tape a short journal about why you picked the images and colors that you did.

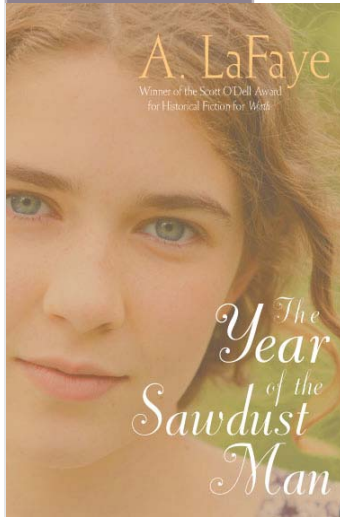
### Writing:

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** "spreading them about faster than thistle down in a windstorm" ( p. 20)  
2. **Concrete** " rain... like chattering fairies" (p. 203) or "sparks like evil rain" (p. 69)  
3. **Sensory** "His hans were as rough as raw wood" (p. 7)

And so on ...

Follow that list to create your own elements of your own.



*The Year of the Sawdust Man* by A. LaFaye

A. LaFaye  
[www.alafaye.com](http://www.alafaye.com)  
[ALaFayeBooks@aol.com](mailto:ALaFayeBooks@aol.com)

Are You Ready  
to  
Know More About  
the Author

## About the Author



A. LaFaye

A. LaFaye's first name is Alexandria. When she started school, she was a bit like Heirah Rae and did things her own way. 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 starting 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!

***Go out there and make your own dreams come true!***

*The Year of the Sawdust Man* was Alexandria's first published novel. She has several more novels available that you might enjoy. Stop by her website to learn more about her books, her life, and her school visits. She'd love to hear from you and even visit your school. Say hello at [www.alafaye.com](http://www.alafaye.com)

## Do You Live in a Place Like Harper?

In *The Year of the Sawdust Man* Nissa lives in a town that is not very accepting of difference. Is the place where you live like that? How about your school?

**What can you do to make it a place where everyone is accepted?**

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

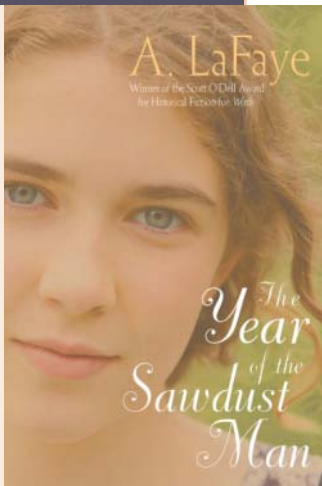
<http://www.tolerance.org/index.jsp>

<http://www.giraffe.org.html>

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

## More About this Guide

This guide was created by [Tracie Vaughn Zimmer](http://www.tracievaughnzimmer.com) ([www.tracievaughnzimmer.com](http://www.tracievaughnzimmer.com)), a reading specialist and children's author. Visit her website to find hundreds of guides to children's literature.



*The Year of the Sawdust Man* by A. LaFaye