

## THE COTTONMOUTH CLUB

### Louisiana Young Readers' Choice Award Nominee 2008 Grades 6-8

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**The Cottonmouth Club** by Lance Marcum. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005. 328 pages.

#### Summary

Mitch Valentine has just finished the sixth grade, and he and his best friend Tick have already laid out their plans for the best summer vacation ever. Unfortunately, Mitch's parents inform him that they have made different plans which include visiting the country relatives down in Pitkin, Louisiana for two whole months! While his younger brother is having the time of his life, Mitch struggles to overcome his anger, depression and discomfort (no air-conditioning, no television, swarms of mosquitoes, sleeping accommodations, etc.). Mitch makes friends with the wrong people, tries to steal his cousin's girl, escapes a raging bull, and is nearly killed by a water moccasin. While all this is going on, Mitch comes to some realizations, reaches an understanding with his country cousins, and manages to confront his fears.

Read an excerpt: <http://www.lancemarcum.com/cottonmouth.htm>

#### Awards

International Reading Association, Notable Children's Book for 2006.

#### Author's Biography

Lance Marcum is a former sixth grade teacher from Fair Oaks, California. He is married, has two children and two grandchildren. This is Mr. Marcum's first published book. The book is loosely based on his own experiences on his grandfather's farm in Louisiana. In addition to being an author, Mr. Marcum holds writing workshops for elementary and middle school students as well as shorter half-day motivational assemblies. The author has plans to begin a second novel based on characters introduced in the first novel.

<http://www.lancemarcum.com/>

#### Related Titles

##### Summer High-Jinx

*Harris and Me* by Gary Paulsen. An eleven-year old boy spends an adventurous and hilarious summer with his cousin on a ranch.

*A Long Way from Chicago* by Richard Peck. This is a rollicking tale about a girl who goes to spend the summer with her down-state grandmother.

##### Taking a Dare

*Jumping the Nail* by Eve Bunting. Elisa plans to jump off a cliff to please her boyfriend.

##### Overcoming Adversity or Inner Turmoil

*Wringer* by Jerry Spinelli. A young boy struggles between his conscious and what's expected of him.

*Shiloh* by Phyllis Naylor. A boy rescues a dog from its' cruel owner.

*Echohawk* by Lynda Durrant. A boy raised by Indians is sent to school with "white-people."

*The Only Outcast* by Julie Johnston. A boy spends the summer with his grandparents after his mother dies.

*Bearstone* by Will Hobbs. A Native American boy is sent to work on a farm during the summer.

*Red Dog* by Bill Wallace. A boy tries to protect his family.

### **Growing Up in Louisiana**

*Fiddle Fever* by Sharon Arms Doucet. A young boy in Louisiana tries to fulfill his dreams even though it goes against his mom's wishes.

*My Louisiana Sky* by Kimberly Willis Holt. Tiger must choose whether to stay in her small town and take care of her parents or move to the big city of Baton Rouge and live with her aunt.

*Part of Me* by Kimberly Willis Holt. This is a collection of vignettes about 4 generations of a Louisiana family.

### **Classroom Connections**

- After students read the book, have them make comments about the book on this web site: <http://www.bookhive.org/books/bookcomments.asp?id=2161>
- After reading *The Cottonmouth Club*, have the students write a journal entry describing a family vacation that they will always remember. In the journal, the following questions should be answered:
  1. Who went on the vacation with you?
  2. Where was the destination?
  3. Where you excited, nervous, or upset about it?
  4. Was the trip what you expected it to be?
  5. What makes this vacation memorable?If any students have not gone on a family vacation yet, have them write about a family vacation that they would like to go on one day.
- Students will participate in a friendship activity. Write the headings of two lists on the board. One list will be the "Desirable Friends" list and the other list will be the "Undesirable Friends" list. Brainstorm examples of desirable friends and undesirable friends. Then have students write a letter to Mitch stressing the actions of Finn that made him an undesirable friend.
- Students will research Cottonmouth snakes. Divide the class into four groups. Each group will have a question to research. These are the questions:
  - Where does this type of snake live?
  - What does the snake eat?
  - Is it venomous? If so, what happens if someone gets bit?
  - What are its distinguishing colors and patterns?Each group will submit a written report and present the information to the class as a group.
- Have students use a blank map of the United States to trace the route that Mitch's family took from California to Pitkin, Louisiana. Using the scale of miles, determine how many miles they traveled and the states they traveled through.

### **Social Studies: 7<sup>th</sup> Grade/American History**

Have students research the history of Fort Polk. Student reports should emphasize the impact of the military base on the economy of the region, such as providing jobs for citizens who work on the base as well as generating income for people who provide goods and services (entertainment) to soldiers when they leave the base. Also to be considered is the effect that military bases have on local society and family structures: For example, Are young men and women leaving the area to join the service or marry service members? Another point of consideration is the

environmental effects of military bases on local ecosystems, such as abandoned/unexploded munitions and chemical waste. (7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade, Grade Level Expectations - 5, 10, 13, 50, 51).

### **8<sup>th</sup> Grade/Louisiana History**

Have students read the book and create a report that identifies cultural elements in the book that are specific to Louisiana. (8<sup>th</sup> Grade, Grade Level Expectations – 5, 8, 9, 13).

Have the students draw a map of Louisiana (or the parish) and locate and label all the places mentioned in the book. (8<sup>th</sup> Grade, Grade Level Expectations – 2, 3).

**Science:** Teachers could incorporate certain sections of this book when doing a lesson on swamps, snakes, gravity/physics (swinging on a rope and the cause of Mitch's rope burns).

(6<sup>th</sup> Grade, Grade Level Expectations – Motions and Forces -14, 15, 17).

(7<sup>th</sup> Grade, Grade Level Expectations – Adaptations of Organisms – 30, 31, 32, 34).

(7<sup>th</sup> Grade, Grade Level Expectations – Science and the Environment – 35, 39, 40).

### **Web Sites**

#### **Missourian News**

<http://www.semissourian.com/story/1171095.html>

Includes the overview of a presentation that the author gave at a school in Missouri.

#### **Snakes and Swamps**

##### **VENOMOUS/Cottonmouth Snakes**

<http://www.snakesandfrogs.com/scra/snakes/cotton.htm>

Information about the Eastern Cottonmouth and the Florida Cottonmouth.

##### **The Cottonmouth Water Moccasin**

<http://www.wf.net/~snake/moccasin.htm>

Information about cottonmouth water moccasin snakes that includes photos.

##### **Discovery School**

<http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/snakes/>

Lesson plan on how snakes survive.

##### **National Teacher Training Institute**

[http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/nti/resources/lessons/s\\_warriors/index.html](http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/nti/resources/lessons/s_warriors/index.html)

A lesson on snake evolution and characteristics.

##### **Reptiles and Amphibians**

<http://www.kathimitchell.com/reptiles.htm>

This site contains dozens of links to other sites about snakes.

##### **National Groundwater Association**

<http://www.ngwa.org/educator/lessonplans/wetlands3.cfm>

Lesson plan about analyzing wetlands.

##### **National Teacher Training Institute/ Lesson Plans: Ambush Warriors**

[http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/nti/resources/lessons/s\\_warriors/index.html](http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/nti/resources/lessons/s_warriors/index.html)

Lesson plan for a 7<sup>th</sup> -8<sup>th</sup> grade level unit on snakes. It includes an overview of snakes, learning objectives, a video, and other web links for information about snakes.

## **Social Studies Lesson Plans**

### **NewsHour Extra**

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/socialstudies/brac.html>

A civics lesson on military bases and their impact.

### **Center for Economic Conversion**

<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/sustecon/lessons/lesson7.html>

This site has several activities (high school level) that can be adapted to younger students concerning the impact of military bases on the economy.

### **Louisiana History Teachers**

<http://www.louisiana101.com/>

A site that gives information and ideas to middle school teachers of Louisiana History.