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Activity One

LIFE ON SARAH'S MOUNTAIN

The setting of *M.C. Higgins, the Great*, certainly makes for an intriguing backdrop for this novel. The mountainous country of West Virginia is recognized by visitors as being the most beautiful part of the United States. John Denver's song, *Country Roads*, pays homage to this:

Almost heaven, West Virginia,
Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River.

The Appalachian Mountains, home to M.C. and his family, extend for more than 1600 miles — from Quebec all the way to Georgia.

The author makes reference to the great variety of vegetation and wildlife found in this part of North America. Below are a few examples found in the text:

Flora (Plant Life)	Fauna (Animal Life)
Ginseng	Wild Turkey
Wild Daisy	Hoop Snake or Greengrass Snake
Sweetbriar	Bullhead
Gossamer	Catydid (Katydid)
White Pine tree	Prairie Dog
Gourd	Bobcat
Mushroom	Skunk

Choose **one** of the examples from the above chart (or another from the novel that is approved by your teacher).

Create an information card for your choice. The card should resemble a large baseball card, complete with a picture of your plant or animal. This picture can be drawn or printed from the Internet and pasted to the card.

Your card should also include at least five facts about this particular item that your friends would find interesting.

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Activity Two

CASTING DIRECTOR

This activity can be done with students working in small groups.

Imagine you are the casting director for a movie company planning to do a film version of this novel. You are to cast all of the major roles for the movie and must choose one of the following two scenarios:

a) For the list of characters in the box below, choose an appropriate Hollywood actor to fill each role and write a brief explanation as to **why** you chose this particular actor.

OR

b) For the list of characters below, choose an appropriate person from your own class or school to fill each role and write a brief explanation as to **why** you chose this particular person. For this assignment, you might choose fellow students (including yourself), teachers, principal, custodian, etc.

Roles

- **M.C.** _____
- **Ben** _____
- **Lurhetta** _____
- **Jones** _____
- **Banina** _____
- **Mr. Lewis** _____
- **Ben's Mom** _____
- **Ben's Dad** _____
- **Macie Pearl** _____

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Activity Three

PUT IT ON FILM

- **To be done in groups of four or more**

One of the fascinating things about putting book to film is in the many different interpretations of a scene which are possible. To illustrate this, you may wish to check out a number of student-made clips of scenes from novels which are posted on **YouTube**. You may also be able to find a copy of the 1987 version of this movie.

The task of your production team is to recreate a particular scene from the novel. Choose your scene carefully. Factors to consider:

- **length** (2-3 minutes ~ 2-3 pages is advised)
- **number of characters** (i.e. M.C. and Lurhetta's visit to Ben's village might be impractical because of the number of people involved)
- **setting** (i.e. the swim through the tunnel would be impractical because of the setting)
- **dialogue** (i.e. too much dialogue can be difficult to memorize for the actors; too little might make the scene a bit boring)

Your Task:

Create a short scene from the novel and present it to the class on film or in person. A script must be written, roles must be assigned, and rehearsals must be scheduled before filming or performing. You may wish to present the film in Readers Theater format.

Be sure that when you are presenting your finished project to the class, it is your best effort.

Have fun!

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Activity Four

A GIFT OF SONG

It is evident that Banina is a most gifted singer and the whole Higgins family values their musical heritage. Yodeling and the spirituals from the past form an important part of their lives and relationships.

The Negro Spiritual has been a valuable contributor to the musical heritage of not only the United States, but the entire English-speaking world. Some of the more famous songs include: **Swing Low, Sweet Chariot; Dry Bones** and **Go Down Moses**. The songs, **Wade in the Water, The Gospel Train** and **Swing Low, Sweet Chariot** describe methods of escape used by fleeing slaves.

The influence of these spirituals is also seen in the music of such famous songwriters as Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger.

Go down Moses

Way down in Egypt land

Tell all Pharaohs

To let my people go

When Israel was in Egypt land

Let my people go

Oppressed so hard they could not stand

Let my people go

“Thus spoke the Lord”, bold Moses said

“If not, I’ll smite your first born dead

Let my people go

Your Task:

- Your task is to do an investigation of the Negro Spirituals. You may wish to do an overview of their important contributions to American society; their role as an encouragement to generations of slaves; or you may wish to investigate **one** particular song and report on its origins, author and historical significance.
- A good starting point might be to visit the website www.negrospirituals.com.
- Your report should be approximately a page in length.

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Activity Five

AN ALTERNATIVE ENDING

• **This activity can be done individually or in small groups.**

The conclusion of *M.C. Higgins, the Great* is very memorable. Not only does it tie-up a few loose ends (i.e. M.C. and his family begin to do something about the dangerous spoil heap poised above their home), but it is very moving and dramatic as well. The conclusion also leaves the reader wondering about other issues (i.e. will M.C. and his family leave the mountain? Will the spoil heap slide down on their house? Will Lurhetta return to the mountain? Will M.C.'s friendship with Ben flourish?).

What, though, if Virginia Hamilton had woken up on the wrong side of the bed on the day she wrote the novel's concluding chapters? What if it didn't end the way it is described in these pages, but had taken another turn in the road? What if Jones didn't accept M.C.'s actions in building the break wall or his friendship with Ben?

Although we will never know the answers to these questions, you will be given the opportunity of putting your imagination to work in coming up with what **might** have happened if the author's imagination had worked its way in an entirely different direction.

Your Task:

Working alone or in a group, brainstorm possible alternate endings to the novel. Remember to consider all of the principal characters. From your list of ideas, choose one ending to present to the class. Write a **detailed synopsis** of your alternate ending, presenting as much detail as possible. After presenting it to the class, you may wish to get their input as to additional changes that might be made to further improve your alternate ending.

Have fun!

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Activity Six

STRIP-MINING

Most good stories have an antagonist (bad guy) to make things interesting. In this novel, the antagonist is actually the unseen presence of the coal mining company, which has created the spoil heap high on the mountain above the Higgins' home.

Although strip-mining (or Mountaintop Removal Mining - MTR) is practiced in the Appalachian regions today, safety regulations have hopefully made things much safer for the families living in the proximity of such industries.

The bleakest landscape in the U.S. can be found where miners have torn away the earth's surface to get at coal deposits. Huge piles of gray debris, aptly called "orphan soil banks," stand like gravestones over land so scarred and acidic that only rodents can live there.

— *Time Magazine*

Your assignment is to do a brief report on the subject of strip-mining in North America. You may wish to consider the following subtopics:

- procedures/process involved in strip-mining;
- equipment;
- minerals excavated;
- impact on the environment/health (i.e. erosion, plants and animal life).

Your Task:

As a twist to this assignment — with your teacher's permission you may wish to address one of these alternate methods of mining: open pit mining, dredging, and highwall mining.

Your report should be approximately a half-page in length.