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**TEACHER GUIDE**  
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## **Three Songs for Courage**

Written by Maxine Trottier

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### **ABOUT THIS BOOK**

*Three Songs for Courage* is a potent mix of love, loss, and the sometimes-raw reality of living and dying. Set in the small, lakeside town of Erie View, Ontario in the mid-1950s — a golden decade of growth, prosperity, and rock-and-roll — sixteen-year-old Gordon Westley experiences a summer of extremes: love and hate, pain and pleasure, victory and defeat. He is the leader of the Lakers, a group of four friends who spend their time cruising the streets in Gordon's beloved car, *The Chief*, playing pool, hanging out at the local movie theater, pursuing first love. Along comes Lancer Caldwell and his unsavory gang, the Sultans. Conflict between Gordon and Lancer culminates in murder and the lust for revenge.

While the teenagers weave their secret lives, the adults are entangled in their own complicated and haunted realities. Young and old alike are oblivious to the fact that the nightmares of the past, the tragedy of the present, and the danger of the future are all intricately intertwined.

This story is masterfully unwound through laugh-out-loud humor, cutting wit, and gut wrenching sadness. It is an emotional journey that leads the reader through mystery, humor, days gone by, and, most of all, love and courage.

### **ABOUT THIS AUTHOR**

Maxine Trottier is the author of more than thirty books. Her work includes many picture books ranging from the light-hearted *Alison's House* to the touching *Prairie Willow*. She has also written many nonfiction books including the Canadian Biographies series, *Our Canadian Flag* and most recently, *Terry Fox: A Story of Hope*. She has published six

novels, including the trilogy beginning with *A Circle of Silver*. Though her work encompasses a wide variety of themes and genres, the common thread among her titles is her love of history.

Maxine was born on May 3, 1950 in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan. She moved with her family to Windsor, Ontario at the age of ten and became a Canadian citizen at the age of twenty-four.

She is a graduate of the University of Western Ontario and devoted thirty-one years to her teaching career. She lives with her husband and two Yorkies in both Port Stanley, Ontario and Newman's Cove, Newfoundland.

## TEACHING IDEAS

### Curriculum Connections

#### Language arts

Language, particularly slang, evolves over time and is influenced by pop culture, economics, political upheaval, and social conditions. Many new slang words were coined in the 1950's, words such as hepcat, flip, blast, and daddyo. Research the slang of the 1950's with consideration of how and why some of these words might have been coined and by whom, their meaning, and the impact they had on the culture.

#### Vocabulary from the book

quintessential(pg. 2)

limpets (pg. 10)

malodorous(pg. 19)

conniption(pg. 34)

contortions(pg. 56)

besotted(pg. 72)

imbecile(pg. 73)

eviscerated(pg. 97)

scabrous(pg. 100)

lexis(pg. 135)

nacre(pg. 244)

predilection(pg. 318)

## SOCIAL STUDIES

The roles of women in society have been slowly, yet steadily, changing throughout time. The lives of women in the 1950s were dramatically different in many ways than those of women today. Investigate the social expectations and roles of women in the 1950s and compare them to those of women today.

Fashion, clothing, and hairstyles have always been paramount to teenagers, regardless of the era. The way a person dresses is like a personal marquee for self-expression and for solidarity with one's social group. Research the teenaged fashion trends of the 1950s and compare them with those of today.

In the 1950s, popular culture in Canada included an influx of movies, television, music, and entertainers from the United States. American film stars such as Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Grace Kelly, Gary Cooper, and Humphrey Bogart brought adventure, romance, and drama into the movie houses across Canada. Choose one of the popular movie actors or actresses of the 1950s and research his or her life and work. Discuss how this person might have influenced Canadian culture at the time.

### SCIENCE

The Great Lakes contribute significantly to the weather patterns of Southwestern Ontario. Storms brew quickly and can be devastating to recreational boaters, fishermen, and the people who live around the lakes. Research the weather patterns and trends of the Great Lakes.

### MATHEMATICS

The cost of living is a calculation of how much money is needed to buy the goods and services that constitute the basic necessities of life. These would include such items as milk, bread, clothing, gasoline, housing, and so on. As time passes, the cost of living typically increases. Investigate what some of these basic items would have cost, on average, in the mid-1950s. Compare these findings to what the same items would cost today. Discuss reasons for this difference.

Canadian families suffered the loss of thousands of loved ones throughout the tumultuous years of the World Wars. Research the number of Canadian casualties resulting from World War I and World War II. Compare these figures.

### MUSIC

The 1950s were an exciting and innovative time for music. The big bands were still going strong with Benny Goodman, Glen Miller, and the Dorsey Brothers playing highly orchestrated jazz and swing music. The crooners like Pat Boone, Nat King Cole, and Frank Sinatra were melting the hearts of fans with songs like "I Almost Lost My Mind," "Mona Lisa," and "Fly Me to The Moon." Rock and Roll was the new music craze. This combination of gospel music and the Southern blues had a strong back beat and set the feet of teenagers everywhere dancing. Choose one of these musical genres from the 1950s. Complete a comprehensive study of the roots of the music, the artists who performed it, and the songs that were popular during this era.

### PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Dancing and attending dances as social events were very popular pastimes throughout the 1950s. The classics, such as the waltz and fox trot, were enjoyed to the sounds of the big bands and the crooners. Rock and Roll spawned a whole new generation of dances, some of which were acceptable to the older generation and some of which

were not. Investigate the hip, new dances developed in the 1950s. Choose two dances and describe where they originated, whether or not they were socially acceptable at the time, and demonstrate how they were performed.

## HEALTH

Many of the soldiers who were fortunate enough to return home after the World Wars suffered terribly as a result of their horrific experiences. In the 1950s this condition was called “shell shock” or “battle fatigue.” Today we refer to it as “post-traumatic stress syndrome.” In either time, the meaning remains the same. Investigate the specific causes, symptoms, and treatments for this disorder.

## VISUAL ARTS

Postwar North America was a dynamic environment in which to work and create for visual artists. The atrocities of war behind them and hope for positive changes ahead, artists were looking for an innovative way of expressing this new world. It was in this era and social climate that abstract expressionism was born. Artists such as Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, and Franz Kline were experimenting with geometric shapes and bold colors. Research examples of abstract expressionism and then create a similar, unique work in the same form.

## DISCUSSION AND WRITING

### Discussion Questions

1. Compare your first impressions of Lancer Caldwell and Gordon Westley. How are these characters unique with respect to their physical appearance, social status, and personality?
2. What is the significance of Lancer Caldwell intentionally flicking his cigarette butt onto the hood of Gordon Westley’s beloved car. How does this assault foreshadow the future interactions between these two characters?
3. How does Gordon Westley alter his persona while cruising the streets in his car? He is described as “a mutant James Dean with pinkeye” (pg.18). How does this image differ from his own perception of himself?
4. Describe the ambiance of the Palace Theater and the personalities and quirks of its employees, Mr. Ligonier, Marla Jenkins, and Naomi Innagadda.
5. The Lakers, Gordon Westley, David Molonovitch, Frank Thibodaux, and Tony DeSalva, are best friends. Discuss their unique personalities and lives and how they both complement and support each other in these friendships.
6. Who is Joely Waters? What does he share in common with Gordon Westley that leads them to first establish and then develop a relationship?
7. Discuss the physical appearance and personality of Stan Westley. What makes him so endearing to others? What depth of relationship do Gordon and Stan share?
8. Gordon Westley is strongly attracted to the girl who he perceives as perfect, Mary Davidson. Discuss the insecurities and emotions that Gordon and Mary experience,

9. What are a person's three songs for courage, as explained by Joely Waters?
10. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Lancer Caldwell is a violent, troubled individual. Discuss examples of this pathology through examples of his behavior and actions.
11. What are the circumstances surrounding the death of Stan Westley? How did this tragedy affect each member of the Westley family? Explain how Stan's death became Gordon's second song for courage.
12. When Gordon and his friends were caught on the lake, out of gas and unprepared for a storm, they thought they were doomed. Explore what this experience must have been like for the boys and why they all felt compelled to perform some act of thanksgiving when it was over.
13. Discuss the significance to the plot of Stan's World War I service medal. Why was it given to Stan by his grandfather? What role did it play in Stan's death? What series of events surrounding the medal would eventually lead Gordon to the realization that Lancer Caldwell had murdered his brother?
14. As the story unfolds, deeper, more intimate insight into Joely Waters is revealed. How does this character develop throughout the first seventeen chapters of the novel?
15. Mary Davidson's character experiences significant personal growth over the summer of 1956. Discuss how Mary changed from the first visit to the beach in July, with Gord, Stan, and Robbie, to the Labor Day visit with Gord and their friends. How did her experiences affect her appearance, her perspective, and her personality?
16. Why did Gordon choose to tell Joely Waters both about Lancer's involvement in Stan's death and his plans for revenge? What is Joely's response?
17. Explore the relevance of the quotations at the beginning of each chapter. Why were they accredited to Amos Littlebird, Joely's grandfather, rather than the people who actually spoke them?
18. Gordon Westley and his father make a deeper connection with each other at the end of the story. Discuss how this new relationship, and a deeper understanding of each other, come to develop.
19. Lancer Caldwell is a destructive, cruel character. Was his death just and deserving? Does anyone have the right to take another's life?
20. Discuss Gordon and Mary's reconciliation. Was it destiny that they reunite, or did the events of the summer lead them to develop a new understanding of life and love? How did Stan play a role in this reunion?
21. At the end of the story, Gordon gains even deeper insights into the life of Joely Waters. What was Joely's background? Why did he give others a different impression of himself? How did his life experiences lead him to choose Gordon as his third song for courage?
22. What is the significance of Stan's World War I service medal being returned to Gordon, and then to his mother?