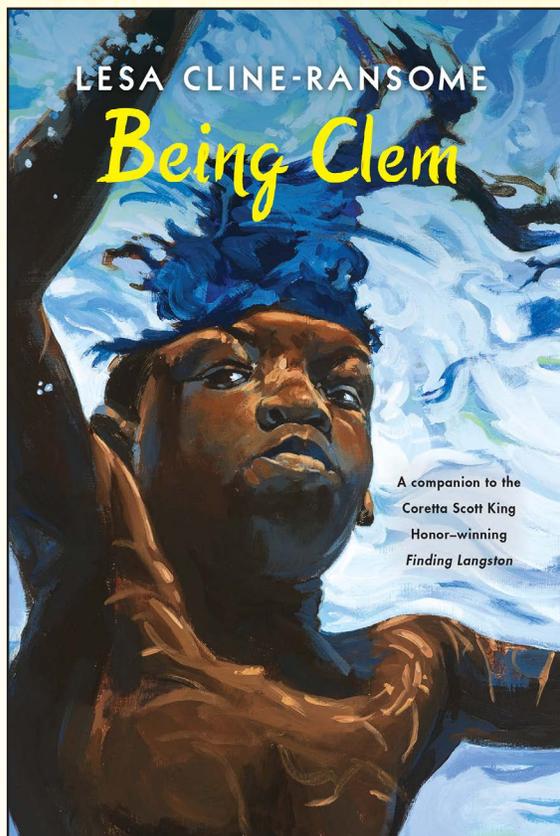


# HOLIDAY HOUSE



HC: 9780823446049 · E-BOOK: 9780823448968

## Being Clem

Lesa Cline-Ransome

### ABOUT THE BOOK

A brilliant and vulnerable African American boy must navigate his family's losses and struggles in 1940s Chicago from the award-winning author of *Finding Langston* and *Leaving Lymon*.

Clemson Thurber, Jr. was four years old when his daddy joined the navy, and he is nine-years-old when soldiers come to his family's apartment in Chicago's South Side to inform them that Clemson, Sr. was killed in the Port of Chicago Disaster on July 17, 1944. Since Clem has so few memories of his daddy, he can't grieve in the same way as Momma and his sisters, Clarisse and Annette. He wants to be brave like his daddy, and make Momma proud, but he is small and harbors fears, like learning to swim and

dealing with bullies. He is so intelligent that he skips third grade, but this makes him the target of much larger and tougher fourth grade guys. In sixth grade, he teams up with Errol, a neighbor, and Lymon, a new boy, to deal with Curtis, the school yard bully.

They call themselves the Three Musketeers, but when Errol and Lymon begin bullying Langston, a new boy from Alabama, Clem makes the decision to leave the Musketeers. He and Langston discover they have something in common—the love of books and the Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library. Something about Langston makes Clem feel brave, and he finally gains the courage to conquer his fears. He learns to swim from a member of the DuSable High School swim team, and he faces off with Lymon. His newly developed sense of self gives him the courage to speak up for himself to Momma and his sisters. He even manages to convince Momma to allow him to get a paper route and help with the family finances.

### PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Clem's father joined the navy during World War II, and was killed in the Port of Chicago Disaster. Read about this tragic incident on the following website: [history.com/this-day-in-history/port-chicago-disaster](http://history.com/this-day-in-history/port-chicago-disaster). Then write a one-page paper that explains why this incident during World War II was an example of race discrimination in the United State military.

Correlates to CCSS in Writing Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.1; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-5.3.



## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

- The novel opens with the night the family learns that Clemson Thurber, Sr. was killed in the Port of Chicago Disaster. Explain what Clem means when he says that on that night, Clarisse, his oldest sister, “looked like the momma and our momma looked like the child” (p. 3). Clem was very young when his father joined the navy. Debate whether grief is easier or more difficult for Clem because he doesn’t have many memories of his father. Discuss whether Momma ever overcomes grief.
- Discuss how Clemson Thurber’s death changes the family. How does each member of the family deal with these changes? Who suffers the most?
- Contrast Clarisse and Annette. Why does Clem say that Clarisse is hard to like? Explain the following simile: “She (Momma) had us lined up on the couch and was giving directions like she was a drill sergeant and we were recruits” (p. 31). Which of the recruits is most likely to disobey Momma?
- Momma has to go to work to pay the bills. She is turned down for secretarial work, though she has a secretary degree from the National Training School for Women and Girls in D. C. Define discrimination. How is Momma the victim of discrimination? She is forced to take a job as a maid for the Franklin family in the wealthy Hyde Park neighborhood. Explain why Momma cries on the first day of work. Clem’s sisters seem to understand what Momma is feeling. Why don’t they explain it to Clem? Later, Clem goes to work with Momma. Discuss his reaction when he hears Matthew Franklin call his mother “CeeCee.” Why does Clem think his mother looks older at work than she does at home?
- How is it obvious that Clem is Momma’s favorite child? Debate whether it’s because he’s the youngest, or whether it’s because he’s the only boy. How does being the favorite interfere with Clem’s journey toward becoming a man? Discuss why Clarisse sometimes calls Clem “Clementine.” Name times that Clem feels like a “Clementine.” Clem says, “All I did was my schoolwork. I just wish once someone would treat me like I had something to offer” (p. 35). At the end of the novel, Clem takes Anthony’s paper route. Discuss Momma’s response when Clem gives her the money from his earnings. How does this change Momma’s view of him? What else does Clem do to change how his family views him?
- Strength of family is evident throughout the novel. What is an extended family? The summer after his daddy dies, Clem and his sisters go to Milwaukee to visit Uncle Kent’s family. Contrast Clem and his first cousin, Kendrick. What things does Clem learn from his cousin? How is this trip different from his summer visits with his aunts in D.C.?
- Clem is very intelligent, and the school principal thinks that he should skip third grade. Explain why Mrs. Franklin is surprised to learn that Clem skipped a grade. Why do the boys in the fourth-grade call Clem “Professor”? Discuss why Clem wants to go back to third-grade. Explain what Momma means, “We can’t always do what’s easiest, Clem” (p. 14). Clem gives the answers to test questions to the boys sitting around him. Explain why he cheats when he knows it’s wrong. How is being so intelligent sometimes a burden for him?
- Describe Clem’s relationship with Errol. Explain what Clem means, “I might have to walk with Errol, but it didn’t mean I had to walk beside him” (p. 47). How is walking with Errol Momma’s idea, not Clem’s?
- Who are the bullies in the novel? How do Clem and Errol respond to them? Discuss why Clem, Errol team up with Lymon. They call themselves the Three Musketeers. Explain why Clem seems out of place in this group. The group calls Langston, Country Boy, because he’s from Alabama. Explain what Clem means, “The way Lymon treated him (Langston) didn’t have nothing to do with Country Boy and just about everything to do with Lymon” (p. 142). Clem makes a decision to leave the Three Musketeers. How is this a good decision? Explain how this is an act of courage.
- Lymon rips the pages from Langston’s library book. Discuss Langston’s reaction. Clem gathers the pages and gives them to Langston. Debate whether Langston is surprised by this kind gesture. How is this a turning point in their relationship? Why does Clem call Langston a hero?
- Clem tells Annette that he wants to learn to swim to feel brave. He failed with two swim teachers. How does Anthony give him courage to try again? Momma, Clarisse and Annette come to see him swim. Explain what Clem means when he says, “Like for the first time, she (Momma) saw just me and not the part that reminds her of my daddy” (p. 231). How does learning to swim give Clem courage to speak up for himself at home?



- Setting is when and where a novel takes place. Identify people, places, events and things in the novel that reveal the setting.

*Correlates to CCSS in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 3-5.1, RL. 3-5.2, RL. 3-5.3; Craft & Structure RL. 4-5.4, RL. 3-5.5, RL. 3-5.6; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 3-5.1, SL. 3-5.2, SL. 3-5.3; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3-5.1; Knowledge of Language L. 3-5.3.*

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

**Language Arts/Writing** – Write a two-page paper that discusses the hardest part of being Clem. Cite scenes, and use direct quotes to illustrate your point. Write a concluding sentence that states how Clem changes by the end of the novel.

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.1; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-5.3*

**Language Arts/Writing** – At the end of the novel, Clem gets a paper route. He thinks that he may become a journalist. Write a guest editorial for the *Chicago Defender* that Clem might write about what's it's like having a paper route.

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.1; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-5.3*

**Language Arts/Writing** - Clarisse calls Clem the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz*. Read about the lion in *The Wizard of Oz* on the internet, or by reviewing L. Frank Baum's novel. Then write a one-page paper that draws a comparison between the Cowardly Lion and Clem. How does each character find courage?

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.1; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-5.3*

**Social Studies/Writing** - Edwin Rosskam was a photographer for the Farm Security Administration charged with documenting the Great Migration. Ask students to locate photos that he took of daily life in Chicago's South Side in the 1940s. The following website is helpful:

<https://rawnakedart.com/2021/02/20/the-photography-of-edwin-rosskam-chicago-1941/>.

Then ask them to write a one-page description of one photograph through Clem's eyes.

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.1; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 3-5.9; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-5.3*

**Social Studies/Writing** - Momma sends Clem and his sisters to Washington D.C. every summer to visit Aunt Dorcas and Aunt Bethel. Research one of the monuments that Clem might have seen, and write a brief paper about the monument's significance. Include at least five interesting facts.

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing Text Types & Purposes W. 3-5.2; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 3-5.9; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 3-5.1, L. 3-5.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-5.3*

**Social Studies** - Clem was fifty-nine-years-old when The Port of Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial was dedicated in 1994. Prepare and deliver a brief speech that Clem might have made about how the disaster changed his family. Speak of his father's bravery and dedication to country.

*Correlates to CCSS in Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 3-5.4.*

## VOCABULARY/USE OF LANGUAGE

The vocabulary in the novel isn't difficult, but students should be encouraged to jot down history.com/this-day-in-history/port-chicago-disaster unfamiliar words and try to define them taking clues from context. Such words may include:

*Ventriloquist* (p. 12), *sacrificing* (p. 15), *compensate* (p. 20), *hypnotized* (p. 119), *spinster* (p. 123), *modest* (p. 204), *enterprising* (p. 232), *hospitality* (p. 234), *reverberated* (p. 242), and *retribution* (p. 243).



## INTERNET CONNECTIONS

### Port of Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial

[nationalparks.org/connect/explore-parks/port-chicago-naval-magazine-national-memorial](http://nationalparks.org/connect/explore-parks/port-chicago-naval-magazine-national-memorial)

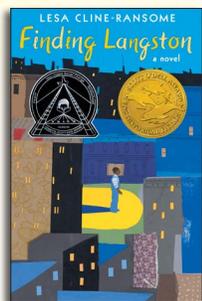
### Bud Billiken Parade

[budbillikenparade.org/](http://budbillikenparade.org/)

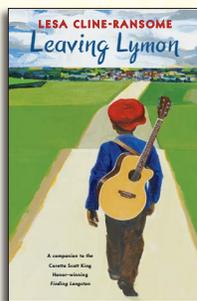
### Chicago's South Side

[encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1177.html](http://encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1177.html)

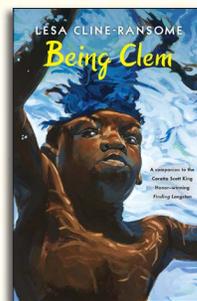
## CONNECTING FINDING LANGSTON, LEAVING LYMON, AND BEING CLEM



HC: 9780823439607  
PB: 9780823445820  
E-BOOK: 9780823441105



HC: 9780823444427  
PB: 9780823449422  
E-BOOK: 9780823446339



HC: 9780823446049  
E-BOOK: 9780823448968

In *Being Clem*, Langston and Clem have a conversation about losing a parent. Langston says, “Maybe your daddy and my momma are looking down on the two of us. Maybe they’re gonna help us get through. Together” (p. 186). How is this a conversation Clem needs? Lymon loses his beloved Grandpops in *Leaving Lymon*. Compare and contrast how Clem, Langston, and Lymon deal with grief.

*Correlates to CCSS in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 3-5.1, RL. 3-5.3; Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RL. 5.9.*

A mentor is someone who plays an important role in another person’s life as a guide and a teacher. Identify the mentor in the lives of Langston, Lymon, and Clem. Discuss how each boy follows the guidance of his mentor.

*Correlates to CCSS in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 3-5.1, RL. 3-5.3; Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RL. 5.9.*

Lymon is sent to the Arthur J. Audy Home, a detention facility, after he tried to run away from home. His father eventually comes to take him home to Milwaukee. Write a letter that Lymon might write to Clem and Langston that lets them know what his life is like in Milwaukee. Include a concluding paragraph that apologizes to the boys for his bullying behavior.

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Production & Distribution of Writing W. 3-5.4, W. 3-5.5.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

photo credit John Halpern



**Lesa Cline-Ransome** is the author of more than twenty books for young readers, including the award-winning *Finding Langston* trilogy. Her work has received a plethora of honors, including dozens of starred reviews, NAACP Image Award nominations, Coretta Scott King Honors, and a Christopher Award. Many titles have been named to ALA Notable Books and Bank Street Best Children’s Books lists. She lives in upstate New York.

