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# Lesson 2: The Transcontinental Railroad

*Locomotive* • by Brian Floca



## First Read: Movie Read

This first visit, the “movie read,” focuses on taking in the story without interruption (see Chapter 1, p. 21). *Locomotive* tells the story of a family’s journey on a cross-country train traveling from Omaha to Sacramento in the summer of 1869 after the completion of the transcontinental railroad.



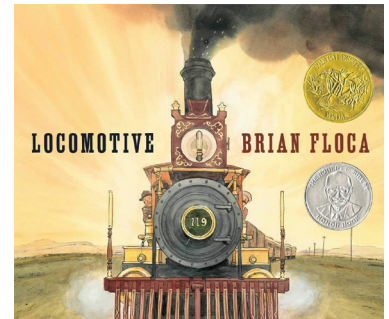
## Second Read: Reading With the Text

Before rereading the book, ask students what they recall from the first read about passengers riding the first transcontinental railroad in 1869. Record their comments under the “K” for “know” in a KWL chart. Then ask students to share what they are wondering or want to know and record that under the “W” column of the KWL. Reread the book with the lens of their inquiries and questions from the “W” column. After reading, invite students to share what they learned and record it in the “L” column of the KWL. Alternatively, students can record their thinking on sticky notes to share (see Figure 6.4).

We have adapted the KWL to represent a more fluid notion of reading and learning as inquiry.

- K:** What we know based on our current thinking and beliefs.
- W:** What we are now wondering about.
- L:** What we learned as a result of new understandings and what new questions we have.

FIGURE 6.3



K	W	L
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It connected the east and west.</li> <li>• There were two and they connected in the middle.</li> <li>• It made the transportation of goods and people easier and faster.</li> <li>• People slept on the train.</li> <li>• It went through tunnels in the mountains.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who built the railroad?</li> <li>• How fast does the train go?</li> <li>• How much did it cost to ride the train?</li> <li>• Did anybody get hurt?</li> <li>• Did people choose to work on the railroad?</li> <li>• Were the workers paid fairly?</li> </ul>	

FIGURE 6.4 I Know I Wonder Chart





### Return Read: Reading Critically

For the return read, begin by reviewing what students learned (KWL chart). Display and read the endpapers, then ask students what else they know about what was happening in the United States at that time. For example, the Civil War ended, and President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Also, many Irish immigrants came to the United States because of the potato famine in Ireland.

#### Ask students:

- *What do you notice about the map and illustrations?*
- *Who is included/excluded (e.g., Native American territories are not included in the map, nor are they illustrated)?*

Read page 1: “A new road of rails made for people to ride.”

#### Ask students:

- *Who was the road of rails made for and by whom?*
- *Do you think there was any impact on people or wildlife as a result?*

Read page 2: “Men came from far away to build from the East, to build from the West . . .”

**Ask students:** *Did only men work on the railroad? Only adults?*

Continue reading: “men came from far away.”

#### Ask students:

- *Where did they come from specifically?*
- *What are their stories?*
- *Did they have to leave their families behind?*
- *What do you notice about the illustrations?*

Read page 3 (Omaha, Nebraska) where people are waiting for the train to arrive.

#### Ask students:

- *Who’s riding the train?*
- *What do the passengers have in common?*

- [Note: Scaffold students' understanding of the group who was privileged to be passengers and prompt questioning why others were not on board.]
- Who isn't riding the train?

Turn to the middle of the book to the page labeled "The Great Plains." Notice how the perspective changes to more of a bird's-eye (or drone) view of the train within the broader landscape. This is a little different than the previous illustrations from within the train focused on the passengers and inner workings of the train. Reread: "Here the bison used to roam."

**Ask students:**

- Where did the bison go?
- What happened to them?

Pause here to remove the book jacket to display the alternate illustration of the bison. You may prefer to do so after reading.

Continue reading: "Here the Cheyenne lived, and Pawnee and Arapaho."

**Ask students:** *How might this language be problematic?*

Pause and reference the book *We Are Still Here* by Traci Sorell (see Lesson 1). You may also discuss the genocide of Indigenous people and how the building of the railroad affected their land, resources, and homes (connect to Lesson 1).

Turn to the page labeled "Sherman, Wyoming." Read the first two sentences.

**Ask students:** *What do you know about the porters?*

Explain that many people who had been enslaved during that time found work as porters when they were freed. The availability of employment as porters for formerly enslaved men was instrumental in the Great Migration. Go back four pages to the illustration of the boy selling newspapers. Pullman porters had greater access to information, different people, and different places. You can explore this further with the book *I, Too, Am America* by Langston Hughes, illustrated by Bryan Collier.

Turn to the page with the Summit Tunnel and the previous page.

**Ask students:**

- Do you think it was dangerous work to build these tunnels?
- Who did that work? Who didn't do the work?

Turn to the page labeled “Sacramento, California.” On this page, the train finally arrives, and the family is reunited.

**Ask students:**

- *Who’s riding the train?*
- *Who isn’t riding the train?*
- *Who isn’t reunited?*

So many voices are not included in the book, yet the train itself is personified and referred to as “she” and “her.”

**Ask students:** *What do you think this suggests?*

Read the author’s note for additional information. Note, however, that there is limited mention of the Chinese laborers who made up 90 percent of the workforce and who were not invited to the celebration at the completion of the railroad. They were not employed to work on the trains, and they were not among the passengers on board the trains.

**Ask students:** *What other perspectives are limited or missing?*

### Layering Texts

To deepen students’ understanding of the transcontinental railroad and provide additional perspectives, we offer the following additional texts:

- View together the Scholastic article and video “The Railroad That Changed America” (see QR code in margin). Ask the guiding question “What impact do trains have on the United States?” during reading. After reading, ask students to describe the five ways the transcontinental railroad changed America. Discuss how the railroad transformed the nation but may not have benefited all people equally.
- Read *Coolies* by Yin to learn more about the transcontinental railroad from the perspective of the Chinese immigrant workers who built the railroad. In this story, the reader meets two young boys who leave their family in China to travel to California in search of work. While working on the transcontinental railroad, Shen and his brother Little Wong face difficult working conditions, discrimination, and even avalanches. Based on real events, this story tells the harsh realities of many Chinese immigrants working on the railroad system in 1865. Pairing this book with *Locomotive* and other resources enables readers to further their understanding



“The Railroad That Changed America” video.



of westward expansion to include the inequities and discrimination faced by the Chinese American laborers.

**Ask students:**

- Consider whose perspective is centered in this book. How does it compare with the perspective presented in *Locomotive*?
- How were the workers treated in comparison with the treatment of other workers during time periods both past and present?

Read *I, Too, Am America* by Langston Hughes to learn more about the Pullman porters who worked on the trains. Consider reading *This Is the Rope: A Story from the Great Migration* by Jacqueline Woodson as a follow-up read to this text set.

**Ask students:**

- Consider whose perspective is centered in the book. How does it compare with the perspective presented in *Locomotive* and *Coolies*?
- How does the story of the transcontinental railroad in these texts compare with the story told in our textbook?
- What new information do you have now?
- What questions can you ask that you could not have asked before reading these books?

Read *Black Heroes of the Wild West* by James Otis Smith to learn about the role of cattle drives and railroads during the mid- to late 1800s as well as the railroad companies' role along with the US government in exterminating millions of buffalo. Return to the cover of the book *Locomotive* and remove the book jacket to compare the illustrated cover without the buffalo.

**Ask students:**

- Why do you think the author/illustrator created two different illustrations (the book cover and the book jacket)?
- What is the author's/illustrator's message?