

Nightjohn by Gary Paulsen

“Who’s got tobacco? I need some tobacco.”

It was a whisper from the corner where the new man sat. I had me some tobacco. It was just shredded bottom leaf that I’d been chewing to spit on the roses.

“I’ll trade,” he whispered. “I’ll trade for something for a lip of tobacco.”

I thought, *What you got to trade? You come in naked as the day you was born, come in bad with whip marks all up and down your back, and you’re ready to go to trading? I didn’t say it, but I thought it. And he like to read my thoughts.*

“What I got to trade, what I got to trade is letters. I knows letters. I’ll trade A, B, and C for a lip of chew.” He laughed again.

I didn’t know what letters was, nor what they meant, but I thought it might be something I wanted to know. To learn.

I moved to the dark corner and set next to him. “What’s a letter?”

He smiled. “You sound like you’ve got tobacco.”

“Not until I know what a letter is...”

“Why, it’s reading. You learn the letters first and when you know them you string (**200 words**) them together into words. I’ll trade you three letters for a lipful.”

I knew about reading. It was something that the people in the white house did from paper. But we weren’t allowed to read nothing.

Mammy told me, “You learn to read and they’ll whip you till your skin hangs like torn rags. Or cut your thumb off. Stay away from writing and reading.”

So I did.

“You saying you can read?”

“I can.”

“Can you teach me that?”

“To read?” He rubbed his chin. “Well, might be if I had some tobacco...”

I dug the sack out of my shirtdress and gave him a pinch. He put it in the side of his mouth.

Name:	Date:
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Please answer these questions in your own words. You may use extra paper if you need it.

Question #1: What did Nightjohn want to trade with Sarny?

Question #2: Why didn't Sarny's mother want her to read?

Question #3: Why do you think Sarny was surprised that Nightjohn offered to trade something for her tobacco?

Question #4: In the story Sarny says, "We weren't allowed to read nothing." Who wasn't allowed to read?
