

# Arthur's Best Shot

by Sari Wilson • illustrated by Victor Mclindon

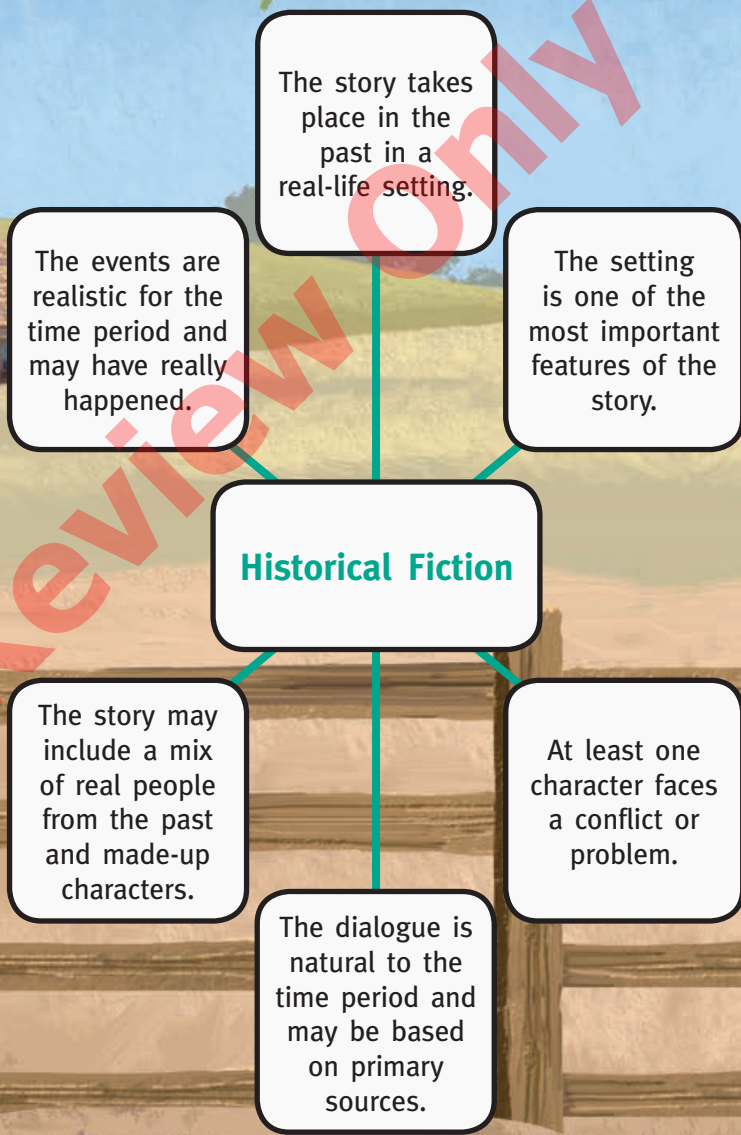


**HISTORICAL FICTION  
LITERATURE**

**Level** U/50  
**Lexile®** 700L

## Historical Fiction

Look for the genre features noted below as you read this book. Use the features to help you understand the text.



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# A Desperate Time



Dad and I stood out by the chicken coop, hammering wooden posts into the ground.

*Thwap! Thwap! Thwap!*

We were repairing the fence that had been ripped through.

Last night, there had been another coyote attack. This morning, we'd found blood trailing into the woods, and one of our best egg-laying hens was gone. I knew what the look on Dad's face meant every time we lost a hen. We needed their eggs to keep us from starving until fall harvest.

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Dad gave the fence post another whack. Then it was my turn. I wielded the heavy mallet and managed to give the post a good whack. I was proud of myself.

I hit the post again. The hard earth slowly gave way. I kept hitting the post until my arms shook.

“Good, Arthur, you’re getting stronger,” Dad said. My face glowed with his compliments.

“I’m working on getting better at farmwork,” I said, beaming.

I had been trying to prove myself ever since we moved here to Laurel Creek Farm, in the hills of eastern Kentucky. It had been a terrible spring. Dad was forced to move us to this farm where he’d grown up. It had been abandoned since my grandparents had passed.

We were one of the lucky families. We had a farm to go to. It was a desperate time for many. Back in the mining town where we’d lived before, they were calling it a great depression. When the mine closed, Dad and many others lost their jobs. Businesses were closing everywhere. We watched as lots of neighbors packed all their belongings into their cars and then left to try their luck out west, in California.

My parents decided to go back to the farming life. They said it was a hard life, especially during a drought, but it was an honest life.

They were sure right about that: Farming was *really* hard.

By the time Dad and I got to the very last fencepost, the sun hung low over the hills. I felt as if we were alone in the world—as if the farm were some kind of desert island.

Dad and I had started wrapping chicken wire around the posts when I heard an unexpected sound: the clop of horses' hooves and the jangle of reins.

Dad and I shaded our eyes as we watched a solid brown mare, loaded down by bulging saddlebags, headed toward us. I was shocked to see a woman in the saddle. She wore a brimmed hat and sat very upright. There were no roads to Laurel Creek Farm, so she must have ridden up the creek bed, over sharp rocks—she had probably been riding all day. She was a stranger, and Dad always said we *didn't* have use for strangers.

But she didn't know that when she trotted right up to us.

Dad kept working as he spoke. "If you're selling something, we won't be buying any, so you'd best continue on your way."

She laughed. "I'm not selling. I'm bringing. Books and magazines for free."

I took a good look at the lady on horseback. She had bright eyes and rosy cheeks, shiny brown hair pulled away from her face—and a bagful of books.

Dad shook his head. I was the only one in the family who could read. Neither Dad nor Mama had ever been to school. As kids, they'd been too busy helping on their farms to learn. My sisters were too young: Gloria was only a baby, and the school had closed down because of hard times before my sister, Abby, at 5, could go.

Since moving up here, I had missed our old town's library, with its long wooden shelves filled with oceans of books. It seemed to me that in each book there was an adventure waiting.

The woman wiped her forehead and said, “As you know, sir, times are tough. So our president and the first lady are sending librarians on boats down to Mississippi and Louisiana to bring people books and magazines. And here in Kentucky, they are sending librarians up the mountain on horseback.”



Dad paused, weighing her words. Then he said, “So let me get this straight. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt is sending librarians to bring books to our farm?”

“That’s correct, sir,” said the woman.

Dad shook his head again.

“And you’re a librarian?” he said. “A horseback librarian?”

“That’s me and the same,” she said, smiling. It was as if she’d heard all this before. “My name is Alice. Alice Bassin.”

“I’ll be,” Dad said slapping his knee. “Arthur, hand me that nail.”

I did as he said.

Alice nodded. “When I heard the announcement, I thought this was something I could do. I know these hills and I love books.” Her horse whinnied. She pulled on the reins to calm the horse down. “See, I’ll be riding 120 miles to serve about fifty families. Your farm is along my route. Every two weeks, I’ll bring around new materials and pick up the ones you’re finished with.”

Alice sounded proud to be riding books around the hills—maybe even prouder than I was to knock fence posts into the hard earth. I smiled shyly at her.

But Dad turned back to the fence. His tone got angry. “Much as I appreciate the president and the first lady’s kindness, unless you have a coyote trap, you’d best be on your way.”

Alice Bassin’s smile dimmed just a bit. “All right then,” she said. “I’ll be back in two weeks, in case you change your mind.”

As she turned her horse around, I heard myself say, “I would like a book, please.”

“Arthur,” Dad said, like he was issuing a warning.

Dad never approved of book learning. For him, the most useful things were the things you could do with your hands, like building fences.

“Please, Dad,” I said. “Just one book?”

I took a deep breath. Dad’s eyes got softer. “Well, Arthur,” he said, as he pounded another nail into a fence post, “you’ve worked hard. I suppose one book is okay. When you’ve finished all your chores for the day, you can read till dinnertime.”

“Thank you, Dad.” I smiled.

Alice reached into her saddlebag and pulled out a book. The cover was tattered and worn. “I’ve been saving this one for someone special.”

I took the book as if it was a gold nugget.





## A New Page

That evening after chores, I sat on the porch and opened up the book Alice Bassin had given me. It was called *Robinson Crusoe*, and its pages were onion-skin thin and brittle from handling. I read in the waning sunlight till Mama called me for dinner.

The story was about a man who gets shipwrecked on a deserted island, without food or shelter, and struggles against nature to survive.

After dinner about a week later, Mama sat down by the stove with baby Gloria in her lap and asked, “Arthur, will you read a bit to me?”

“Oh, yes,” said Abby, as she curled up at Mama’s feet. “Please read to us!”

I looked over at Dad. I think he saw how eager Mama and Abby were.

“Don’t burn too much candlelight,” Dad said. Then he went to the corner to oil his boots. So I got out the book and read about how Robinson’s ship is destroyed during a terrible storm:

“And now our case was very dismal indeed; for we saw plainly that the sea went so high that the boat could not live and that we would inevitably be drowned.... We worked at the oar toward the land, though with heavy hearts ... for we knew that when the boat came nearer the shore, she would be dashed in a thousand pieces by the breach of the sea.”

I jumped up, holding the book. Mama rocked Gloria. Abby’s mouth was slightly open, and her eyes never left my face.

I could see in their eyes they weren't in the Kentucky hills anymore; they were in the tropical seas with our hero. When I read the most exciting parts, I caught sight of Dad in the corner with the rag dead in his hands.

This made me smile.

