Excerpt from *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

By Mildred D. Taylor

Now Miss Crocker made a startling announcement: This year we would all have books.

Everyone gasped, for most of the students had never handled a book at all besides the family Bible. I admit that even I was somewhat excited. Although Mama had several books, I had never had one of my very own.

“Now we’re very fortunate to get these readers,” Miss Crocker explained while we eagerly awaited the unveiling. “The county superintendent of schools himself brought these books down here for our use and we must take extra-good care of them.” She moved toward her desk. “So let’s all promise that we’ll take the best care possible of these new books.” She stared down, expecting our response. “All right, all together, let’s repeat, ‘We promise to take good care of our new books.’” She looked sharply at me as she spoke.

“WE PROMISE TO TAKE GOOD CARE OF OUR NEW BOOKS!”

“Fine,” Miss Crocker beamed, then proudly threw back the tarpaulin.

Sitting so close to the desk, I could see that the covers of the books, a motley red, were badly worn and that the gray edges of the pages had been marred by pencils, crayons, and ink. My anticipation at having my own book ebbed to a sinking disappointment. But Miss Crocker continued to beam as she called each fourth grader to her desk and, recording a number in her roll book, handed him or her a book.

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I glanced across at Little Man, his face lit in eager excitement. I knew that he could not see the soiled covers or the marred pages from where he sat, and even though his penchant for cleanliness was often annoying, I did not like to think of his disappointment when he saw the books as they really were. But there was nothing that I could do about it, so I opened my book to its center and began browsing through the spotted pages. Girls with blonde braids and boys with blue eyes stared up at me. I found a story about a boy and his dog lost in a cave and began reading while Miss Crocker’s voice droned on monotonously.

Suddenly I grew conscious of a break in that monotonous tone and I looked up. Miss Crocker was sitting at Miss Davis’s desk with the first-grade books stacked before her, staring fiercely down at Little Man, who was pushing a book back upon the desk.

“What’s that you said, Clayton Chester Logan?” she asked.

The room became gravely silent. Everyone knew that Little Man was in trouble for no one, but no one, ever called Little Man “Clayton Chester” unless he or she meant serious business.

Little Man knew this too. His lips parted slightly as he took his hands from the book. He quivered, but he did not take his eyes from Miss Crocker. “I—I said may I have another book please, ma’am,” he squeaked. “That one’s dirty.”

“Dirty!” Miss Crocker echoed, appalled by such temerity. She stood up, gazing down upon Little Man like a bony giant, but Little Man raised his head and continued to look into her eyes. “Dirty! And just who do you think you are, Clayton Chester? Here the county is giving us these wonderful books during these hard times and you’re going to stand there and tell me that the book’s too dirty? Now you take that book or get nothing at all!”

Little Man lowered his eyes and said nothing as he stared at the book. For several moments he stood there, his face barely visible above the desk, then he turned and looked at the few remaining books and, seeming to realize that they were as badly soiled as the one Miss Crocker had given him, he looked across the room at me. I nodded and Little Man, glancing up again at Miss Crocker, slid the book from the edge of the desk, and with his back straight and his head up returned to his seat.

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He sat for a while with a stony face looking out the window; then, evidently accepting the fact that the book in front of him was the best he could expect, he turned and opened it. But as he stared at the book’s inside cover, his face clouded, changing from sulky acceptance to puzzlement. His brows furrowed. Then his eyes grew wide, and suddenly he sucked in his breath and sprang from his chair like a wounded animal, flinging the book onto the floor and stomping madly upon it.

Miss Crocker rushed to Little Man and grabbed him up in powerful hands. She shook him vigorously, then set him on the floor again. “Now, just what’s gotten into you, Clayton Chester?”

But Little Man said nothing. He just stood staring down at the open book, shivering with indignant anger.

“Pick it up,” she ordered.

“No!” defied Little Man.

“No? I’ll give you ten seconds to pick up that book, boy, or I’m going to get my switch.”

Little Man bit his lower lip, and I knew that he was not going to pick up the book. Rapidly, I turned to the inside cover of my own book and saw immediately what had made Little Man so furious. Stamped on the inside cover was a chart which read:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| PROPERTY OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION  Spokane County, Mississippi  September, 1922 | | | |
| CHRONOLOGICAL ISSUANCE | DATE OF ISSUANCE | CONDITION OF BOOK | RACE OF STUDENT |
| 1 | September 1922 | New | White |
| 2 | September 1923 | Excellent | White |
| …….. | ……… | ……. | …….. |
| 12 | September 1933 | Very Poor | Nigra |

The blank lines continued down to line 20 and I knew that they had all been reserved for black students. A knot of anger swelled in my throat and held there. But as Miss Crocker directed Little Man to bend over the “whipping” chair, I put aside my anger and jumped up.

“Miz Crocker, don’t, please!” I cried. Miss Crocker’s dark eyes warned me not to say another word. “I know why he done it.”

“You want part of this switch, Cassie?”

“No’m,” I said hastily. “I just wanna tell you how come Little Man done what he done.”

“Sit down!” she ordered as I hurried toward her with the open book in my hand.

Holding the book up to her, I said, “See, Miz Crocker, see what it says. They give us these ole books when they didn’t want ‘em no more.”

She regarded me impatiently, but did not look at the book. “Now how could he know what it says? He can’t read.”

“Yes’m, he can. He been reading since he was four. He can’t read all them big words, but he can read them columns. See what’s in the last row. Please look, Miz Crocker.”

This time Miss Crocker did look, but her face did not change. Then, holding up her head, she gazed unblinkingly down at me.

“S-see what they called us,” I said, afraid she had not seen.

“That’s what you are,” she said coldly. “Now go sit down.”

I shook my head, realizing now that Miss Crocker did not even know what I was talking about. She had looked at the page and had understood nothing.

“I said sit down, Cassie!”

I started slowly toward my desk, but as the hickory stick sliced the tense air, I turned back around. “Miz Crocker,” I said, “I don’t want my book neither.”

The switch landed hard upon Little Man’s upturned bottom. Miss Crocker looked questioningly at me as I reached up to her desk and placed the book upon it. Then she swung the switch five more times and, discovering that Little Man had no intention of crying, ordered him up.

“All right, Cassie,” she sighed, turning to me, “come on and get yours.”