

# Bridge to Terabithia

## TEACHER'S GUIDE

Includes Discussion Questions, Classroom Activities,  
Cross-Curriculum Connections, and more!

### About the Book

After training all summer to be the fastest runner in the fifth grade at Lark Creek Elementary School, Jess Aarons loses the race to a girl on the first day of school. Inexplicably, however, this girl becomes his best friend. Leslie Burke's imagination leads them to Terabithia, an imaginary kingdom they build in the woods. Jess and Leslie rule their fantasyland, delightfully free of the loneliness, social pressures, and bullies of their everyday lives. Through Leslie's friendship Jess experiences a new sense of himself, but he is unprepared for the tragedy that leaves him to reign alone in Terabithia.

*Bridge to Terabithia* was first published in 1977 and has been engaging and inspiring readers as a poignant story of friendship, courage, and growing up ever since. It was honored with the 1978 Newbery Medal for being the year's most distinguished contribution to American literature for children.

## About the Author

Katherine Paterson was born in China, where she lived as a girl with her missionary parents. She also spent parts of her young life in Virginia, North Carolina, and West Virginia. As a child, Ms. Paterson wanted to be a movie star or a missionary. The first books she published were about Japan, where she lived for a while as an adult. She has won numerous literary awards, including two Newbery Medals and two National Book Awards.

While the town and characters in *Bridge to Terabithia* are fictional, Ms. Paterson did teach for a year in a rural Virginia school, and the idea for the story came from a real-life experience. Ms. Paterson's son, David, had a childhood best friend named Lisa Hill, who was struck and killed by lightning at the age of eight. Writing *Bridge to Terabithia* was in many ways an attempt for her to make sense of this tragedy. Ms. Paterson now lives in Vermont with her husband. They have four grown children.

## Before Reading

With your class, take a look at the book cover. Allow students to share their initial thoughts and predictions regarding what the book might be about. Now read the description on the back cover together as a class. Use the following questions as an introductory discussion. Then begin reading the book as a class, or assign chapters for independent reading.

1. This story is about two friends. Brainstorm a list of qualities that make someone a good friend. Is having friends important? Explain.
2. The main characters in *Bridge to Terabithia* have a secret place they go to. Do you have a secret place—a place where you can go to be by yourself? Can your secret place be imaginary? Explain.
3. Look at the cover. What do you think it tells you about the story? What emotions does the cover make you feel? What questions do you have about the cover? What do you think the title means? What is a bridge? How can a bridge be a metaphor? What can a bridge symbolize?

## While Reading

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe Jess. What does he look like? What is important to him? What does he think of himself? How do you know? Would you be friends with Jess? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think Jess tells himself that he and Miss Edmunds are “alike”? (p. 17)
3. What is Lark Creek Elementary School like? Who has social power there? How is this similar to and different from your school?
4. When Jess thinks about Miss Edmunds and his drawings, he considers himself “rich, very rich.” (p. 15) What do you think he means? Is he rich? What role does wealth play in this story?

5. Who is Leslie Burke? What does she look like? What is important to her? What makes her different from Jess and other students?
6. What does Leslie mean when she says, "My parents are reassessing their value structure"? (p. 40) What does Jess mean when he responds, "But you're the one that's gotta pay"?
7. Discuss the roles of boys and girls, men and women in this story. Why do you think the gender roles are the way they are in this community? Do these roles apply today?
8. What is Terabithia? What does it mean to Jess? To Leslie? Why?
9. Why doesn't Jess stand up to Janice Avery on the bus? What does Leslie mean later when she says, "It's the *principle* of the thing, Jess. That's what you've got to understand. You have to stop people like that. Otherwise they turn into tyrants and dictators." (p. 54) Do you agree? What do you think about what Jess and Leslie did to Janice after she took May Belle's Twinkies? Did they have other choices? Explain. Leslie says that Janice deserves everything she gets. Do you agree? Why or why not?
10. Compare and contrast Jess's and Leslie's families. In what ways are their families similar to and different from yours?
11. How does Jess feel about his sister May Belle? Why? Why do you think Jess decided that "somehow this year May Belle needed something special" (p. 74) for Christmas?
12. Why doesn't the magic of Terabithia work for Jess when he is alone?

13. The words *stupid* and *smart* appear throughout the story. For example, "All the Burkes were smart. Not smart, maybe, about fixing things or growing things, but smart in a way Jess had never known real live people to be." (p. 88) What do you think *smart* means? Are there different ways of being smart? Explain.
14. The Aarons family goes to church once a year, on Easter. Leslie's family has never gone to church before. How do Jess and Leslie expand each other's ideas about God and religion? How can you learn from people who have different beliefs from yours and your family's?
15. What made Jess's day in Washington so special? What is ironic about the title of chapter ten? What was your reaction to the news of Leslie's death? Have you known someone who died? What were your feelings and experiences about this death? What helped you during that time?
16. Does Jess eventually come to terms with Leslie's death? Explain your thinking. Ellie says that "boys ain't supposed to cry at times like this." (p. 138) What do you think about this statement?
17. Is Jess the same person at the end of the book as he was at the beginning? Use examples from the book to support your ideas.
18. Review the notes about the cover and title from before you read the book. Now what do you think the title means? What do you think is happening in the cover picture? Talk about the meaning and importance of bridges in this story, both real and symbolic.

## While Reading

### VOCABULARY TO LEARN

|                         |                       |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| grit (p. 4)             | regicide (p. 67)      |
| primly (p. 8)           | consolidated (p. 72)  |
| hippie (p. 15)          | predator (p. 93)      |
| pandemonium (p. 16)     | obliged (p. 93)       |
| hypocritical (p. 17)    | dumbfounded (p. 93)   |
| clabber (p. 29)         | vile (p. 96)          |
| reassessing (p. 40)     | laid off (p. 101)     |
| gully (p. 49)           | sporadically (p. 115) |
| stronghold (p. 50)      | repented (p. 116)     |
| siege (p. 51)           | discern (p. 118)      |
| insufficiencies (p. 52) | scrawny (p. 121)      |
| string quartet (p. 58)  | liberated (p. 128)    |
| solemn (p. 60)          | constricting (p. 151) |

## While Reading

### WRITE AND SHARE

For Write and Share topics, students can first write about a question or statement individually. Next, pair students. As partners, allow them to spend fifteen minutes reading their ideas to each other and discussing. This activity provides active opportunities for children to consider and communicate their own ideas without the pressure of a large-group setting.

1. Jess was determined to be the fastest runner in his grade, but in the end he wasn't. Think of a time you set your heart on something. What was it? What did it mean to you? What did you do to try to achieve your goal? What happened and how did you handle it?
2. What do you like to do at recess? Who do you spend your recess with and why? If you had to do something you've never done at recess, what would it be? Why don't you do it now?
3. For a school assignment, the fifth-grade students at Lark Creek Elementary write about their favorite hobby. Jess thinks about what boys and girls were expected to write. What is your favorite hobby? Do you feel uncomfortable letting people know about it? Why or why not?
4. Leslie's family doesn't have a television. Why do some people consider TV a bad thing? What do you think about the value—or lack of value—of television?

## **While Reading**

### **JOURNAL WRITING PROMPTS:**

#### **PUT YOURSELF IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES**

The following journal prompts allow students to process their thoughts and questions about the story while considering the story in light of their own experiences. Journal writing assignments can be used as in-class activities or assigned as homework.



1. Reread the scene showing Leslie's entrance into her fifth-grade classroom. How does Leslie handle being a stranger? How do you think you would have felt? Think of a time when you were a stranger or felt different. What happened? How did you feel? How might you handle a similar situation in the future—what might you do just as you did before and what might you do or think differently? What could you do when you see someone else in such a situation?
2. Jess decides to help Janice. Why? Do you agree with his choice? What do you think he means when he says that "if she was an *animal* predator, we'd be obliged to try to help her"? (p. 93) What choices did the students and adults in the story have regarding Janice Avery's home life? If this story happened today, what would you do if you found out about Janice's secret?
3. After Leslie's death, Leslie's father hugs Jess and says, "She told me once that if it weren't for you..." (p. 144) How do you think he might have finished this sentence? Why do you think Mr. Burke can't give P. T. to Jess in the end? How is Mr. Burke feeling?

## While Reading

### INDEPENDENT ACTIVITIES

One or all of the following activities can be used for students who complete in-class reading before the full group. They can also be used as additional homework activities, or as extra-credit assignments.



1. Choose a word to follow throughout the book. Keep notes on the pages where you find the word and its meaning in different contexts. How does the word relate to different characters? How does the word relate to the story overall? Consider tracking one of these words: *peace*, *brave*, *secret*, *solemn*, *dumb*. You could also look for synonyms or antonyms of the word.
2. Draw a picture you think Jess might draw. You could create your interpretation of the hippo picture Jess explains on p. 12, or your own idea of a crazy animal in an impossible situation. Extend your drawing into a story, as Jess thinks about doing.
3. What do you think Leslie thought about the running races on the first day of school? Write a letter from Leslie to a friend from her old school telling about what happened at recess that first day.
4. Brainstorm a list of words or phrases that tell something about Jess. Brainstorm a separate list of words or phrases for Leslie. Circle any words that show up on both lists. Continue to add to your lists as you read the novel.
5. Write the story of how you and one of your friends became friends. How did you first meet? Did you like the other person immediately or did it take time? How did you know you were friends?
6. Jess wishes he had more attention from his father. Imagine that Jess figured out a time to talk with his father to let him know how he's feeling. Write the conversation that you hope Jess and his dad might have.

7. Pretending you are Jess, write a eulogy (a speech given by a person's friends or family at his or her funeral) for Leslie. What do you want to say about Leslie? What do you want people to know about her? What did she mean to you?

## While Reading

### READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES:

#### ANALYZING VOICE

Who is the narrator of the story? Why do you think Katherine Paterson chose to use this narrator? How would the story have been different if it were told from another point of view?

### READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES:

#### UNDERSTANDING SIMILES

A simile compares one thing to something else using the words *like* or *as*. Katherine Paterson's similes bring the southern setting and rural culture of the story to life. Jess doesn't put on a shirt to run because "he would be hot as popping grease even if the morning air was chill." (p. 1) He worries about making his mother "mad as flies in a fruit jar." (p. 1) What other similes can you find in the book which convey a strong meaning and image? As you read, keep a journal of similes that particularly strike you. How do they enrich the text?

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**READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES:****INTERPRETING DETAILS**

Katherine Paterson could have told us that Jess's family is poor and his parents struggle to make ends meet. Instead, she shows us what life in Jess's family is like through details, situations, and interactions between characters. Find examples of this in the book, as well as examples of how Jess feels about his family life.

**READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES:****RECOGNIZING FORESHADOWING**

Sometimes writers want to make readers think about what might happen later in the story. This is called *foreshadowing*. How does the author use foreshadowing at the end of chapter one? What does this make you think? As you read, be aware of other instances of foreshadowing. Are there words, phrases, or sentences that make you feel something is going to happen?

**READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES:****APPRECIATING WORD CHOICES**

Katherine Paterson chooses words to convey character and setting. One choice she made as an author was to include obscenities. Though this book has been banned in some places because of this language, Katherine Paterson has said that she believed it was important for the language to be authentic. What do you think? Katherine Paterson has Leslie and Jess use language differently in *Terabithia*. Why? What does this do for the story?

## **READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES: INTERPRETING THEMES**

The major themes of this story include friendship, courage, difference, gender roles, class, death, and growing up. In what ways do these themes appear in the novel? What do you think the story says about each theme? Which of them is most meaningful to you personally?

## **After Reading**

### **CROSS-CURRICULAR PROJECTS: GEOGRAPHY**

1. Charge students with making maps of Terabithia. Encourage them to use information from the novel to locate the homes of Jess and Leslie, the road, Miss Bessie's field, the gully and creek, Terabithia, and the sacred grove. Remind them to include a key that explains any symbols they use on the map.
2. Research the definitions of urban, suburban, and rural. Create a color-coded map of the United States that indicates urban, suburban, and rural areas. Though Jess lives in a fictional town, mark the surrounding urban areas of Washington, D.C., and Arlington, VA, as well as the areas of rural Virginia where Jess's town might be.

### **CROSS-CURRICULAR PROJECTS: ART**

1. Provide students with a variety of art materials to create a representation of the symbolic meaning of the word *bridge* in this story.



2. Redirect students to the descriptions of the gully, creek, and trees of Terabithia and the sacred grove. Allow them time to research the types of trees named in the book so they can draw their own vision of Terabithia.

### **CROSS-CURRICULAR PROJECTS: MUSIC**

Organize students into small groups and provide each group with a recording and the lyrics of one of the songs Miss Edmunds teaches: "My Beautiful Balloon," "This Land Is Your Land," "Free to Be . . . You and Me," or "Blowin' in the Wind." Instruct each group to discuss what the song means and what it has to do with the story. Then have each group write a new stanza for their song that relates to some aspect of *Bridge to Terabithia*.

### **CROSS-CURRICULAR PROJECTS: HISTORY**

Jess's momma and some of his classmates call Miss Edmunds a "hippie." Provide students with time and resources to research the term *hippie*. Have different groups research different aspects, such as when hippies were prevalent in our country, what the term hippie meant, what hippies tended to wear, hippies and music, and how hippies were connected to the protest of the Vietnam War. Have each group use visuals to present their findings to the whole group.

### **CROSS-CURRICULAR PROJECTS: HEALTH**

Katherine Paterson has stated that a tragic death was her motivation for exploring the death of a friend in this story. Invite a

counselor or other mental health professional in to talk with your class about grieving. Prepare your students by having them develop a list of questions ahead of time.

### **CROSS-CURRICULAR PROJECTS:**

#### **SOCIAL STUDIES AND MATH**

Direct students to find as many passages describing Lark Creek Elementary School as they can. Ask them to think about how Lark Creek Elementary is similar to and different from their own school. If needed, prompt them to consider the classrooms, athletic equipment, recess, interaction of students with one another, and the attitudes of students in different grades toward one another. Create a Venn diagram that displays these similarities and differences.

#### **CROSS-CURRICULAR PROJECTS: DRAMA**

Have small groups work together to create time lines of important events in the story. Then have each group choose one event to rewrite as a short play to act out for the rest of the class.

#### **CROSS-CURRICULAR PROJECTS: WRITING**

Ask students which of the book's characters they wish they could meet. Students can then write a letter to that character conveying why they wish they knew the character, and what questions they would like to ask. Then students can write a response letter from that character's perspective.

**CROSS-CURRICULAR PROJECTS:****LITERARY HISTORY**

*Bridge to Terabithia* was first published in 1977. Charge students with finding adults in your school or at home who have read this book. Guide students in preparing interviews to help them learn what the adults remember about the book and how they felt about it.

**CROSS-CURRICULAR PROJECTS:****LITERARY CRITIQUE**

*Bridge to Terabithia* won the Newbery Medal in 1978. This award is given “for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children.” Have students write persuasive essays explaining why they think this book was worthy of such recognition or was not. Divide students into small groups to listen to one another read their essays.

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