FLOSSIE & THE FOX STUDY GUIDE

Paul Mesner's puppet production of *Flossie & the Fox* is adapted from Patricia McKissack's popular picture book of the same name. If you only do one thing in class before attending Paul's performance, read the book aloud to your students.

Once you do, however, you will be hard pressed to stop there! Your students will immediately light up with the satisfaction of recognizing the obvious parallels between Flossie's story and an old favorite - the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

**Oral Tradition & Language**

Before we delve into Red Riding Hood comparisons, and even before you read the story of *Flossie & the Fox* to your kids, read aloud and share with your students Patricia McKissack's note at the beginning of the book, where she discusses the origin of the Flossie story, and the storytelling legacy from whence it came.

The story of *Flossie & the Fox*, among many others, was passed down and transmitted through generations of the McKissack family through oral tellings. For the African-American community, storytelling has a particularly powerful legacy. In early America, as slaves, African-Americans were not allowed by law to read or write. Although many brave souls carried on covert lessons in reading and writing within the slave community, the spoken word was the primary vehicle in transmitting knowledge, history and story. The momentum of the spoken word carried on beyond the emancipation of slaves, and to this day storytelling continues to play a vital, although diminishing, role in African-American culture.

In general, the oral tradition is diminishing - as the workaday world demands more and more of our time and we yield more and more of our children's free time to electronic media (TV, computers, etc), there is less family time, less conversation, and less opportunity for the transmittal of family stories - the very stories that help us understand who we are, where we come from, where we are going.

**Family Stories / Journal:**

After reading McKissack's note, discuss some of the ideas presented above and ask the kids to share any family stories they might have. Ask them to talk to a grandparent, a parent, an aunt or an uncle. Their goal: to get a family story - a story about something that happened before they were born - write it down the way they heard it, and bring it back to share with the class. Expand the idea into a Family Journal and make it a year-long project. Every fews weeks they retrieve a new story from a relative and compile each entry in a journal. The journal becomes a sort of quilt, a patchwork of their heritage and family history. This project will perpetuate itself - every new piece of the "quilt" will expose another missing piece, another story to retrieve. Entries will constantly move within the journal as new entries find their place in time and space.

**Useful Book Supplements:**

*Potato: A Tale From the Great Depression*, by Kate Lied; *Who's Who In My Family*, by Loreen Leedy; *Grandma's Bill*, by Martin Waddell; *Family Pictures*, by Carmen Lomas Garza; *Cracked Corn & Snow Ice Cream*, by Nancy Willard
Oral Language Center:

Create an area in your classroom that supports storytelling and the spoken word. You may already have a Writing Center. Perhaps this would be a good place to add an Oral Language Center.

Some ideas:

- Provide a flannel board with felt pieces (from fairytales, e.g.) that kids can manipulate and retell stories with. Create new characters for Flossie’s story and have some of the kids retell the story as they remember it, using the flannel board. Have the kids make their own felt characters representing different members of their family, so they can visualize and share their family stories as well.

- Provide a variety of puppets and dress-up clothes for more theatrical storytelling activities.

- Provide a tape recorder for kids to record their own stories. Provide another tape player with headphones for playing back their own stories. Consider keeping a small library of professional storytelling tapes for the kids to listen to during free times.

Dialect:

McKissack’s rendering of Flossie & the Fox is rich with the dialect of the rural South. Although alien, exotic even, to most of us midwesterners, the flow of language in Flossie is warm and comfortable, even familiar somehow, when read properly. Although we may not be able to speak the dialect, we can understand it perfectly, even when Flossie invents words like “confidencer”.

As much as we might like to standardize it, language is a living thing, ever-changing and evolving. There are an estimated 2,700 separate languages on the planet, and over 5,000 dialects within them. Even within a seemingly homogenous group of kids, the subtleties of language will vary enormously among individuals, depending on their home life and peer groups.

Language is an extremely important part of a child’s identity. Revered author and educator, Bill Martin, Jr., acknowledges this in his threefold philosophy of the classroom teacher:

First, the teacher must invest the child’s home language with legitimacy; secondly, the teacher must expose children to the public language of the larger society; thirdly, teachers must expose their students to the aesthetic, uplifting language of literature.
Here is an exercise that will bring *Flossie* closer to your students, bring your students closer to Paul Mesner, and address Bill Martin's goals:

Have your students break into three groups. Have each group “script” the story of *Flossie & the Fox*. That means reducing the story to dialogue only, and casting parts for a Narrator, Flossie, Big Mama, the Fox and some of the various animals. The first group should script the story closely to the language of the book. (Each person in the group should have a speaking part.) The second group should rewrite the dialogue in a language and dialect close to their own, incorporating their own slang expressions. The third group should rewrite the dialogue according to the rules of grammar and standard usage of the “public language”. Have each group perform their version of Flossie for the rest of the class. Discuss which version was most appealing and why.

Teachers of younger students should script the story themselves and read the different versions to them, followed by discussion.

Useful Book Supplements: *Jump!*, by Joel Chandler Harris; *Possum Come A-Knocking*, by Nancy van Laan; *Birthday*, by John Steptoe; *Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear*, by Ken Kesey.

**Little Red Riding Hood**

As mentioned above, one of the first things your students will recognize about Flossie is her similarity to Little Red Riding Hood. Making a connection like this is exciting, and you can use it to drive several learning games and activities.

**Compare and Contrast:**

First, read to your class a version of Little Red Riding Hood that is close to the original, like the one by Beni Montresor, to refresh them. Then, lead the students in a brainstorming session of compare and contrast, listing on the board any similarities between Flossie and Little Red. For example, they both have baskets, they are both delivering something, they both take shortcuts through the woods. How are they different? One meets a wolf, one meets a fox. One is naive, the other clever. And so on.

Discuss similarities and differences in emotional response as well. Why isn’t Flossie afraid? Or is she? Are you afraid for her? Is the Fox a physical threat to Flossie? What about Little Red? Interchange some of the elements from both stories to get a deeper look at the characters. E.g., what if Flossie had to deal with a wolf instead of a fox?

Take them as far as you can, then read them other Little Red Riding Hood variations, like Lisa Campbell Ernst’s *Little Red Riding Hood: A New Fangled Prairie Tale* or *Ruby*, by Michael Emberley, or *Little Red Cowboy Hat*, by Susna Lowell.

At this point, your students are ready to stretch their own muscles of reinvention. Set them on a mission to write their own version of Little Red Riding Hood, using whatever characters they like. (Younger students can dictate.) Share the stories with the class and take this opportunity to discover, with the students, what story elements are vital to the original story of Little Red Riding Hood. Some of the students will invent great stories that bear no relationship at all to the original story. Discuss the vital ingredients that make Little Red Riding Hood Little Red Riding Hood.
Games & Activities

The Flossie Egg Walk:

- Make flashcards featuring a unique part of an animal (an elephant's trunk, a rabbit's ears, etc.) Make at least eight. The more the merrier.
- Have the students make eggs out of construction paper, or use plastic Easter-type eggs. You'll need at least a hundred eggs.
- Have each student make a basket for themselves, out of plastic strawberry pints and pipe cleaners, milk bottles or whatever.
- Establish half as many stations around your room as you have flashcards. (If you have 8 flashcards, you will have 4 stations.) Place two flashcards and several eggs at each station. Number the stations.
- Assign one student to each station. These are the Foxes. Their job is to raise the flashcard and hand out eggs, if necessary. The rest of the students are "Flossies".
- Each Flossie starts out with two eggs in her basket and moves from station to station, trying to identify the animal from the part featured on the flashcard. A successful I.D. wins one egg from the Fox, and the right to move on. If Flossie guesses the wrong animal, she must give the Fox one egg and try again. If Flossie guesses the second flashcard correctly, she gets no egg, but can now move on to the next station. If Flossie guesses incorrectly on the second flashcard, she gives all the eggs in her basket to the Fox and trades places with him. The Fox continues around the stations, (but may be out-foxed by another Fox at another station.)
- The winners are those with the most eggs at the end of the game.
- Note: The more quietly this game is played, the better.


Egg Relay:

- Separate your class into 2 - 4 teams. (Team Flossie, Team Fox, etc.)
- Provide as many eggs (plastic or hard-boiled) as you have teams, and twice as many spoons.
- Split each team in half and line them up across the room from each other.
- The two lead players on each team get a spoon. One of those players balances an egg on a spoon. The teachers says, "Go!" and the relay begins. The player with the egg runs to his teammate across the room and deposits the egg onto his spoon, trying not to drop it and without holding the egg with his hand. The team that finishes first wins.
Mapping:

One of the great things about books is in the extent to which a story resides in the imagination of a reader. The power of a story, therefore, is dependent in some part on our own life experiences and cognitive abilities. Making a map of a story can sometimes illustrate how we process information. In this respect, the following project, while being fun and helpful for your students, may be enlightening and helpful to you.

Have your students create a map of Flossie’s trip through the woods. Have them all begin by drawing Big Mama’s house on one end of their paper and the McCutchin Quarters on the other. Have them complete the map from memory. Compare and share the maps with the class and then work together to pull all the ideas from all the maps to create one big map. Display your work!

Memory and Sequencing:

Read *Flossie* again to your students. Talk about Flossie’s trip through the woods and the order of things - particularly with regard to her encounters with the Fox. Give the students the attached Activity Sheet and have them cut out each picture so they can sequence them as they remember them happening in the story. (Have them glue their sequence onto another piece of construction paper.) Let them color them, then display them!

Search-a-Word:

Look for the words below hidden in the letters above and circle them.

FLOSSIE FOXY CONFIDENCER VIOLA BIGMAMA EGGS
HOUND CHILE SQUIRREL PROOF KITTYCAT FUR RAT
RABBIT BASKET DOLL WOODS
During and After the Show:

Hopefully, some of the ideas discussed above will be helpful in preparing your students for Paul Mesner's performance of *Flossie & the Fox*. But before you come to the show, don't forget to discuss proper theatre behavior with the kids. We want the kids to have fun for sure, and there will be plenty of room for laughter during the show. But make it clear to the kids that inappropriate outbursts and yelling are unacceptable. We need to respect the others in the audience as well as the performers. Live theatre moves quickly, and it is easy to miss dialogue and action if someone is too rowdy. There is no instant replay.

After the show, discuss with the students their reactions to the performance. Compare their expectations to the reality. Read the book aloud again. How was the performance similar to or different from the book? If different, why might that be? Is different bad? Talk about the challenges of adapting a story from one form (a book) to another (a theatrical performance.)

Have the students write a letter to Paul Mesner, sharing their thoughts about the performance. Have them draw a picture of their favorite part. Help them develop a relationship with the culture of children's theatre that exists just for them.
"I have proof," [Fox] said. "See, I have thick, luxurious fur. Feel for yourself." Fox leaned over for Flossie to rub his back.

"All foxes are known for their fluffy, bushy tails. That has got to be adequate proof."

And [Flossie] turned toward Miz Viola's with the basket of eggs safely tucked under her arm.

Flossie commenced to skip along, when she came upon a critter she couldn't recollect ever seeing.

With a quick glance back, Fox dashed toward the woods. "The hound knows who I am!" he shouted.

[Fox] cleared his throat. "Are you saying I must offer proof that I am a fox before you will be frightened of me?"