

BOOKNOTES

TALL TALES TEACHERS GUIDE

in the classroom

The **tall tale** is a distinctly American story form that celebrates an ordinary citizen's ability to overcome obstacles. Of course, the heroes of tall tales are anything but ordinary, and therein lies the fun and charm of the stories.

This guide, for **grades 2–6**, uses several outstanding books of tall tales to explore the genre and to discover the American character in activities across the curriculum.

classroom connections

Tall Tales • Literature Study
Characterization • Use of Language
Grades 2–6



Alfred A. Knopf hardcover • 0-375-82196-1

about the books

New York's Bravest

Beloved author Mary Pope Osborne adds her own two cents to introduce young children to the legendary Mose Humphreys, the 19th-century New York City firefighter who was eight feet tall and able to swim the Hudson River in two strokes.

American Tall Tales

Meet America's first folk heroes in these nine wildly exaggerated and downright funny stories. In the tradition of the original 19th-century storytellers, Mary Pope Osborne combines, edits, and also supplies fascinating historical headnotes.

John Henry: An American Legend

This tall tale is another celebrated work by Caldecott Medalist, Ezra Jack Keats.

★ "The heroic figure of John Henry is captured in a simple rhythmic picture book. Dramatic pictures with large bold figures express the feeling of this tall tale."—Starred, *School Library Journal*

pre-reading activity

Ask your students to name their favorite tall tales. Show the students the illustrations by Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher in *New York's Bravest*. Discuss the traits that make these characters "larger than life." Brainstorm a list of the different characters in the tall tales. Have students draw a picture of a tall tale character, and then have them discuss in groups why they admire these characters.



activities for use with *New York's Bravest*

- After reading *New York's Bravest* by Mary Pope Osborne, discuss with your class what it means to be brave. Focus on the dedication page and the historical note. How was Mose brave? How are real-life firefighters like Mose? How was firefighting different in Mose's day than it is now? What qualities of firefighters are the same? Which ones are different?

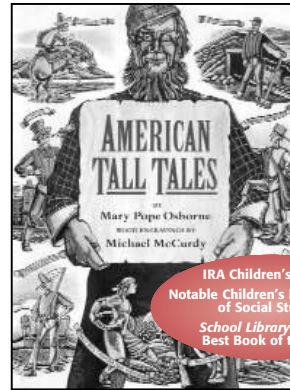
The children should write their responses in their journals.

- Have a Mose Humphreys Day at your school to honor the firefighters in your town. Write letters to firefighters thanking them for the job they do. In the letters, have the children tell about Mose's feats. Decorate your room to look like a firehouse. Invite a firefighter and present him/her with the letters. Have the children dress up as Mose Humphreys and ask each to tell about a fantastic feat that Mose could do.
- Encourage your students to be good citizens in the spirit of Mose Humphreys. Create a Mose Humphreys Good Deed Award. Every month give out the award to a student who does something "above and beyond."
- Rewrite the story of Mose Humphreys in play form. You can add new characters and new extraordinary feats that he did. Make hand puppets of the characters and perform it in a puppet theater.
- Davy Crockett and John Henry have songs written about them. It is fitting that Mose Humphreys have one, too. Write a song about Mose, New York's bravest firefighter. Use a tune familiar to the children.

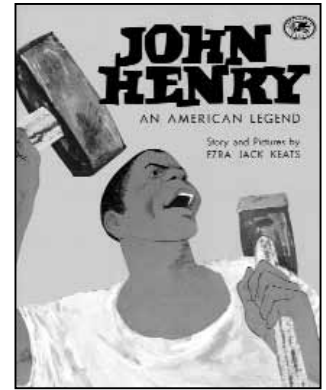
literature study

Tall tales come out of an oral tradition. Stories were passed from one person to the next changing along the way. Exaggerations grew and facts were altered, and as a result there are often several versions of the same story.

- Read and compare *New York's Bravest* by Mary Pope Osborne and *John Henry* by Ezra Jack Keats to the different stories of John Henry and Mose Humphreys in Mary Pope Osborne's *American Tall Tales*. Make a chart showing what is the same about each and what is different.



Alfred A. Knopf hardcover • 0-679-80089-1



Dell Dragonfly paperback • 0-394-89052-3

the colorful characters of tall tales

- As your class reads the books and meets the characters, each student should keep a running chart that identifies the characteristics of the heroes and heroines of the tall tales.
- Divide the children into groups of six and have them play Tall Tale Charades. Write the names of the characters on index cards and place them in a box. A child draws out a name and acts the part of the character without using words. The other children have to guess which tall tale hero is being portrayed.

tall tale writing activities

- Tall tale heroes were ordinary folks about whom extraordinary stories were told. Write tall tales about contemporary people: firefighters, teachers, nurses, students, etc.
- Create a tall tales newspaper with your class. Have the children write and illustrate newspaper articles telling about the lives of the tall tale heroes. Be sure to talk about the structure of a newspaper article (headline, byline, dateline, story).

the language of tall tales

- Have children collect adjectives and descriptive phrases that are used to describe the characters in the tall tales. Write the names of the characters on one set of index cards and the descriptions on another set and play a matching game. The children should notice that the adjectives often apply to more than one character.
- Play with the language of tall tales. Tall tale heroes were brave, strong, big, fast, smart, tough, strange, tireless, ornery, funny, talented, etc. In fact, they could outdo just about everybody with everything they did. Use these descriptors, and any others the class can come up with, and play the response game *How Big Was He?*

To play this game, use Mose and all the other tall tale heroes mentioned in the books. Have the students illustrate all the fantastic qualities of the heroes. Display the illustrations with captions on a tall tales bulletin board.



vocabulary

Ask students to find unfamiliar words and try to define them from the context of the stories.

New York's Bravest

pumper, volunteer, tenement, wedged, trolley.

American Tall Tales

Davy Crockett: *varmint, bragging, panther, keelboat.*

Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind: *coonskin cap, hickory sapling, bonnet, dumpling, butter churn.*

Johnny Appleseed: *pioneer, missionary, orchard, wilderness, frontier.*

Stormalong: *fathoms, outcast, bowsprit, sea chantey.*

Mose: *Bowery, tenement, volunteer, cobblestone, valiant.*

Febold Feboldson: *plains, sod shanty, prairie schooner, panned, postholes.*

Pecos Bill: *coyote, cowpoke, Hell's Gate Canyon, lariat.*

John Henry: *steel driver, Allegheny Mountains, steam drill, dignity, contestants.*

Paul Bunyan: *mackinaw, ox, logging, Grand Canyon.*

John Henry: An American Legend
rascal, riverboat, paddle wheel.

about the author/illustrators

Mary Pope Osborne is the author of many highly acclaimed books for children and young adults, including the Magic Tree House series, which has sold over 12 million copies, and *One World, Many Religions*, an Orbis Pictus Honor Book. She lives in New York City and Connecticut with her husband, Will.

Steve Johnson and **Lou Fancher** have collaborated on a number of notable children's books, including *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss, *The Salamander Room* by Anne Mazer, *The Frog Prince Continued* by John Scieszka, *Bambi* retold by Janet Schulman, and *Robin's Room* by Margaret Wise Brown. Steve and Lou live in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with their son, Nicholas.

Michael McCurdy has designed and illustrated many books, including *The Owl-Scatterer*, a *New York Times* Best Illustrated Children's Book of 1986. He has also written books for young readers, including *Hannah's Farm: Seasons on an Early American Homestead*. Mr. McCurdy lives with his wife, Deborah, and their two children on an old farm in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts.

Ezra Jack Keats long crossed social boundaries by being the first American picture-book maker to give the black child a central place in children's literature. He illustrated over 85 books for children, and wrote and illustrated 24 children's classics. He received the prestigious Caldecott Award for the most distinguished picture book for children in 1963. He passed away in 1983.

internet resources

American Folklore

www.americanfolklore.net/tt.html

A collection of tall tales, legends, folklore, and ghost stories.

EduScapes: Tall Tales

www.eduscapes.com/42explore/talltale.htm

The basics of tall tales, as well as activity ideas including a Web quest.

on the web

For additional online resources, author bios, teachers guides, and more . . .

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