

BIG Issues for SMALL Readers

Picture Book Kit

Includes inspirational posters for your classroom or library, and discussion questions and activities for tackling timely, important topics with your youngest readers.



Why and how should we make *BIG* issues accessible to young readers?

Young children love learning about their world. They make discoveries through their experiences, explorations, and interactions with others, and through literature. Nonfiction literature encourages children to wonder, to ask questions, and to seek answers. It inspires children by expanding their world and introducing them to new people, places, and ideas.

Biographies are especially inspiring, because readers learn about how real people who faced real challenges in the real world managed to overcome their difficulties. Biographies teach children to dream big, think deeply, and navigate challenges.



The books included in this kit provide an excellent springboard for discussion about the following issues:

Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré by Anika Aldamuy Denise with illustrations by Paola Escobar celebrates *diversity* and *heritage*

Mary Wears What She Wants by Keith Negley addresses *gender equality* and *challenging social norms*

I Am Enough by Grace Byers with illustrations by Keturah A. Bobo emphasizes *empowerment* and *self-esteem*

The Rough Patch by Brian Lies offers young readers an accessible way to talk about *grief* and *loss*

Remarkably You by Pat Zietlow Miller with illustrations by Patrice Barton encourages readers to embrace their *individuality* and follow their *passions*

Look Up With Me: Neil Degrasse Tyson: A Life Among the Stars written by Jennifer Berne with illustrations by Lorraine Nam celebrates *curiosity*, *wonder*, and *love of learning*

Sea Bear by Lindsay Moore examines a consequence of *climate change*



Tips for Planning & Organizing Your Unit

Students will have differing views about the topics addressed in this kit, so it will be important to facilitate respectful dialogue and answer questions in a simple, straightforward manner. As educators, our role is to guide the discussion, accepting that all contributions have value and that no single perspective is the correct one.

Depending on the age of the students, you can address these topics in different ways. For example, *older students* can research the issue of climate change and present their information orally or through written reports. They can also hold a debate, sharing their personal opinions and providing reasons to support their views. *Younger children* can create illustrations or stories to express their ideas. For example, they can draw what makes them unique and what talents they possess. The pictures can then be collated into a class book about what makes us special.

The books in this kit can be shared with students in a *variety of formats*. The teacher can *read them aloud* to younger students and spark a discussion with a thought-provoking question. The students should be seated in a circle so that they can see each other and respond thoughtfully to each other's questions and ideas. With a larger group, you can have the students *talk with a partner* ("pair share" or "turn and talk") and then share what they discussed with their partner when they rejoin the larger group. Older students can read these books independently and express their thoughts through *writing*. They can use graphic organizers, such as a word web, to share the main idea and details of the books.

Each of these books features rich illustrations, thought-provoking ideas, and engaging texts that can ignite thoughtful discussion and critical thinking among students as they reflect upon the ideas powerfully conveyed by these stories. Students will be thinking about these books long after the school day is done.





The seeds she has planted,
the roots that grew shoots into
the open air of possibility,
have become a lush landscape
into which she steps, as though she has never left.



Planting Stories

The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré

Words by Anika Aldamuy Denise

Illustrations by Paola Escobar



About the Book

Pura Belpré moves from Puerto Rico to New York City, and while she is working at the New York Public Library, she realizes that the library has no stories from her homeland. Through storytelling, puppetry, and writing, Pura is able to share the folktales she grew up with, bringing the joy, language, and heritage of her beloved Puerto Rico to children everywhere.

Discussion Questions

- ✿ Show the students a map and point out San Juan and New York City. Then read the first two pages of the story. How are the two cities different? How does Pura feel about New York City? How do you know?
- ✿ Read the page, “What began as a visit to celebrate her sister’s wedding becomes the first steps in a new land—y una vida nueva—for Pura.” Ask the students what they believe the Spanish phrase means and to explain their thinking.
- ✿ What is a garment factory? Does Pura enjoy working there? Why or why not?
- ✿ When Pura takes the job at the library, what does she discover? When she realizes there are no stories from Puerto Rico, what does she do?
- ✿ What does the author mean when she writes, “Now Pura has a wish, too: to plant her story seeds throughout the land”?
- ✿ How does Pura decide to bring her stories to life? When she shares her stories, what languages does she use? Why do you think she speaks in more than one language?
- ✿ How does Pura bring books about Puerto Rico to the library? Why is this so important?
- ✿ When Pura returns to the library in 1961, how has it changed?
- ✿ Why is this book called “Planting Stories”?
- ✿ What character traits would you use to describe Pura?



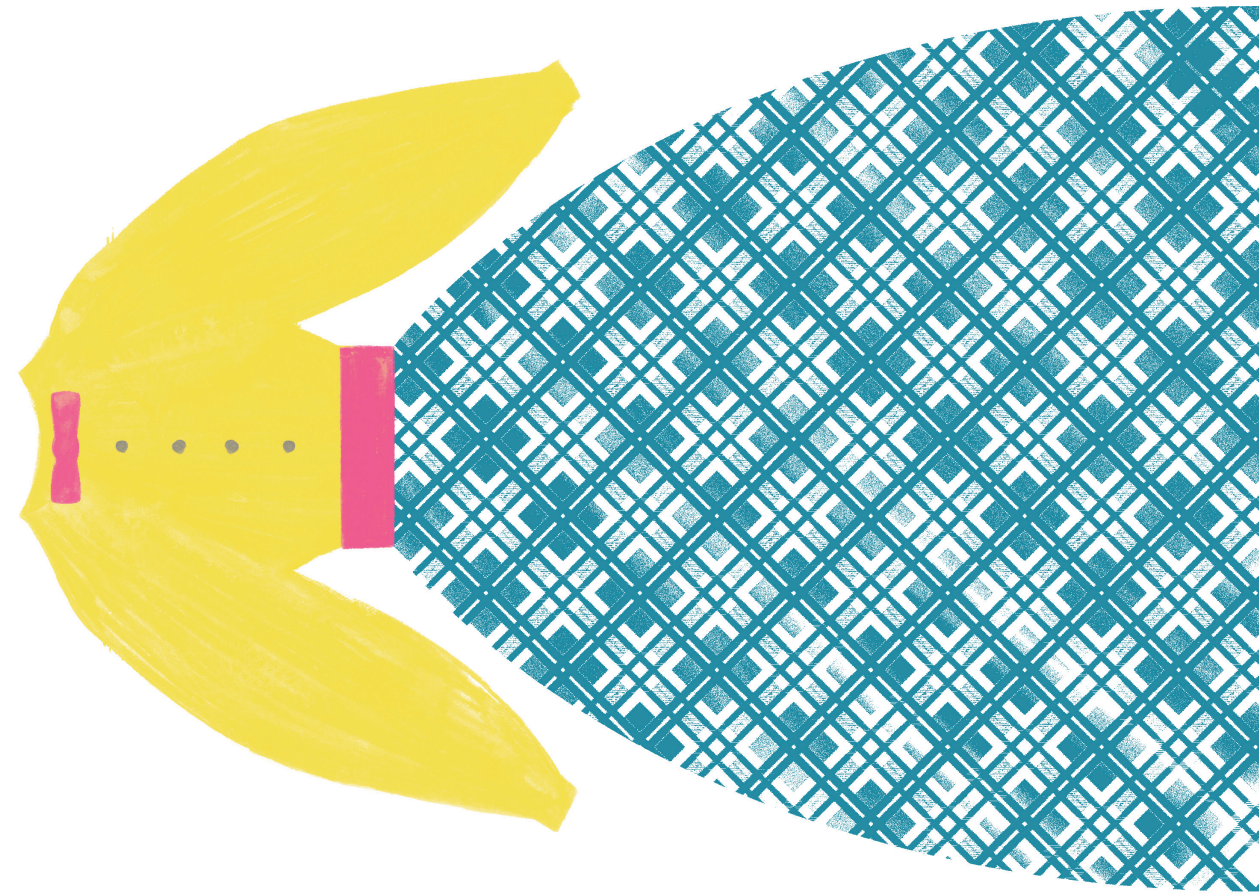
Extension Activities

Puppet Play. Pura designed beautiful puppets to convey her stories. Have the students work in small groups to create their own puppets to retell a story. Students can choose to convey a folktale they know, or a book that they have read. Provide the students with an opportunity to practice their puppet show and then perform it for the class.

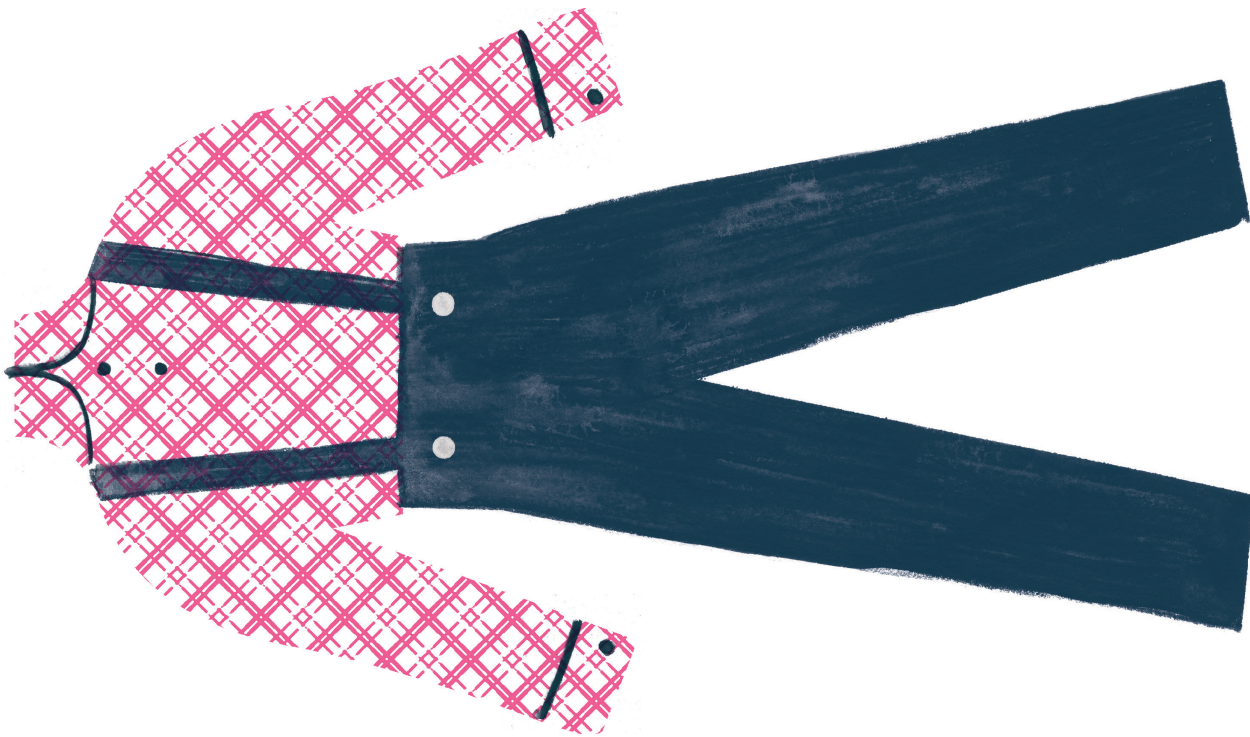
Watch Your Language. Many Spanish words and phrases are sprinkled throughout this story. Ask the students what words they know in other languages. Have them teach each other words and phrases in different languages. Older students can create a multilingual dictionary by writing and translating the words that they know.

Coming to America. Ask the students to interview an older relative or family friend to find out about their heritage. In what country were they (or their parents/grandparents) born? When and why did they come to the United States? What was it like when they first came to the country? Did they speak English? Have the students create a poster or report to share the information that they learned.

Planting Our Own Stories. Ask the students to explain how Pura is able to “plant her story seeds.” Discuss how plants grow and produce seeds so that the plants endure, just as Pura’s stories did. Then provide students with seeds and soil to do their own planting.



~~girl clothes~~



~~boy clothes~~



Mary Wears What She Wants

Keith Negley



About the Book

Inspired by the true story of Mary Edwards Walker, this book tells of a young girl who challenges the gender norms of her time by choosing to wear pants. The townspeople are appalled and castigate her for wearing “boy clothes,” but Mary responds by saying, “I’m not wearing boys’ clothes. I’m wearing my clothes!” Daring to be different, Mary’s small act brings huge change for the girls in her hometown.

Discussion Questions

- Read the first page. Why do you think girls in America weren’t allowed to wear pants long ago?
- Why did Mary dislike dresses? Why did she prefer pants?
- How did the townspeople react when Mary wore pants? Why?
- When Mary asks her father why everyone is so upset, what does her father tell her? Do you agree with his response?
- On her way to school the next day, why does Mary appreciate the fact that she can walk faster in pants?
- What happens when Mary arrives at school?
- What does Mary mean when she says, “I’m not wearing boys’ clothes... I’m wearing my clothes!”
- What happens when Mary goes into her classroom?
- Read and discuss the page: “It’s the way things have always been and the way things will always be, they said. And no one thought it should be any different.” Does Mary agree? Why or why not? What would happen if everyone believed this?

Extension Activities

If I Could Change the World. Mary believed that it was wrong to dictate how people should dress based on their gender. Ask the students what they would change in today’s society. Why? How? Young students can draw pictures to convey their ideas, while older students can write a persuasive piece to express their ideas.

All Dressed Up. Ask the students to think about their favorite ways to dress. Have them wear a favorite outfit to school and photograph them wearing it. Then have the students design, color, and cut out an outfit that they would love to wear. Have the students affix the photo and the cut-out outfit onto a piece of paper and add a decorative border. Display these and discuss how the pages are different and unique. Why is this important?

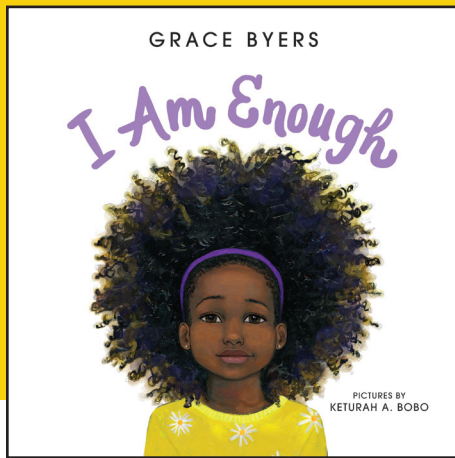
Those Who Dared. This story is inspired by the amazing life of Mary Edwards Walker, who was arrested many times for wearing pants instead of dresses. Ask the students to research other trailblazers who dared to question, challenge, and change their world. This can be a teacher-led whole group activity for younger students, while older students can conduct own research independently.

Girls and Boys. Begin a class discussion about gender roles and expectations. What do the students believe? Why? Do their classmates agree? Why or why not? Emphasize the importance of respectful conversation as the students express their views and challenge one another to think in new and different ways.



I know that we don't look the same;
our skin, our eyes, our hair, our frame.
But that does not dictate our worth;
we both have places here on earth.





I Am Enough

BY GRACE BYERS

PICTURES BY KETURAH A. BOBO

About the Book

“Like time, I’m here to be, and be everything I can.” The little girl in this story shines like the sun. She sings, soars, and stands like the mountains. “Like the winner, I’m here to win, and if I don’t, get up again.” She is strong and smart and loving and kind, but most importantly, she is herself, and that will always be enough.

Discussion Questions

- * Read the first three pages. What language pattern do you notice?
- * What does the author mean by, “Like the sun, I’m here to shine”?
- * What does the author mean by, “Like time, I’m here to be, and be everything I can”?
- * Read the pages, “Like the champ, I’m here to fight” and “Like the heart, I’m here to love.” How is it possible to do both?
- * What does it mean to be, “Like a ladder, here to climb, and like the air, to rise above”?
- * Read the page, “I’m not meant to be like you; you’re not meant to be like me.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- * Explain what the author means after reading the page, “And in the end, we are right here to live a life of love, not fear...”
- * What do the children mean at the end of the story when they declare, “I am enough”?

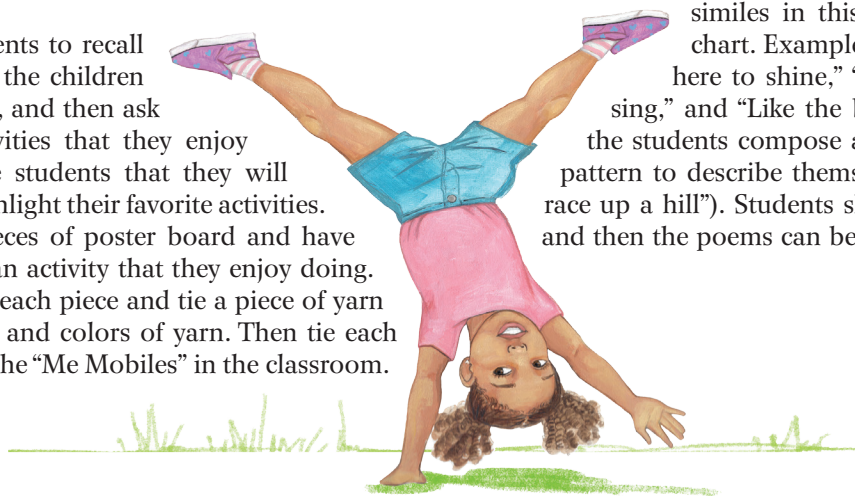
Extension Activities

Body Language. Provide each student with a large piece of mural paper. Have the students work in pairs. While one student lies down on the paper, the other student uses a pencil to trace around the partner’s body. Students should cut out their body and color the paper, adding hair, eyes, nose, mouth, hands, feet, and clothing. Display the cutouts on the wall to show how different and special all the students are.

Me Mobile. Ask the students to recall some of the activities that the children enjoyed doing in this story, and then ask them to think about activities that they enjoy doing themselves. Tell the students that they will create a “Me Mobile” to highlight their favorite activities. Give each student 4–6 pieces of poster board and have them draw on each piece an activity that they enjoy doing. Punch a hole in the top of each piece and tie a piece of yarn to it. Use different lengths and colors of yarn. Then tie each piece to a hanger. Display the “Me Mobiles” in the classroom.

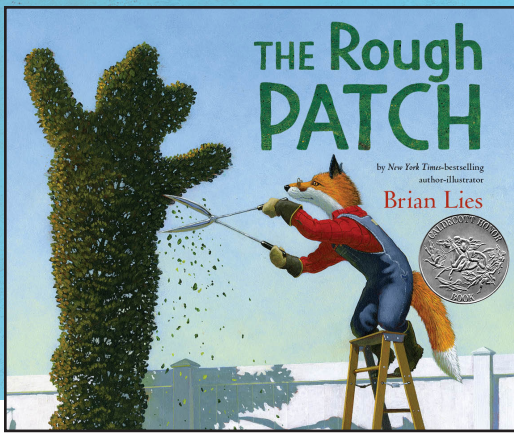
Mirror Image. Reread aloud the page, “I know that we don’t look the same: our skin, our eyes, our hair, our frame.” Bring in some mirrors for the students to use. Have them look carefully at themselves in the mirror and then make a self-portrait by first sketching their face and then adding color.

Like Me. Ask the students to recall the similes in this story and list them on a chart. Examples include “Like the sun, I’m here to shine,” “Like the voice, I’m here to sing,” and “Like the bird, I’m here to fly.” Have the students compose a poem using this language pattern to describe themselves (e.g. “like the wind, I race up a hill”). Students should illustrate their poem, and then the poems can be collated into a class book.



*A good place
won't stay empty for long.
Something must grow.*





THE Rough PATCH

by Brian Lies

About the Book

Evan and his dog do everything together, from eating ice cream to caring for their award-winning garden, which grows big and beautiful. One day the unthinkable happens: Evan's dog dies. Heartbroken, Evan destroys the garden and everything in it. The ground becomes overgrown with prickles and thorns, and Evan embraces the chaos. But beauty grows in the darkest of places, and when a twisting vine turns into an immense pumpkin, Evan is drawn out of his misery and back to the county fair, where friendships—old and new—await. A beautiful, accessible, and deeply personal story about love, loss, and hope, and the healing power of friendship and nature.

Discussion Questions

- 🌿 What activities do Evan and his dog enjoy together?
- 🌿 What is special about Evan's garden?
- 🌿 What happens to Evan's dog? How does this make Evan feel?
- 🌿 Have you ever lost something? How did it make you feel?
- 🌿 What happens to Evan's garden? How does it change? Why?
- 🌿 How does attending the fair help Evan?
- 🌿 What plant starts to grow in the garden? What does Evan do when he discovers the pumpkin? When it ripens, what does Evan do with it?
- 🌿 What are the prizes Evan can choose for winning third place at the fair? What choice does Evan make?
- 🌿 How does the story end?
- 🌿 Why is this story called "The Rough Patch"? Does this title have more than one meaning?

Extension Activities

How Are You Feeling? Discuss what happens to Evan's dog in the story and ask the students if they have ever experienced loss. How did it make them feel, or how do they imagine they would feel? What might help them feel better? Have the students write about their feelings and share their story with a partner.

Plant a Seed. Discuss how animals and plants have a life cycle. Bring in an assortment of seeds (including pumpkin seeds), a bag of soil, and cups. Label the cups with student names. Help the students to plant a seed of their choice. They can write the name of the plant on a craft stick and slide it in the soil to identify their plant. Have them place their cups near a window and care for their seeds by watering them regularly.

Just Between Friends. Ask readers to think about one of their closest friends. Why is their friendship so special? What do they enjoy doing together? Have students write about their friend and add an illustration. Students can share their friendship pages with the class.

And the Winner Is . . . Evan wins third prize at the fair for his big, beautiful pumpkin. Have the students choose a name from a basket. They should design an award ribbon for the student whose name they picked. They should acknowledge a special trait or talent in that classmate. Examples could include, "Fastest Runner," "Great Reader," or "Amazing Artist." Pass out the ribbons and have the students applaud one another as they are awarded. Then have the students wear their ribbons during a special celebration.



Follow your path.

Do what you love to do.

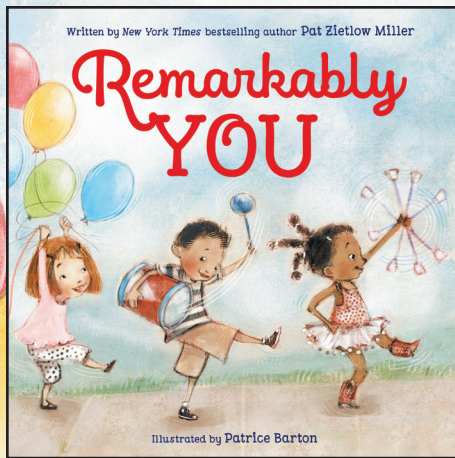
Be completely,

uniquely,

remarkably

YOU.





Remarkably YOU

By Pat Zietlow Miller
Illustrated by Patrice Barton

About the Book

With upbeat rhythm and rhyme, this story celebrates the bold and the timid, the tall and the small, the knitters and spellers and artists and singers. Every person is unique and special, and everyone can make a difference in their own remarkable way. So why not start today?

Discussion Questions

- What does “remarkably” mean? Are all of us remarkable in some way?
- After you read the first two pages, ask the students if they would describe themselves as bold or timid. Why? Have them talk with a partner to share a time when they acted boldly or timidly.
- Read the page, “Learning new things when you’re out and about.” Ask the students to share examples of something new they have just learned.
- Discuss what the author means when she writes, “Just look for the moments that let you be you.” Ask the students to share such a moment from their own experiences.
- Read the page, “Don’t change how you act to be just like the rest.” Why is this important?
- As you read, pause to discuss and define new vocabulary words such as: savvy, uncertain, bookish, capable, unparalleled, flair, courageous, embrace.
- Reread the last line of the book, “Be completely, uniquely, remarkably YOU.” Discuss what the word “unique” means. Ask, “Why is it good to be unique? How are you unique?”

Extension Activities

Follow Your Passion. Reread the pages, “A swimmer who knits. A cellist who cheers. A mutt-loving cat cuddler who volunteers.” Discuss how sometimes we believe that we should have only one passion (e.g., “I’m an artist” or “I’m an athlete”). Discuss the joy of following many passions, and how people can pursue several interests, even those that are very different from each other. Then have pairs or small groups of children discuss their own passions or interests with each other.

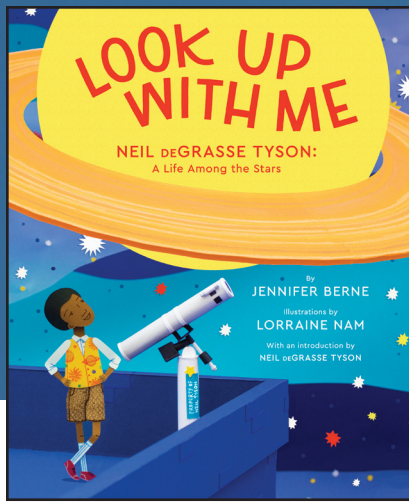
What a Character! Make a list of character traits named in the story (e.g., wise, daring, careful, kind) as well as those not specifically named but implied. For example, reread the page, “Perhaps you like counting, or drawing all day” (artistic) and “Or finding invisible dragons to slay” (imaginative). Have the children draw a picture of themselves and write character traits that describe them around the portrait.

What’s New? Ask the students to recall the many activities that the children engage in during the story (e.g., biking, drumming, baseball, reading, rollerblading, counting, drawing, singing). Then ask the children to think about one new activity that they are willing to try. Are they nervous? Excited? Why or why not? Challenge the students to try their new activity within the next week and share their results with the class afterwards.

You’ve Got the Power. Reread the pages: “YOU have the power to be a surprise...You could change the world. Are you willing to start?” and “You can make a difference. In big ways. Or small.” Discuss how the children in the story are changing the world (e.g., collecting recyclables, planting, sharing with others). Have the students brainstorm ways that they, too, can change the world, one small act at a time.

"EVERYONE SHOULD
HAVE THEIR MIND BLOWN
ONCE A DAY."





LOOK UP WITH ME

NEIL deGRASSE TYSON: A Life Among the Stars

By JENNIFER BERNE

Illustrations by LORRAINE NAM

About the Book

This book celebrates the life and accomplishments of Neil deGrasse Tyson, a scientist, astronomer, researcher, and educator, and the current director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York City. Tyson inspires readers of all ages to look beyond what they can see, ask challenging questions, ponder the immense complexity of the universe, and embrace their curiosity and wonder.

Discussion Questions

- ★ Read Neil's introduction aloud. He says, "Scientists are kids who never lost their natural childhood curiosity about the world." Do you agree? Why or why not?
- ★ What experience changed Neil's life? Why?
- ★ What did young Neil do when he became fascinated with planets, moons, and stars?
- ★ How does Neil earn enough money to buy a new telescope?
- ★ What happened one night when Neil was on the roof with his telescope?
- ★ When did Neil realize that he could earn a living talking about the universe?
- ★ When Neil grew up, how did he pursue his love of the cosmos?
- ★ What special job did Neil consider the "coolest job on earth"?
- ★ Read the facts aloud on the page that says, "Neil believes everyone should have their mind blown at least once a day." Which fact do you think is the most mind-blowing?
- ★ What does Neil wish every person would do? Why?

Extension Activities

Scope Things Out. Have the students build a simple telescope. Websites such as National Geographic Kids provide instructions for creating a telescope using cardboard tubes and two convex lenses (<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/nature/make-a-telescope/>). You can create one telescope as a class, or have students create their own individual telescope.

See the Stars. Neil's life was changed forever after he visited the Hayden Planetarium. If possible, plan to take your students to a local planetarium. Afterwards, have the students write about their experience.

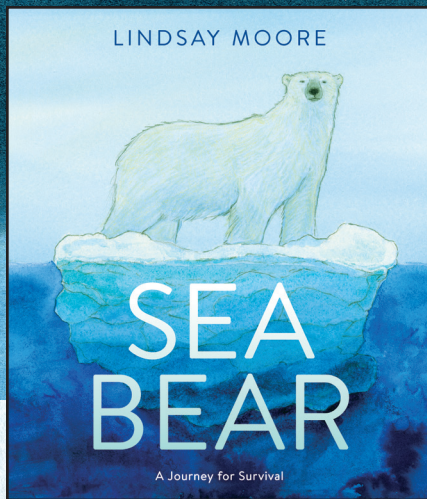


Spacing Out. Have the students research our solar system and challenge them to build a model using materials of their choice. Students may design a large poster, a pop-up picture, or a three-dimensional model of our solar system using materials such as clay, balloons, or paper maché. Display the models and have the students design invitations for other classes to visit the "Space Show" in your classroom.

Shoot for the Stars. Ask the students to research a constellation. What is it called? Why? When is it visible in the sky? Then have the students create a constellation chart or build a 3-dimensional constellation using materials such as toothpicks and mini-marshmallows. Display the constellations and add them to the "Space Show" in your classroom.

**Imagine you are a
polar bear . . .
Your home has always
been the sea
and the ice.**





SEA BEAR

A Journey for Survival

BY LINDSAY MOORE

About the Book

What is life like for a polar bear living in the Arctic? How is the polar bear's Arctic habitat changing? What can we do to protect the Arctic and the myriad of animals that live there? These are some of the questions raised by this powerful, lyrical story, told from the perspective of a polar bear struggling to adapt to its ever-changing habitat.

Discussion Questions

- ❄ Where do polar bears live? Locate the Arctic Circle on a map or globe.
- ❄ Why must polar bears be patient animals?
- ❄ How do polar bears hunt across the Arctic Ocean?
- ❄ What is their primary source of food?
- ❄ Why is there less ice for the polar bears to stand on? What is happening to the ice floes?
- ❄ What are some of the ocean creatures that the polar bear encounters?
- ❄ What happens when the polar bear encounters a storm?
- ❄ Explain what you think the author means when she writes: "Polar bears are not land bears. We wait on land. We hope on land."

Extension Activities

Bear in Mind. Ask the students to research polar bears, including their habitat, diet, migration, and life cycle. Have the students create a presentation to share their polar bear research. They can create an informational report, a poster presentation, or a digital presentation using software applications such as Microsoft PowerPoint or Google Slides.

The Amazing Arctic. Have the students work collaboratively to create a large Arctic mural. Some students can paint the background, while others can draw and cut out icebergs and ice floes to affix to the background. Students should design and cut out Arctic animals to add to the mural. They can use self-adhesive mounting squares to attach the ice and animals to the mural, creating a three-dimensional effect that brings the Arctic mural to life.

Why So Warm? Have the students research the causes of global warming and climate change. What is happening to the Arctic, and how are other regions being affected? Websites such as NASA Climate Kids (<https://climatekids.nasa.gov/search/global/>) and the American Museum of Natural History (<https://www.amnh.org/explore/ology/climate-change/what-s-the-big-idea-about-climate-change2>) are two examples of interactive resources that students can use for this research.

Protect Our Planet! After completing the previous research project, discuss with the students how they can act to protect our planet. What can we do to curb the effects of climate change? Have the students create a list of ways that they can help (e.g., reduce waste, reuse materials, recycle, conserve energy). Ask them to make a "Promise Page" and add their signature, pledging to make small lifestyle changes that collectively have a large impact on protecting our planet.