



# The Girl in the Torch

By Robert Sharenow

## TEACHING GUIDE

Aligns with  
Common Core  
State  
Standards  
Grades 3–6

### ABOUT THE BOOK

In her small village at the turn of the twentieth century, twelve-year-old Sarah stares at a postcard of the Statue of Liberty, imagining the Lady beckoning her to America, a land of freedom and possibility. When Sarah and her mother finally journey across the Atlantic, though, tragedy strikes, and Sarah finds herself being sent back before she even sets foot in the country. Yet just as Sarah is ushered onto the ship that will send her away from the land of her dreams, she makes a life-or-death decision. She daringly jumps on the back of the boat and swims as hard as she can toward the Lady, Ellis Island, and a new life. Her leap of faith leads her to an unbelievable hiding place: the Statue of Liberty itself. Now Sarah must search for a way to Manhattan while avoiding the watchman and scavenging enough food to survive. When a surprising ally helps bring her to the city, Sarah faces new dangers and a life on her own. Will she ever find a true home in America?

### VOCABULARY PRACTICE

*The Girl in the Torch* introduces the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of history. It also introduces many challenging words. Add these words to your vocabulary by matching them to their definitions below.

- |                |   |
|----------------|---|
| 1. Ascend      | a. Rival                                  |
| 2. Complexion  | b. Building with sleeping facilities      |
| 3. Dejected    | c. To climb upward                        |
| 4. Discreet    | d. Grand                                  |
| 5. Dormitory   | e. To stop or withhold                    |
| 6. Harrowing   | f. Smug smile                             |
| 7. Jeopardy    | g. Danger                                 |
| 8. Majestic    | h. Facial appearance                      |
| 9. Nemesis     | i. Isolation to prevent spread of disease |
| 10. Quarantine | j. Unhappy                                |
| 11. Smirk      | k. Distressing                            |
| 12. Suppress   | l. Careful or tactful                     |



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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the Statue of Liberty symbolize for Sarah and her mom? How does Sarah personify this monument, and why does she think of it as “the Lady”?
2. Who are Sarah’s “people”? Why do Sarah and her mom leave their lives behind in the “old country” and travel to America? Who becomes Sarah’s “people” in New York?
3. Why does Maryk help Sarah? Why does Mrs. Lee? Think of a time when you went out of your way to help a stranger. What motivated you to do so?
4. What surprises Sarah about New York City? When you have traveled to a new place, what surprised you?
5. Why does Maryk tell Sarah the fable of “Androcles and the Lion” (p. 110)? Why does that fable come to have significance for Sarah?
6. How do the religions practiced in Mrs. Lee’s boardinghouse—Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism—meld together? What do all three faiths have in common when it comes to saying a blessing over a meal?
7. How does Sarah encounter racism in America? Why does Sarah treat all people equally, regardless of ethnicity or skin color?
8. Why is Maryk surprised by Sarah’s skill at chess? Why is chess important to Sarah?
9. Why is Sarah scared of horses? How does Maryk help her overcome her fear, and why do you think he’s so determined that Sarah should be comfortable around horses?
10. Maryk tells Sarah, “Best way to make friends with anyone, man or beast, is to offer them something to eat” (p. 176). What do you do to make a new friend?
11. How do Sarah and Bao Yu become friends? How are they different, and how are they similar?
12. What does Bao Yu mean when she says that her mom “doesn’t want [her] to become too American” (p. 187)? Even though Sarah is not *legally* American, how does she immerse herself in her new world to become it? What about Sarah embodies the American spirit?
13. Why do Sarah and Tommy lie to each other about their lives at home? Why does Sarah pretend that Maryk is her uncle, and why does Tommy pretend that Mr. Duffy takes care of him?
14. Why do the police arrest Mrs. Lee and Maryk? Why does Sarah stick up for her friends, and how does she make her voice heard? Why isn’t Maryk’s offer of sponsorship enough to keep Sarah in New York?
15. How does Maryk take care of Sarah in spite of the judge’s ruling? What does Sarah mean when she says that maybe Maryk’s heart “was just too big” (p. 272)? How does Sarah continue to feel Maryk’s love as she grows up?



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## RESEARCH AND EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. **A Poem to Remember.** Read the complete poem of “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus, which Robert Sharenow excerpts at the beginning of the novel, pausing after each line to think about its significance. Research the history of the Statue of Liberty and this poem, specifically answering:
  - Who was Emma Lazarus, and how did she come to write “The New Colossus”?
  - When did the Statue of Liberty open? When was the plaque bearing this poem added to it?
  - What is the significance of the poem’s title?
  - What is the poem’s rhyme scheme, and what poetic form does it follow?
  - What are the “twin cities” framing the harbor in line 8 of the poem?

Memorize the poem in its entirety or 4–6 lines from it. Recite what you’ve memorized in front of an audience, and then compare and contrast *hearing* the poem versus *seeing* it.

2. **Carrying the Banner.** Newsies (also known as newsboys) such as Tommy Grogan distributed newspapers to the public from the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth century. In fact, many children held jobs at this time, just as Sarah does at Mrs. Lee’s. Research the Newsboys Strike of 1899 and child labor in the United States during the 1800s. Do you think children should or should not have been allowed to work during that time? Write a one-page newspaper opinion article defending your viewpoint. Offer clear reasons for your argument and relevant evidence drawn from your research. Format your piece to look like an actual newspaper article.
3. **Living History.** If possible, encourage your teacher to plan a class trip or your parents to take a family vacation to New York City to experience what Sarah does in the novel. Take the Statue of Liberty ferry to Liberty Island and Ellis Island, walk across the Brooklyn Bridge, explore the crowded streets of Chinatown, and visit the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side. How do your experiences compare and contrast with Sarah’s? While touring the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, and the Tenement Museum, take note of the exhibits showcasing photographs and other primary resources detailing the immigrant experience. How does Sarah’s fictional immigrant experience compare and contrast with those chronicled in history?

Aligns with Common Core State Standards Grades 3–6

English Language Arts Common Core Reading Literature Standards:

RL.3.1, RL.3.3, RL.3.4, RL.3.6, RL.4.1, RL.4.2, RL.4.3, RL.4.4, RL.5.2, RL.5.3, RL.5.4, RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.4, RL.6.7

English Language Arts Common Core Writing Standards:

W.3.1, W.3.2, W.3.4, W.3.7, W.4.1, W.4.2, W.4.4, W.4.7, W.5.1, W.5.2, W.5.4, W.5.7, W.6.1, W.6.4, W.6.7

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