



# PAX

## CLASSROOM KIT

Inspire your students  
to build a better world  
with *Pax*.

The contents in this  
kit can be used to teach  
timely, thematic units on:

**IDENTITY, EMPATHY,**  
the **ENVIRONMENT** &  
the **NATURAL WORLD**,  
and the **IMPACT**  
**OF WAR.**

Includes Discussion Questions, Classroom Activities, Thematic Units of Study, and Reproducible Activities



# PAX

SARA PENNYPACKER

ILLUSTRATED BY JON KLASSEN



Grades 3-7

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Pax was only a kit when his family was killed, rescued by “his boy,” Peter, from abandonment and certain death. Now the war front is approaching, and when Peter’s father enlists, Peter has to move in with his grandfather. Far worse than being forced to leave home is the fact that Pax can’t go with him. Peter obeys his stern father and releases Pax back into the wild. But before Peter makes it through even one night under his grandfather’s roof, regret and duty spur him to action; he sneaks out, determined to find his beloved friend. This is the story of Peter, Pax, and their independent struggles to return to each other in the face of war.



## ABOUT SARA PENNYPACKER

Sara Pennypacker is the author of the award-winning, *New York Times* bestselling Clementine series; the Waylon series, the novel *Summer of the Gypsy Moths*, and the picture books *Meet the Dullards*, *Pierre in Love*, and *Sparrow Girl*. She divides her time between Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and Florida. You can visit her online at [www.sarapennypacker.com](http://www.sarapennypacker.com).



Photo by Lorraine Scheppler

## INTERVIEW WITH SARA PENNYPACKER

**Why did you decide to write this book without a defined geographical setting?**

Keeping everything about the war undefined—especially the setting and time—was critical to me. I didn’t want the reader to be able to say, “Oh, this happened somewhere else,” or “This couldn’t happen now,” because that would have allowed a sense of distance and comfort I didn’t want. I wanted the reader to be able to identify with Peter as though he lived nearby, right now. It was harder to do than I’d predicted, by the way—technology and geographical clues kept trying to insert themselves into the story!

**How did you go about researching the behavior and characteristics of foxes? What do you feel is the most important thing you learned about the fox?**

Foxes! As always with a story, I do a lot of research because it bothers me if an author gets things wrong in a book. With foxes, the more I learned, the more impressed

I became—with their intelligence, their adaptability, and their complexity. And that altered the way I wrote the book—I decided to make it more realistic than I’d originally planned. To do that, I asked a red fox expert to go over the manuscript with me, and I thanked him in the acknowledgements for his generosity. A few times for the sake of the story I fictionalized their behavior, but only a few.

The most important thing I learned about—or maybe the most intriguing—is their intelligence. Foxes are just as smart as portrayed in the book—for instance, they are known to be able to understand the communications of many other species, not just crows, as I write in the book. For over fifty years in Siberia, people have been experimenting with domestication of foxes, and one fascinating result is this: unlike all other domesticated animals—dogs, cats, farm animals, etc.—who lose intelligence through domestication, foxes actually become *smarter* during the process!

**When did you make the choice to tell the story through alternating points of view? Were there certain parts of the story that were best told through Peter’s point of view and others from Pax’s perspective?**

In the early drafts, I only had one point of view—the fox’s. Peter’s came later, halfway into the writing, when I realized how much more light I could shed on the whole story if I included a human’s understanding. Once I decided that, I next had to figure out which piece of the story belonged to which character. I made the decisions based on two factors: who had the most insight to share, and whose view was the most moving. The hardest to choose were the first and last chapters—I wrote them each out from both points of view, and only hope I chose the right ones. As a writer, the most rewarding parts of *Pax* were the events that were told from both Peter’s and Pax’s perspectives—they reminded me how differently we all perceive the same thing.

Video content, including extensive author interviews on *Pax*, and on Sara Pennypacker’s writing craft and style, are available at [www.findpax.com](http://www.findpax.com).



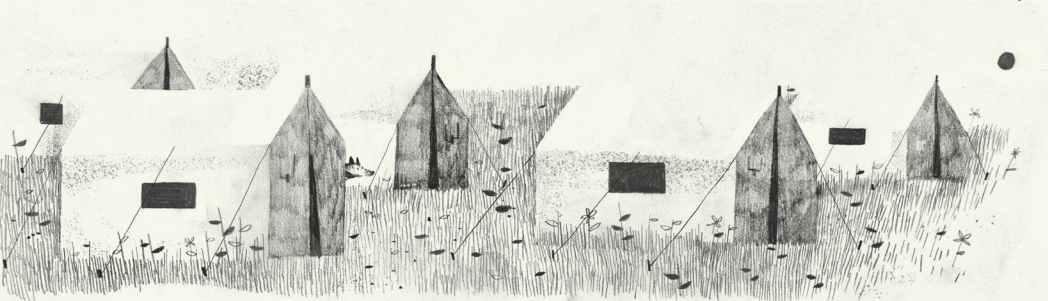
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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the connection between Peter and Pax. How did that connection develop over the years? Why must Peter release Pax? What makes Peter leave to look for Pax after he arrives at his grandfather's home?
2. What is the importance of the toy soldier in the game Peter plays with Pax? Why is Peter surprised to find a box of toy soldiers at his grandfather's house? What is the impact on Peter when he sees the picture of his father as a boy with his arm around a dog? Why do you think Peter's father never talked about his dog?
3. Why is it so important to Vola to live alone? What does she mean when she says, "The plain truth can be the hardest thing to see when it's about yourself" (p. 189)? How does that phrase pertain to Vola? How does it pertain to Peter and to Peter's father?
4. Vola tells Peter, "People should tell the truth about what war costs" (p. 130). What costs of war does each of the characters in this book pay? Describe both the physical and emotional costs that these characters experience.
5. Discuss the concept of "nonduality," or "two but not two," that Vola explains to Peter (p. 186). How does this concept help Peter understand his connection to Pax? What does it mean to Vola?
6. Describe the steps in Peter's journey that help him to understand that, when he finally finds Pax, he must let him go. Describe the steps in Pax's journey that lead him to stay with his new family in the wild.
7. Discuss the meaning of the phrase that appears before the story begins: "Just because it isn't happening here doesn't mean it isn't happening." What does that phrase mean to you? Why do you think the author did not name a specific place or area as the setting of the book?
8. What does Vola mean when she asks Peter if he is "wild or tame" (p. 106)? What do those words mean to you? Why is it hard for the wild foxes to accept Pax when he finds them? Apply the concept of wild or tame to each of the main characters in the story to help explain their personalities.
9. Discuss the meaning of the final words in the book: "Sometimes the apple rolls very far from the tree" (p. 277). Why do these words appear as handwritten text? What do these words mean for Peter?
10. Why do you think the author decided to tell the story from dual points of view with alternating chapters describing of the separate adventures of Peter and Pax? How does this structure help the story move forward and enhance your understanding of the plot?
11. What do you think Peter and Pax do in the moments after the story ends and in the weeks that follow? What clues in the book support your guesses?
12. Compare the experience of reading Pax to listening to the audio edition of the book. How is the experience of the story different when you hear the voices rather than see the words on the page? How do the illustrations in the book help you to visualize the story?
13. Throughout the centuries and in many cultures, people have told stories, tales, and fables about foxes. What stories can you remember or can you find that have a fox as a main character? How would you compare some of these fictional characters to Pax and the other foxes in this novel?
14. Read the story of Sinbad in a volume of the Arabian Nights stories. Compare the experiences of Sinbad to what you have learned about Vola in this book. Why do you think the story and the puppets she creates have become so important to Vola? What does the story and working with the puppets mean to Peter?





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## THEMATIC UNITS OF STUDY

Inspire your students to build a better world with *Pax*. The following activities can be used to teach four timely thematic units: **IDENTITY, EMPATHY, the ENVIRONMENT & the NATURAL WORLD, and the IMPACT OF WAR.**

### IDENTITY

**Mapping Journeys.** On page 19, Peter uses his grandfather's atlas to route his journey. Show students how to use an atlas, and teach them mapping skills that are appropriate for their grade levels. Then, have students think about a few journeys they have made that are significant to them. These journeys could include routes such as "home to swim practice," or "home to Disney World," or "mom's house to dad's house," etc. Then have students create and decorate individual maps that chart places and journeys significant to them. To further incorporate details from the text, point students to page 129. In this scene, Vola explains to Peter that she found a little true piece of herself in remembering that she liked peanut butter at the local grocery store. Ask students to incorporate one place where they find a "little true piece of [themselves]" to add even more individuality.

**What Would You Take? What Would You Leave?** Between pages 18-23, Peter makes the tough decision to leave home and search for Pax. To prepare for his journey, he packs his backpack and leaves a letter behind. Have students imagine they're leaving home for an important journey. Ask them to generate lists of the items they would pack, and explain why they would carry each item. As a writing extension activity, have them compose the letters they would leave behind.

**Personal Philosophy.** On page 125, Vola explains the purpose of her "philosophy bingo cards." Give students a set number of index cards, and ask them to record "universals" or "things [they] figure to be true about the world." Like Vola, students can choose to categorize some of the cards as public and some of them as private. Before displaying the public cards on a classroom philosophy bingo card wall, let students decorate and illustrate the cards.

**Defining Home.** On page 73, Peter explains, "I'm not running away from home, I'm running away to home." Ask students to define the word "home" as if they were writing a dictionary definition. You could expand this into a public speaking project by having students show-and-tell an object or cherished item that symbolizes home. To take a more artistic direction, ask that students create collages or capture and print a photo series to further illustrate their definitions of home.

**Nature vs. Nurture.** On page 188, Peter questions, "Do you think if someone had a wild part, it could ever be tamed out?" Give students a Venn diagram. Have them label one side "nature" and the other side "nurture." There are many educational resources online to help teach students the differences and the theories related to the two categories. Once the vocabulary is understood, have students list behavioral habits and personality traits that are unique to them in either category, or in the space between. This could lead to many deep thinking tasks, such as a writing piece about how personality is formed, or a class discussion about whether one can alter "inherited" traits.

**Identity Puppet Show.** One major moment in the text includes the scene in which Peter performs Vola's life story with her puppets. It is an impactful and cathartic moment for Vola to see the events that shaped her personality externalized in an artistic performance. For a bigger culminating project exploring identity, have students create puppets that either literally or symbolically represent themselves. Additionally, students can brainstorm pivotal life events related to their core identities to translate into original scripts. The final step would be grouping students for rehearsals and performances of these short identity plays. This is an excellent opportunity for parent engagement, as you can invite them to attend the final production.

### EMPATHY

**Connecting with Veterans.** After a very difficult and fearful experience, such as fighting in a war, many people can develop a condition known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). There are many ways to help people through this troubling illness. Learn about the symptoms of PTSD and create a list of how they relate to the life that Vola is living. Help students better connect with Vola by inviting a veteran into the classroom. Before the visit, generate a list of responses to show listening, understanding, and empathy skills using Peter's response, "that must have been hard for you," as a model (p. 149). After the event, ask students to reflect on the experience by having them write about how Vola and Peter both likely felt during chapter 16.

**Connecting with Animals.** Throughout the text, Peter and Pax describe a sense of connectedness to each another, even though they can't verbally communicate. The bond between humans and animals can be deeply meaningful. Depending on allergies and school rules, students can bring in pets or photos of pets for a show-and-tell project. Students can come prepared to share stories about feeling connected with their pets or comforted by their pets in times of need. Finally, as a reflection, students can connect the way their pets comfort them with strategies humans can use to comfort one another in times of need.

**It's Okay to Cry.** On page 9, Peter reprimands himself for crying, calling himself "a baby" and telling himself to "man up." Start with an anticipation guide with opinion statements based on the text such as 'Boys shouldn't cry at the age of twelve' or 'It's okay to cry when a person loses his pet' so students have some silent time to prepare for discussion. Then, use the prompts to facilitate a conversation about age and gender stereotypes related to crying.

**Rewriting the End of Pax.** As a creative writing project, have students re-imagine chapter 34 as though Peter and Pax had the power to communicate with one another the way foxes do, with words and images. Guide them with the following questions: What would Peter tell or show Pax if he could? What would Pax tell or show Peter if he could? Did Peter show empathy at the end of





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the original text? How can both characters show that they empathize with one another in the reimagined version of the chapter? For additional storytelling skill-building, teach students about standard characteristics of denouement, grammatical formatting of dialogue, and consistent narration point-of-view.

## THE ENVIRONMENT & THE NATURAL WORLD

**War Sick Land.** There is an African proverb that reads, “When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.” Though the grass has been popularly understood to symbolize the more vulnerable, the themes in *Pax* present a more literal meaning: nature suffers when humans are at war. Direct students to the many scenes in which human fighting negatively impacts the earth and animals, such as in chapters 7, 17, and 30. Have students connect the environmental impact of Pax’s war experience with researched or taught historical events and current events. Some commonly studied war tactics that have detrimental environmental impacts include: salting fields, digging and fighting in trenches, dropping bombs, using chemical warfare, and using atomic weapons.

**Noticing Noise.** On page 130, Vola explains to Peter that she wanted to move into her grandfather’s place in the woods because “the world was too loud for [her] to hear [herself] think.” This moment inspires an important question for readers: How does the world and society get in the way of us finding our true selves? For 24 hours, have students keep a “noise” diary. Prepare them for the societal noise they might notice, like commercials, news, gossip, advice, instructions, music, and more before asking students to record the noise they experience in a normal day. Then have students write a reflection about how environment impacts self.

**Unplugging.** On page 53, Peter immerses himself in nature and notices many new things about plants and animals based on his observations. Have students “unplug” and spend time in nature. You could take them outside yourself during class, take them on a field trip to a park, or instruct them to sit outside for an extended period on their own. Have students record external observations about what they saw and internal observations how it felt to be “in the moment.”

**Survival Skills.** When Peter starts out on his journey to find Pax, he packs very quickly. Do some research to discover some of the best techniques for survival in the wilderness. Which of these did Peter remember? Which of them were missing from his preparation? Make a list of the things Peter should have had with him and the skills he would have needed to survive if he had not met Vola.

## THE IMPACT OF WAR

**War Sickness.** Throughout the book, war is described as a human sickness. Teach students about specific moments in history that illustrate humans acting “war-sick,” or provide a list of historical events that illustrate “war sickness” for students to research. The research can culminate in a writing composition using historical research to exemplify “war sickness,” a jigsaw discussion in which students split from their research groups to teach students from other groups about their researched example of ‘war sickness,’ or even a visual representation, like a poster, exemplifying how “war sickness” relates to a given historical event. Moments in history that appear commonly in historical curriculums include: the Crusades, the American Indian Wars,

the wars related to global imperialism like the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, and wars in the Middle East.

**Finding Peace.** On page 93, Pax acknowledges that Bristle’s hatred of humans feels fair to her because of her past negative experiences. Her hatred of all humans leads to disagreement between her and Pax, which raises many difficult questions to discuss with your students. What causes hatred of entire groups of people? Why is this kind of hatred dangerous? How can one extinguish another’s hatred of an entire group? More generally, how can one change another’s mindset, and does one have the right or responsibility to do so in a situation like Pax and Bristle’s? This is a teachable moment for students to critically, but respectfully, exercise discussion and debating skills. Incorporate social studies into the conversation by having students research moments in history and current events in which peaceful negotiations were made or in which officials respectfully debated about an important issue.

**Defining Peace.** On page 102, Vola defines peace as being exactly where she should be and doing exactly what she should be doing. Ask students to define peace. Have students research, debate, and determine whether or not the U.S. is “at peace” currently. Provide students with moments when the U.S. was decisively in a state of war and decisively in a state of peace. For more advanced students, give them examples of historical eras in which it wasn’t clear that the U.S. was truly in a state of peace. This activity could culminate in a vocabulary deliverable incorporating researched historical examples, like a Frayer Model, an artistic representation of peace, like a mural inspired by Berlin Wall graffiti, a demonstration of peaceful protest or civil struggle for peace, like a march based on the Vietnam War protests, or a debate about what peace is and whether the U.S. is currently at peace.

**Wartime Sacrifices.** On page 250, Vola argues that “people should tell the truth about what war costs.” In the beginning of the novel, Peter is forced to sacrifice his fox, his father, and his home as a result of the war. Vola sacrifices her leg and cherished parts of her personality. Both characters lose their senses of stability, peace, and innocence. Even the earth itself is demolished in the act of fighting. The physical, material, environmental, and mental toll war takes on all involved is extremely taxing. Have students connect the war costs they see in the text with historical war-time standards of living. Commonly taught topics that connect well with this idea include teaching war time propaganda, the concept of rations and food stamps, the act of conscription, women entering the industrial workforce, issues surrounding refugees, and issues surrounding veterans and veterans’ families after war ends.

**War Stories.** In chapter 16, Vola opens up to Peter and retells one of her most memorable war stories. Ask students about the act of telling and listening to war stories. Why is it important to tell war stories? Why is it important to listen to war stories? Have students listen to or read real war stories from primary sources. Have students write personal reflections or journalism pieces after experiencing these war stories. To further incorporate *Pax*, group students so they can stage the veteran’s story in scenes or puppet shows like Peter did with Vola’s story. For more advanced students, connect this with the chapter, “How to Tell a True War Story,” from Tim O’Brien’s famous novel, *The Things They Carried*.

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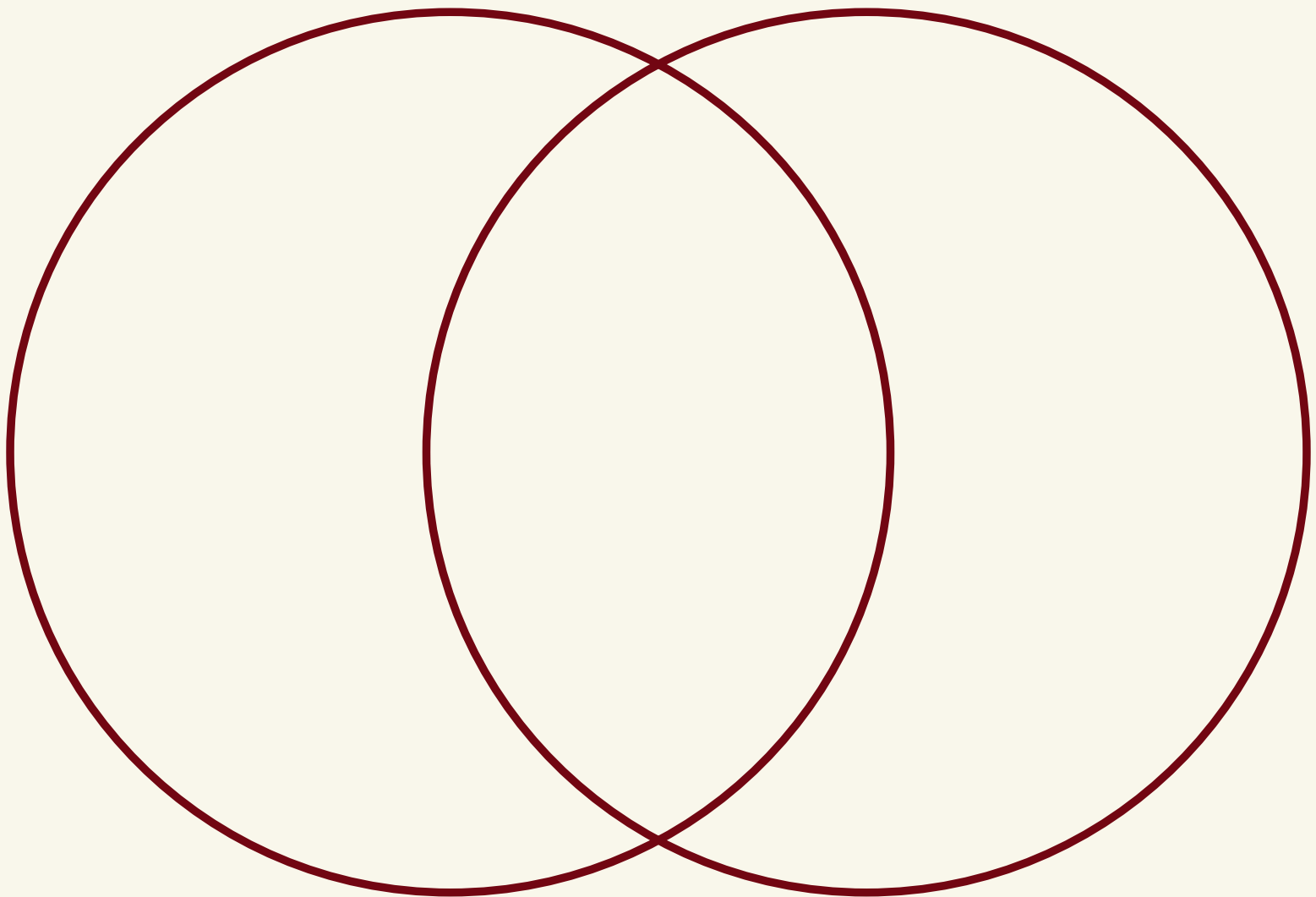
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## PETER & PAX: TRACKING PERSPECTIVES, THOUGHTS & FEELINGS

**Instructions:** Use this Venn diagram to track the perspectives, thoughts, and feelings of Peter and Pax throughout the course of the novel.



PETER

PAX





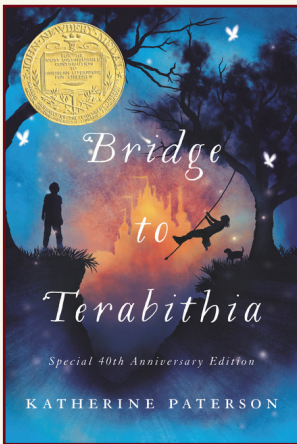


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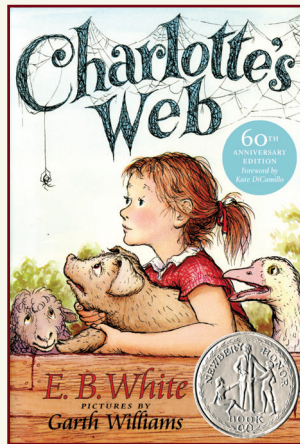
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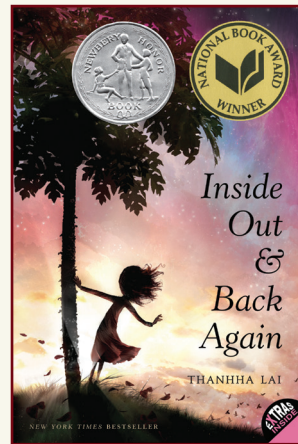
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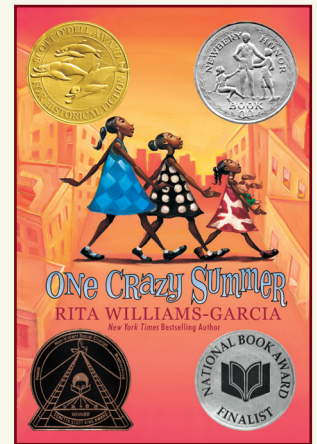
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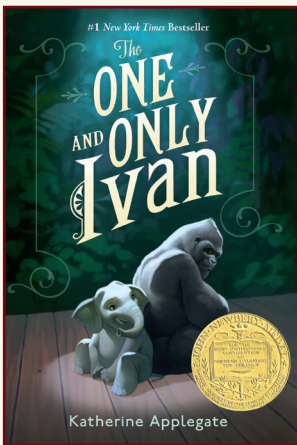
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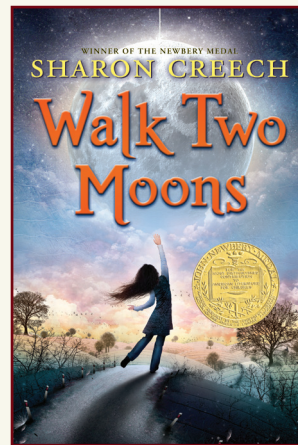
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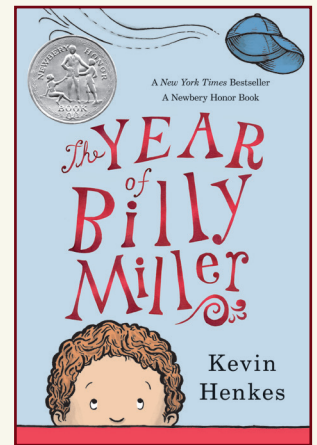
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The activities in this guide can be correlated to the following Common Core State Standards:  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4-7.1—7, 9. | CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4-7.1—3, 7. | CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4-7.1—5.

Discussion questions created by Connie Rockman, youth literature consultant and adjunct professor of children's and young adult literature.  
Thematic Unit Activities created by Danielle Zipkin, a humanities teacher at Booker T. Washington Middle School in New York, NY.