

In the Classroom with . . .

Our Only May Amelia

by Jennifer L. Holm

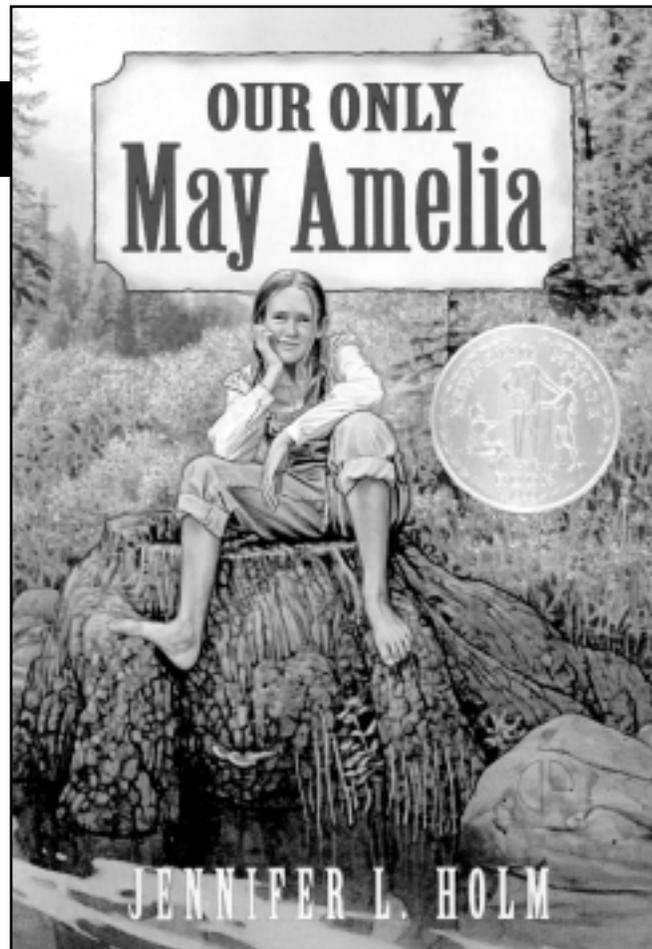
About the Book

May Amelia Jackson, a twelve-year-old girl growing up in Nasel, Washington, in 1899, is the only girl in a family with seven brothers—and is, in her mother's words, "a real miracle." Everybody has a different opinion of May Amelia. Her father says she is always getting into mischief, and her grandmother thinks she's a walking disaster. Her mother, teacher, and aunts think she should behave like a proper young lady. And her brothers? Well, they tease her, teach her, look after her, defend her, comfort her, and rescue her. For May Amelia just wants to do one thing—and that is whatever the boys do!

Summary

Tired of being the only girl around, on her twelfth birthday May Amelia wishes the baby her mother is carrying will be a sister. She continues to help her brothers with the farm work by haying, tending the sheep, milking the cows, and mucking out the barn. She also helps her mother with the cooking and cleaning. But May Amelia takes every opportunity she can to go on adventures with her brothers. They go fishing, watch a Chinook burial ceremony, and visit their aunt and uncle in town. Sometimes adventures come to them while they are working, like the time when they are on their way to pick cranberries and encounter a cougar. Sometimes the adventures come when May Amelia is doing something she should not, like the time she sets out alone in search of a murderer and is treed by a bear.

May Amelia's birthday wish comes true when her sister Amy Alice is born. Then tragedy strikes, and May Amelia embarks on a journey that will forever change how she feels about herself and her family, and what it means to be their only May Amelia.



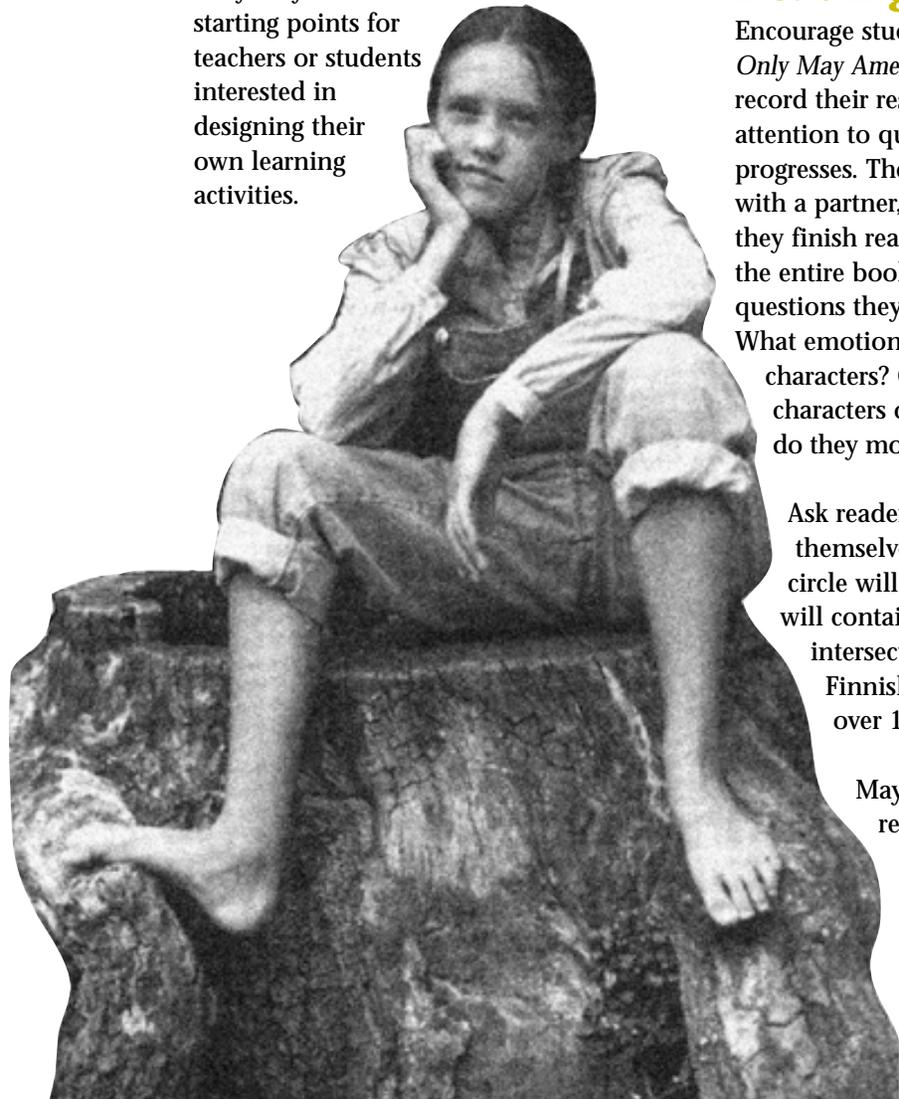
Jennifer L. Holm is the grandniece of Alice Amelia Holm, a Finnish-American girl born on the Nasel River in Washington State during the nineteenth century.

The recent discovery of her grandaunt's diary and her ancestors' adventures in the Pacific Northwest inspired the character of May Amelia.

Ms. Holm produces television commercials, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she is working on her next book.

INTRODUCTION

Although it is filled with adventures, *Our Only May Amelia* is a gentle book, containing large doses of warmth and humor. The perspective is one of a young Finnish-American girl coming to terms with her place in the world via her relationships with family members. Written in the first person, May Amelia's story will entertain readers as well as invite them to think about the nature of family relationships and life in the wilderness one hundred years ago. May Amelia's fresh, honest, unassuming voice and her unique writing style make this an excellent book to read aloud. It is appropriate for classroom use because it presents an appealing, complex character in an interesting situation. The following suggestions are meant to be selected or adapted in accordance with individual teaching styles, curricular circumstances, and student interests. They may also serve as starting points for teachers or students interested in designing their own learning activities.



THE READING EXPERIENCE

Before Reading *Our Only May Amelia*

Ask class members to write a journal entry on the topic of siblings. After they do so, encourage them to talk about what it is like to have or not have siblings. How do brothers differ from sisters? How do older siblings differ from younger siblings? If they do not have a sister, would they like to have one? Mentioning that *Our Only May Amelia* is the story of a girl with seven brothers who wants a sister might be an effective way to pique readers' interest in the novel.

Reading *Our Only May Amelia*

If the students are reading the book themselves, allow them to set their reading pace for *Our Only May Amelia*. Give them a date by which they should have finished the novel, then ask them as individuals, small groups, or a class to determine, either beforehand or as they progress, a reading schedule that will enable them to complete the book by the assigned date. If they need more guidance, suggest they read and discuss two or three chapters at a time.

During and Immediately After Reading *Our Only May Amelia*

Encourage students to be involved participants as they read *Our Only May Amelia* by asking them to keep a response log. Have them record their responses to the story as they read, paying particular attention to questions and observations they may have as the story progresses. They may want to share their questions and observations with a partner, in small groups, or with the class as a whole. When they finish reading the novel, have them record their responses to the entire book. Did they find the book interesting reading? Were questions they had while they were reading cleared up in the end? What emotions did the book elicit? What do they think about the characters? Can they make any personal associations with the characters or situations found in the book? With which character do they most closely identify? What questions does the story raise?

Ask readers to consider the similarities and differences between themselves and May Amelia by drawing a Venn diagram. One circle will contain characteristics about themselves, one circle will contain characteristics about May Amelia, and the intersection will show what they have in common with this Finnish-American girl who lived in a Washington settlement over 100 years ago.

May Amelia has so many relatives it may be difficult for readers to keep them all straight. Suggest they create a Jackson family tree to help them visualize the relationships among May Amelia's family members.

Awards
and Honors for
*Our Only May
Amelia*

Across The Curriculum

Newbery Honor Book 1999

Parents' Choice Silver Award

Publishers Weekly
Best of 1999 Book

Publishers Weekly
Flying Start

LANGUAGE ARTS

Sharing Family Stories

The dish that May Amelia's father brought from Finland was a family keepsake. Unfortunately, it was broken when Grandmother Patience threw it at her daughter-in-law. Had the dish survived, it could have become a family heirloom. However, it is still the subject of a family story. Encourage students to think about objects they might consider family keepsakes or heirlooms. If possible, have students bring them (or photographs of them) to class and tell the family stories associated with these items.

Writing Family Histories

Jennifer L. Holm conducted extensive research into her family history in preparation for writing *Our Only May Amelia*. Suggest that each student select some aspect of his or her family history to explore. Have them interview family members, conduct library research, explore Internet sites, and read historical fiction to gain a sense of how this piece of their family history fits into the larger history of the country. Invite parents and family members to participate in a family history evening at which students display artifacts (such as maps, newspaper clippings, letters, diaries, photographs, reference materials, literary works) related to their research. Then ask students to compose a piece of writing (fiction or nonfiction) based on their discoveries. Compile these pieces into a class anthology of family histories and give a copy to each class member.

Exploring Points of View

May Amelia's rag doll Susannah is an important part of the Jackson family. Students who like creative writing might want to write a story from Susannah's point of view entitled "I Am a Lucky Doll Indeed."

As the only Jackson who likes school, Wendell is the most likely Jackson boy to keep a journal. Suggest that interested students write a series of imaginary journal entries from Wendell's point of view.

Investigating Literary Themes

After May Amelia leaves her family and Nasel for the winter, she returns to discover a sense of satisfaction she had not previously felt. Thus the Finnish proverb "If you don't go, you can't return," printed in the front of *Our Only May Amelia*, can be seen as one of the novel's major themes, or underlying ideas. Suggest that students work together in small groups to discover other themes in the novel and write them in the form of proverbs.

Appreciating the Author's Style

The author's understated humor along with her quirky punctuation and capitalization contribute to a writing style that makes *Our Only May Amelia* read like the work of a young girl. To deepen readers' appreciation for the voice Holm creates, have a small group of students develop a reader's theater performance that emphasizes the novel's humor.

Studying Language

Many of the Finnish immigrants in Nasel and Astoria have difficulty learning English and continue to speak Finnish. Mrs. Jackson insists her children go to school and learn English because they are Americans. Their situation is similar to many immigrant groups around the turn of the 20th century. But learning English presents a particular challenge because Finnish and English come from different language families. Students interested in language study may want to investigate origins of the different language families and present their findings to the class.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Homesteading

The Jackson family lives in a valley on a homestead. Students are probably familiar with the Homestead Act, but this might be an opportune time for them to consider how homesteading affected parts of the country in which they or their family have lived or are now living, as well as places they may have visited. Suggest that small groups of students prepare class campfire circle presentations in which they swap stories they have constructed from their research on homesteading in the wilderness.

Finnish Customs

Based on the information Holm provides about the Finnish culture in America at the end of the 19th century and any other research they choose to conduct, suggest that students compile a guide to Finnish-American culture, then and now. They could include recipes, superstitions, holiday celebrations, religious customs, health practices, folk literature, and other information they find interesting.

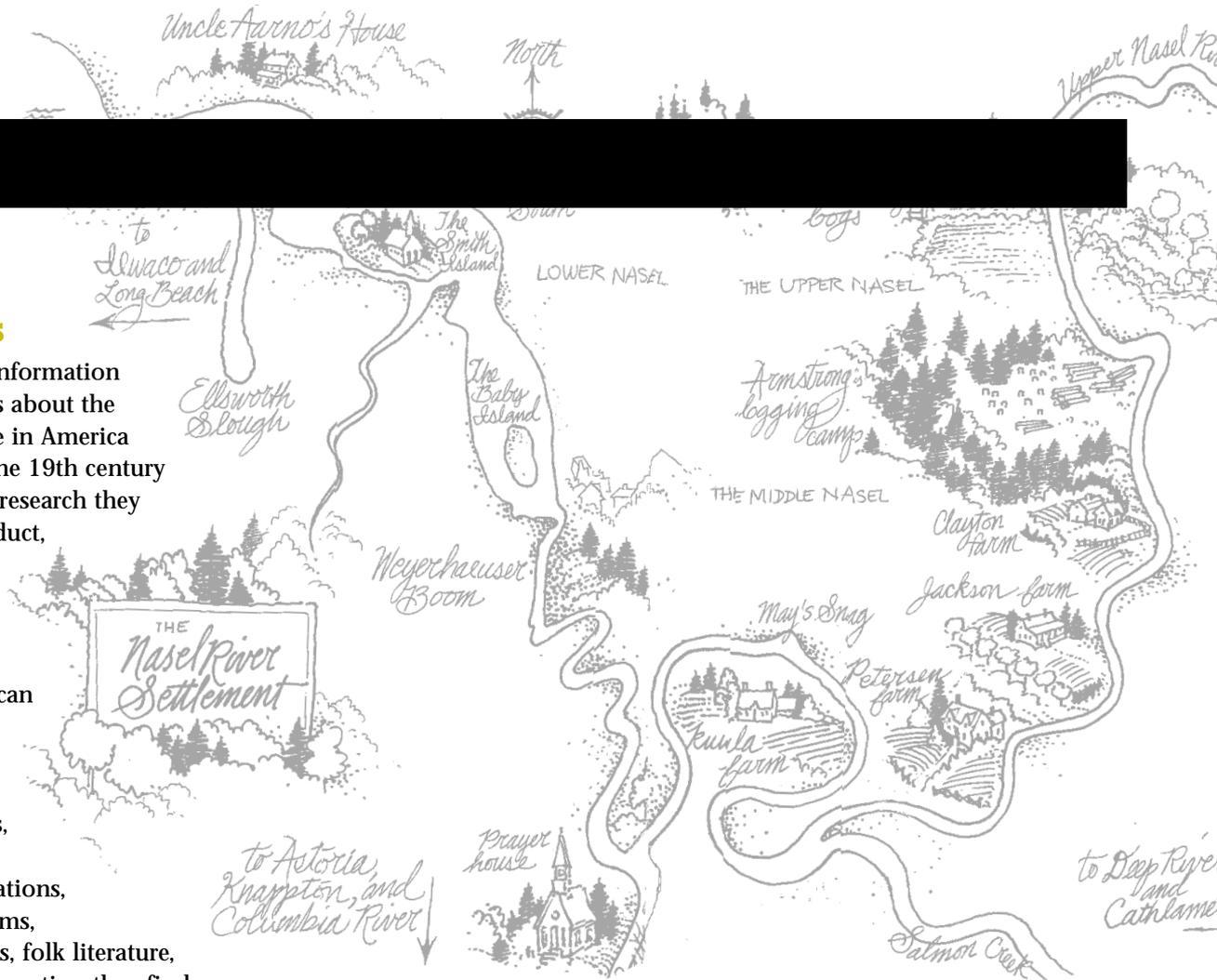
Hold a Finnish Feast in which students bring Finnish food to share with the class.

Chinook Customs

Building on the information Holm provides about the Chinook culture at the end of the 19th century, encourage students to investigate the history and culture of this tribe and share their findings in a classroom symposium. Symposium topics might include the language, social structure, customs, beliefs, ancestry, and contemporary status of the Chinook.

Gender Issues

Readers might wonder why May Amelia's father is so strict with her and does not allow her to do what the boys do. If questions about this arise, suggest that students organize a panel discussion to consider ways in which roles and expectations for males and females have caused girls and boys to be treated differently throughout history.



ART

Doll Making

Students interested in sewing may want to make a rag doll and create costumes for her modeled after those May Amelia, Wendell, and Jane make for Susannah.

Model Ship Carving

Students interested in woodworking may want to make a model pirate ship like the one May Amelia's brothers made for Susannah.

Portrait Painting

May Amelia has a passel of brothers, but each one has his own personality and worth. Encourage young artists to capture these individual differences (even those of the twins, if they can) in seven portraits of May Amelia's brothers. Suggest that each brother hold a prop or be placed in a background that shows an aspect of his character.

Talking with Jennifer L. Holm



The Author's Note tells us that your grandaunt's diary inspired you to write *Our Only May Amelia*. How closely did you adhere to her diary when writing the novel?

In actual fact, my grandaunt's diary was rather slender—only thirteen entries over a seven-year period (1899–1906). She generally wrote in it once a year, typically to relate some big news such as a baby being born or a wedding or a birthday. I was inspired more by the idea of being a girl at that time period than the actual incidents she wrote about in her diary. I did, however, borrow the name of her dog, Bose (Bosie in *Our Only May Amelia*) as well as the name of her best brother (Wilbert). In real life, baby Amy was Aunt Alice's older sister and she lived to be a ripe old age.

What do you imagine your grandaunt Alice would say about the way you transformed her diary into *Our Only May Amelia*?

I think Aunt Alice would be very pleased that her girlhood diary inspired me to write. She was a much-beloved teacher in the Nasel River Settlement for many years, and always loved a good yarn.

What was your reaction when you learned that *Our Only May Amelia* was selected as a Newbery Honor Book?

In the words of May Amelia . . . it was a real miracle!

What type of experience would you hope readers derive from reading *Our Only May Amelia*?

I hope it helps readers be true to themselves . . . even if they get into trouble along the way like May Amelia.

What are your favorite children's books?

Reading is my favorite thing in the world. I love anything by Lloyd Alexander, especially *The Black Cauldron*. I think I read that book a hundred times!

Is the character of May Amelia autobiographical in any way?

May Amelia is definitely a bit autobiographical. Like May, I have a pack of brothers (four) and I was the only girl in my family, so I went through a lot of the same things May went through when I was growing up. When I was writing *Our Only May Amelia* I wanted to show that families are complicated, and that you have very different relationships with different brothers.

Have you always wanted to be a writer?

I have always, always, wanted to be a writer, but never thought I'd be lucky enough to get a chance!

What, as a writer, do you find inspiring?

History and real events are tremendously inspiring. I think that more exciting, interesting things happen in real life than anything you could ever make up.

Awards and Honors
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Amelia*

Newbery Honor Book 1999
Parents' Choice Silver Award
Publishers Weekly Best of
1999 Book
Publishers Weekly Flying Start

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FINNISH IMMIGRANTS

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Hibbing, Minnesota, 1905* (A Dear America/My
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HARSH GRANDMOTHERS

Jacob Have I Loved by Katherine Paterson

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Crescent Moon by Alden R. Carter
Littlejim's Dreams by Gloria Houston

YOUNG GIRLS LIVING IN THE WILDERNESS

Caddie Woodlawn by Carol Ryrie Brink
The Little House Books by Laura Ingalls Wilder

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