

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Bridge to Terabithia

by

### Katherine Paterson

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### Book Information

Katherine Paterson, Bridge to Terabithia  
Quiz Number: 11  
HarperTrophy, 1987  
ISBN 0-06-440184-7; LCCN  
128 Pages  
Book Level: 4.6  
Interest Level: MG

The life of a ten-year-old boy in rural Virginia expands when he becomes friends with a newcomer, who subsequently meets an untimely death trying to reach their hideaway, Terabithia, during a storm.

**Award:** Misc./Other; Newbery Medal; SLJ Best Book

**Topics:** Family Life, Death; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Oprah's Book Club - Kids Reading List

### Main Characters

Bill & Judy Burke Leslie's parents, both writers, who moved to Lark Creek to "reassess their values"

Janice Avery a seventh-grade bully whom Jess crosses while trying to defend Leslie

Jesse Aarons a young boy growing up in rural Virginia who becomes friends with a newcomer, but must come to grips with her tragic, untimely death

Julia Edmunds the free-spirited music teacher at Jess's school who recognizes him as a "diamond in the rough"

Leslie Burke a young girl who moves, with her parents, into the old farmhouse down the road from Jess Aarons

May Belle Aarons younger sister of Jess, who sometimes gets in the way, but always worships Jess

Mr. & Mrs. Aarons, and Jess's sisters Ellie, Brenda, and Joyce Ann minor characters in the story who make up Jess's home life

Mrs. Myers Jess and Leslie's teacher, whose sternness earns her the nickname Monster-Mouth Myers

Prince Terrien the puppy Jess gives to Leslie as a Christmas present

### Vocabulary

**baripity** noise made by the old pickup truck

**cremate** process of reducing a corpse to ashes by burning

**nuisance** something offensive or annoying

### Synopsis

Jess Aarons is a young boy who lives in rural Virginia with his parents and four sisters. His father, struggling to make ends meet, travels to Washington to work each day. Jess is left to fend for himself in the "hostile" environment created by a frustrated mother and two older, menacing sisters.

One day, Jess meets the new girl who moved into the old farmhouse down the road. At first, he is reluctant to make friends with Leslie Burke, but they soon become inseparable. It doesn't matter to Jess that Leslie dresses funny or that she doesn't quite fit in, since he feels like an outcast himself.

Together, Jess and Leslie create a magical kingdom, Terabithia, where they reign as king and queen. The hideaway is their closely guarded secret, and it strengthens their bond of friendship even more. Leslie offers her vision and courage, while Jess offers his total acceptance and friendship.

As Jess is out sightseeing in Washington with a teacher, Leslie decides to brave the relentless rain and has a fatal accident trying to reach Terabithia. Jess returns home from a perfect day to learn of Leslie's tragic death. At first, he does not want to believe that Leslie is gone. Eventually, he faces the pain, guilt, and loneliness of her loss and begins to understand all that Leslie has given him. In the end, Jess accepts Leslie's death and vows to give back some of the beauty and caring that she had lent him. Soon afterward, he builds a bridge across the stream that leads to Terabithia and passes the

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crown on to his younger sister, May Belle.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Explain why Jess felt that May Belle needed something special for Christmas.

*Jess was feeling guilty for spending so much time with Leslie, and he seemed to feel that the doll would make up for his lack of attention.*

### Literary Analysis

Although Jess liked the idea of being respected by his classmates, what seemed to be the biggest reason for his desire to be the fastest kid in fifth grade?

*He was seeking his father's approval and wanted to make him proud. We get the impression he was once closer to his father and wants that relationship back.*

### Inferential Comprehension

One of Jess's prominent personality traits is that he is very thoughtful and in tune with others' feelings. Give two examples from the story that support this.

*He wanted his father to feel proud about his present. He insisted that Leslie try to help Janice after they played the trick on her. He wanted to write Mrs. Myers a letter and wanted to "unsay" all the things he had said about her.*

### Constructing Meaning

Why did Jess feel he had to "hide" when he wanted to draw?

*Jess was very aware of what others thought of him and was careful not to disappoint them. Since his father and teachers discouraged his drawing as a waste of time, he felt he should conceal his love for drawing.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Literary Features** After Leslie's death, the story takes on an almost dream-like mood as the events unfold in brief clips. Have the students reread the end of the story from the point where Jess gets out of Miss Edmunds's car, identifying elements that indicate the shift in mood. As a writing assignment, have them try to capture a certain mood by writing a one-or-two-page dream sequence that they have created. They should pay close attention to word choice and may practice using metaphors, personification, imagery, etc.

**Understanding Literary Features** In this story, Jess experiences a myriad of emotions after Leslie's death. In fact, he goes through some classic stages of grieving, from denial, to anger, to guilt and, finally, to acceptance. Have the students track these stages by listing Jess's specific behavior or dialogue to illustrate each stage. Students may want to read other books dealing with the death of a friend or loved one and identify the stages in the grieving process as a related reading assignment.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** City life is pitted against country life and vice versa throughout this book. This conflict calls attention to many social changes that took place when generational farms could no longer support families. As depicted in this book, fathers and mothers had to travel to nearby cities to seek employment or sell the family farms to get by. Have the students research the decay of rural/farm life and write about the many far-reaching effects its demise has had on modern society.