



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2012 Volume II: The Art of Biography

Authors Behind the Pages

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Introduction

At the start of the school year, many of my primary grade level students in the New Haven Public School District seem uninspired about reading and writing. Perhaps it is because throughout Grades 1 and 2, they have been bombarded with mandated reading selections--many of which are limited to one genre (narrative, realistic, or fantasy-fiction) that hold little interest for the young reader. The introduction of such literature is often followed by habitual Q&A and/or routine written response testing. We look forward to a reversal of this trend with the implementation of our new language arts common core curriculum standards. Nevertheless, because of this reality, by Grade 3 many students shy away from immersing themselves in reading and writing.

Throughout my teaching career, I have found it crucial to put an engaging spin on literature and language arts. I set the tone by creating an interactive relationship through the use of culturally inclusive children's literature across genres--introducing my students to phenomenal, contemporary children's book authors, while putting the accent on author's craft. The objective is to engage young learners in such a way that they make use of their metacognitive know-how: that is, they learn to predict, define character traits, infer, picture, understand, and consequently expand their view of the world and the wonderfully diverse groups of people therein. Using background information, they too learn how to determine relationships between objects and events in a text to draw opinions and/or conclusions. Through this immersion, they come to enjoy reading, writing, and all that these modes of communication have to offer. What better way to engagingly look at why and how stories are developed, while delving into author's craft, than by creating biographies: thus the reason for my proposed curriculum unit, **Authors Behind the Pages** .

Targeted at students in Grade 3, but modifiable to accommodate students in Grades 2, 4, and 5, **Authors Behind the Pages** will help young learners examine key aspects of the lives of one or two of their favorite children's book authors through a biographic lens. This study will be achieved through hands-on research and in-person and/or on-line interviews with the authors.

Initially, as a collective body, my students will examine types of questions required to get a feel regarding the personality and life of their selected author. In this regard, I have already confirmed that award-winning author/illustrator Floyd Cooper will join my students for a school-wide, meet-the-author presentation/interview session during the 2012-13 school year. An interview with Yangsook Choi will be

conducted via on-line communication (see contact information under "Teacher Resources.")

As a springboard activity, my blossoming biographers will ascertain what goes into doing biography by creating an autobiographic sketch based on a snapshot of a moment in their own lives. As will occur in our author studies, students will once again target key questions to help bring their autobiographic creations to life. They too will learn that creating a biography is no easy task; writing in relationship with time past and present is an integral part of creating these works. Editing, proofreading, revising, and producing a finished product to share with a reading community (in our case, school community) is the ultimate goal.

Before beginning their own projects, my students will immerse themselves in realistic fiction, memoir, and/or biographical works created by each of the literary artists noted herein. They will subsequently conduct research on these authors using authentic reference materials and on-line resources. Being able to meet and interview them—in person and/or interactively on-line—will enhance the intensity of my students' literary experience and ultimately their biographic creations. Children will be encouraged to think about questions that are essential in conveying key information about the author and his or her life.

Equally important, my young learners will get a sense of literary craft, i.e., learning first-hand what inspires these authors to convey concepts and images using pictures and words, whether their personal lives in any way influence their story creations, and more.

As a culminating activity, my third graders will be given an opportunity to showcase their literary creations with fellow classmates, parents, and invited guests during an Author's Tea.

Authors Behind the Pages aligns with New Haven Public School District Language Arts and Social Studies mandates. I look forward to developing this unit and successfully implementing it during the upcoming school year. I believe it will set the tone and serve as a model for inspiring young learners to become lifelong readers and writers, and to embrace the human experience across cultures.

Setting the Tone

Before beginning our course of study, introduce students to the key vocabulary. Immerse them in such words as genre, theme, plot, text structure, opinion versus factual details, figurative versus literal language, dialogue, and description. Canvass your students to determine if they have prior background knowledge on these terms, along with the definition of biography.

Note: Students in Grades 2 through 5 are familiar with many genre-specific terms such as fiction, realistic fiction, non-fiction, folktales, myths, legends, memoir, and the like. They often, however, have a general notion that biography highlights a famous person's life from birth to death in chronological order. They may state that the person who writes about the life of someone else is simply an author. We want students to accurately refer to writers using appropriate literary terminology: thus, emphasize that the author of a biography is a biographer.

Engage your students by sharing that they will each try their hand at being a biographer—one who like a skilled detective finds clues and conducts research to learn about aspect of a subject's life and overall experiences. Emphasize that like narrative writing, biography is comprised of story elements: the setting (with

a focus on time and place), a main character (our person of study), key events in the character's life that help to convey a particular perception of the spotlighted individual are to be included. Also stress that doing biography does not signify that the biographer must delve into every nook and cranny of the subject's life; nor does the subject need to be deemed a famous individual. The selected individual of study can be a person who has played a significant role in the lives of others or whose life proves to be special or fascinating.

Thus, the role of a good biographer is to find something that stands out about the subject's character--the attributes of which can be good or bad—and accentuate the subject's persona based on key events that have occurred in that individual's life. The biography should be written in such a way that the reader experiences the persona of the individual. Highlighting general information from each year of the life of the individual is unnecessary. In this regard, several key questions should be considered:

- What major events occurred during the subject's childhood that helped shape some aspect of the individual's personality?
- What descriptive words (adjectives, idioms, similes, metaphors...) can be used to best describe the target subject in the biography?
- What event or series of events happened at other key moments in the subject's life that are relevant to revealing the individual's character?
- How did those events shape the individual's life, helping to make the subject the man or woman he or she is today?
- How has the individual's existence impacted your life? Impacted the lives of others? Impacted history if applicable?

In addition to the above, it is essential to zero in on specific times and places as they impact the subject's life. For example, if the subject of a biography was a Chinese immigrant—a railroad builder who lived in San Francisco during 1863, the time frame should be considered, for during that period, many Chinese workers were forced to live in segregated communities. The subject of the biography may have experienced being disenfranchised based on racial status. Thus, use of this time frame would be beneficial to help vividly depict the setting and the persona of the individual who encountered the prejudicial experience. If the subject overcame the experience, succumbed to the pressures of being hemmed in, or simply played a significant role in helping others make it through such trying circumstances, strategic use of chronological information would prove beneficial. Its inclusion will help the reader grasp how the subject's character evolved with the passing of time and circumstance, creating a vivid biographic snapshot.

And So We Begin

Unlike fiction writing, biography is grounded primarily in fact with some leeway for inference where background information is difficult to acquire. Time and place based on real-life events have a direct bearing on how the researcher interprets the subject. Biography thus requires research. Background information can, however, be obtained through a variety of means: private letters accessible through historical libraries or members of the person's family, reference resources acquired from museum archives, or documents provided directly from relatives of the individual. History books and encyclopedic resources serve as another alternative. First person interviews conducted with the individual or via personal interviews with others who have or have had an interactive relationship with the subject also prove invaluable in the research process.

In some instances, however, depending upon the area of focus, biographic resources may be difficult or easy to find.

To give our young writers a feel for the process of writing biography, have them first conduct a trial run by writing an autobiographic sketch in the form of a memoir.

Writing Exercise # 1. "A Bit About Me!" Snapshot

Objective: To target and emphasize an event that has helped shape one aspect of the student's personality.

Purpose: To create a clearly defined autobiographic sketch using effective techniques, descriptive details, and clearly defined event sequences.

Focus Question: What word best describes one of your major character traits? Think about that one character trait along with an episode in your life that has contributed to that aspect of your personality. Use engaging, descriptive language to convey your experience and innermost feelings. Include dialogue, adjectives and adverbs, powerful synonyms, and well-constructed sentences. Through these literary devices, readers will come to learn about you from a deeper perspective.

In this regard, have students brainstorm on creating a listing of personality traits. Jot their responses down on oversized chart paper. Role play each trait so children derive a concrete understanding of each word listed. (Refer to http://www.ltl.appstate.edu/reading_resources/Character_Trait_Descriptive_Adjectives.htm for additional characteristic word possibilities.) Reinforce their selection possibilities by having your children provide a listing of personality trait focus questions. (My children came up with the following): *Are you timid? A crowd-follower? Bossy? A jealous individual? Considerate? Smart? Insolent? Energetic? Diligent? Persevering? Lazy? Careless? A scaredy-cat? Fearless? Thin-skinned. Melancholy?...*

Once your students have narrowed down their word choice, have them think about how they happened to take on that character trait. Stir their thought processes by asking:

- What major event(s) occurred during that youngster's childhood to help shape that aspect of his or her personality?
- What descriptive words (adjectives, idioms, similes, metaphors...) can be used to best describe him or her at that moment?

- What series of actions happened during that moment to further reveal the student's highlighted character trait?
- How did those events shape the child's life, helping to make that youngster who he or she is today?

Be mindful that each student's writing style will differ based on the language arts ability of each child. Allow students flexibility to write from their abilities levels, requiring that they adhere to the basic guideline: include time, place, and the key event to help convey the targeted personality trait of the individual. The sample noted herein was created by a youngster relatively adept in the use of syntax and semantics:

Writing Sample – First Draft by 3rd Grader, Vaughn. *I remember when I was five years old. I was the only child in my family for a very long time. A very, very, VERY long time! Because I was the first child, my Grandma and Gramps spoiled me. In fact, they spoiled me rotten! My grandparents lived not too far away from me. Actually, they lived right down the street. When I was five years old, my parents and I went over to visit them a lot, and my Grandma and Gramps would give me presents EVERY time I visited. I was showered with presents--even when it wasn't my birthday. And if I wanted a double scoop of ice-cream and my mom and dad said "N-O!," if my grandparents were around, I'd get six scoops of ice-cream anyway. I loved being the first grandson. Then all that changed. My cousin was born. That's when I became jealous, and I hate to admit it, but I still get jealous today. I remember when it started. My aunt and uncle brought my cousin home, and my mom, dad, and me were visiting Grandma and Gramp's house at the same time! All those grownups were so busy with my new cousin, they forgot all about me. I remember walking over to my uncle. Usually, he gave me a high five and swung me around up over his head. But not today! And the thing was, that new baby made a boop-boop-be-doop in his diaper. A BIG ONE! Everyone was around that baby, holding their nose, saying how cute he was. "Hey! I want some attention too!" But no one could hear what I was thinking. So I came up with a plan. I stood in the middle of the livingroom floor. "Eeeeewww. Eeeeewww. Eeeeewww. Eeeeewhhh!" I strained and strained until... I made a boop-boop-be-doop too! A BIG ONE! But my Grandma and Gramps and mom and dad and aunt and uncle WERE NOT smiling. In fact, my mom cleaned me up and my dad made me go sit alone in the corner of the guest room real fast after they cleaned me up. And believe me, they had to do a lot of cleaning. They looked aggravated. "What's wrong with you?" they kept asking. They looked at me like I was retarded. I told them I was jealous... jealous of the baby!*

Vaughn completed this first draft and enthusiastically shared his biographic sketch with peers. His classmates provided constructive feedback. They noted that Vaughn had zeroed in on each of the target questions. They also noticed that his work was not chronological in content, rather that he targeted a key moment in his life that provided insight into one aspect of his personality. They added that Vaughn also used a sequence of events surrounding that key moment. My students laughed their heads off at the "boop-boop-be-doop" portion of the reading and commiserated how they too are sometimes envious of younger siblings who seem to get away with murder. The children gained deeper insight into an aspect of Vaughn's personality. The additional outcome: more students raised their hands, eager to share.

Be Mindful

Writing is a process. Nevertheless, many young learners believe the first write is the end all, that once their last word is written, the work is complete. Counter this notion by emphasizing that they are learning to become writing pros. Because of that, they must revisit and edit their work until they produce a polished, finished product. A few moans and groans may ensue. Encourage students to forge ahead, letting them know they are developing sophisticated writing skills that can be used throughout their elementary school years all the way through college. Doing so proves motivational.

Additionally, when encouraging students to create autobiographic sketches, make every attempt not to mar trust, nor squelch student creativity. In some instances, however, you will find that students dig deep. As a result, they may create revealing memoirs that include incidents of neglect or abuse. Such information can result in the need to contact the school psychologist and/or DCF (the Department of Children and Family Services). Should this occur, follow through with school policy and/or mandated reporting procedures where required.

(I encountered such a situation. A student who had been sexually molested felt safe enough in our classroom environment to write an intensely revealing autobiographic snapshot. The child shared it with me and subsequently asked if she could share it with her classmates. Because of its graphic content, I diplomatically convinced the youngster to use it instead as a healing tool, to keep or discard it to help overcome the pain from that past experience. She decided to keep her literary creation in a special, private place and subsequently took it home to her parent. The child willingly created another equally well-written memoir to share with classmates. Before the school day had ended, I took appropriate steps to contact the child's parent, school social worker support staff, and administrators. In this instance, the exercise and the way it was addressed proved beneficial: follow-up communication had been executed in the best interest of the child and proved therapeutic. Such positive results may not always occur. Nevertheless, from the onset, establish writing and read-aloud-sharing parameters such that students have the option to decline sharing extremely sensitive matters. Additionally, be certain to distribute announcement letters so that parents and/or guardians are aware of the overall assignment and writing objectives.)

Insightful Connections

Literature excites, motivates, entices, instructs, and helps children discover people and places across cultures and experiences through time. Authors and illustrators ingeniously craft stories to convey those images, oftentimes imaginatively incorporating real-life experiences and/or encounters into the text to bring the story to life. Thus, a work-your-way-backwards-from-the-story approach can serve as a tool to do biography. Will this approach prove effective?

During our YNHTI seminar, Professor Gaddis had fellows delve into James Shapiro's biographic work, "A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599." Through that examination, it was brought out that minimal, historical documentation regarding Shakespeare's life is available. Shapiro, however, was able to create an extraordinary biography about this author-businessman-playwright. The author correlated Shakespeare's

literary creations with key historical events that took place during that Elizabethan period. Probing Shakespeare's works--connecting story content and characters therein with key moments in history--served as a means to obtain more background information the author's life. Shapiro used a work-your-way-backwards approach to give insight into Shakespeare's persona; his writing model helped reinforce that using this approach to create biography is no far-fetched idea.

In this regard, I decided to have my students zero in on studying the works of two specific children's book authors, Yangsook Choi and Floyd Cooper. I chose these two artists because of (1) each author's creative storytelling know-how; (2) their culturally-inclusive, accurately depicted illustrations; (3) their ability to effectively and engagingly interact with diverse audiences of all ages; (4) accessibility, and of great importance (5) because the children love their work! (You may find other authors commensurately appealing and accessible; if so, take advantage of contacting them to enhance the literary experience in your classroom environment.)

Writing Exercise # 2 "Meet the Author" A Biographic Sketch

Objective: To use select children's book titles to gain insight into the author, investigating how aspects of the author's persona impacts author's craft and story creation. To reinforce use of metacognitive skills, enhance comprehension, and develop skills in doing biography.

Purpose: To create a clearly defined biographic snapshot of the author using effective techniques, descriptive details, and clearly defined event sequences.

Focus Questions: Can we get a feel for the author's persona by examining his literary creations? Does his/her personal life and/or experiences somehow influence the way the artists creates and/or illustrates a story? Does using this approach shed light on the author's craft?

Before initiating this assignment, coordinate an "implementation time frame" with the authors. Provide them with background information concerning your classroom course of study, the objective and intended focus, and time constraints. Establish the mode of communication (an in-person visit, communicating via E-mail, SKYPE, or via another communicative channel). Take into consideration that although authors are often well-intentioned, they have hectic schedules; they are involved in everything from working with publicists and doing book tours to meeting writing and illustration deadlines for upcoming publications. Thus, advanced scheduling is crucial to accommodate the needs of all parties involved.

Anticipating that both authors would have busy schedules, I contacted the two during May. I E-mailed Mr. Cooper to set up a visit to my school in the fall. I also asked if, in the interim, my students could communicate with him on-line to receive responses to questions they had regarding several of his children's book creations. The author kindly said, "Yes." Yangsook—who is always traveling—additionally agreed to communicate with my children on-line. (My students and I kept our fingers crossed that we would be able to receive their responses such that we could initiate the collective writing portion of our biography writing project before the close of the current school year. We were elated, for both authors responded to student inquiries such that we were able to complete the beginning phase of our biography adventure.)

Reevaluate Their Meaning

Before beginning the first collective biographic writing exercise, revisit the definition of genre, and have students identify the different types of writing styles that exist. Revisit the terms autobiography and

biography, ensuring that children have a solid understanding of each genre. Subsequently share that biography can be presented using different writing styles, i.e., via the narrative, in poetic form, by putting oneself in the subject's shoes, writing in the first person voice. Identify literature that your students may have previously read that is reflective of each noted style. Doing so can serve as a model from which to begin. Now, we can begin!

Implementing the Approach

I announce that we will be taking a discovery adventure through which we will learn to do biography. I advise that during that journey, we will gain insight into how stories are created up close and personal through perhaps the eyes and experiences of the author. I provide my students with multiple copies of the authors' books for student previewing. Using this approach encourages young learners to take ownership in preparing for the task at hand. As a result, my students eagerly help to determine which books will be targeted. Based on the readings, the children collaborate and brainstorm on key questions that will help them gain deeper insight into the author and the reasons behind his or her literary creations. I record their questions on chart paper; these questions will be presented to each author.

I additionally provide students with a morsel of information regarding each author, along with website information that will be later used as a reference source when the children delve deeper into actually writing their biographies. I provide just enough info to rouse curiosity as noted below:

Regarding Yangsook Choi . Yangsook was born in South Korea. Ever since her early childhood years, she loved to draw. In time, that love helped lay the foundation for her attending Sangmyung Women's University in Seoul Korea. By age 24, Yangsook traveled to the United States where she obtained a Master's degree in Fine Arts from New York City's School of Visual Arts. Yangsook's children's books gained recognition in a short span of time. They have been acclaimed by the American Library Association Notable Book list. Recipient of the International Reading Association's Children Book Award, Ms. Choi has created and illustrated books for illustrations for such publishers as Random House, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and the McGraw Hill Company. Although she travels extensively to share her literary and artistic know-how with young audiences, Ms. Choi currently resides in New York City.

Student-Selected Focus Books Created and/or Illustrated by the Author: **The Sun Girl and The Moon Boy** , **Behind the Mask** , **The Name Jar** , **Peach Heaven** (see Children's Bibliography)

Background Info on the Artist's Websites:

<http://www.yangsookchoi.com/bio.html>

http://www.papertigers.org/interviews/archived_interviews/ychoi.html

<http://lindalaib.tripod.com/id26.html>

http://asianweek.com/2002_07_19/feature_yangsookchoi.html

Regarding Floyd Cooper . This author-illustrator was born in the American Midwest. The recipient of numerous awards (including the Coretta Scott King Honor Award), he is known for his artistic and storywriting know-how. Floyd uses an ingenious oil-paint-and-kneaded-eraser technique to create children's book illustrations. Some of his award-winning works include **The Blacker the Berry** , **Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea** , **Mississippi Morning** , and **I Have Heard of a Land** . The author-illustrator was born during an era when

African Americans were not often hired in prestigious business positions--particularly in such fields as advertising. At the age of 20, he worked as a free-lance commercial artist and an illustrator for Hallmark greeting cards. In 1984, he came to New York City to pursue a career as an illustrator of books. He currently lives in Easton, Pennsylvania, with his wife and children.

Student-Selected Focus Books Created and/or Illustrated by the Author: **Jump** , **Mandela** , **Coming Home** , **Cumbayah** , **These Hands** , **Mississippi Morning** , and two poetic selections, **Harriet Tubman** and **Incident** from the anthology **Pass It On** . (See Children's Bibliography.

Background info on the Artist's Websites:

<http://www.eduplace.com/kids/hmr/mtai/fcooper.html> (Houghton Mifflin bio)

<http://www.harpercollinschildrens.com/Kids/AuthorsAndIllustrators/ContributorDetail.aspx?CId=11961> (Harper Collins bio)

http://www.floydcooper.com/index_files/aboutfloyd.htm (30 - second bio)

<http://www.childrensliteraturenetwork.org/birthbios/brthpage/01jan/1-8cooper.html>

Resources established, the children are now ready to begin. I allot a 4 to 5 ½ week time frame (3 days per week with a 50 minute session) for students to delve into stories created by each of the two authors. A particular book serves as the focus reading for each day. To ensure that my students comprehend our final book selections and to model prosody and fluency, I also conduct reinforcing read aloud sessions using each book they have collaboratively selected.

(Note: Weeks six through eight are spent conducting our on-line interviews and subsequently crafting the biographies based on all gathered information. The time frame will be slightly modified for in-person interview sessions and follow-up interactive talks with the author. The exercises that follow are based in part on-line interviews.)

Be Specific, Dig Deep

My children generally agreed that it is important to learn about what inspires authors to become writers and illustrators and what motivates them to create stories. They wanted this to be the focus of their biography. They believed that gaining insight into the author's childhood could be a place to begin. In this regard, they generated this basic list of questions:

When and where were you born?

What was life like in your community?

What was your childhood like?

Did you always like to draw and/or write stories? What led you to know you wanted to be an author/illustrator?

Preliminary focus established, my students rolled up their sleeves scrutinizing the work of Yangsook Choi. I was amazed at the sophistication with which the children connected with each story and the line of questions that they developed based on each reading:

The Sun Girl and the Moon Boy/Storyline: Reminiscent of **Little Red Riding Hood** tales, this por quoi tale explains how daylight and moonlight came to exist in Korea. It infuses aspects of the traditional Korean culture beginning with the belief that deceased loved ones serve as protectors of the living. The work also stresses the importance of mother-daughter; mother-son relationships and listening to one's elders.

Why did you write a Korean folktale--did your parents or grandparents tell you stories like that?

Are you Korean? Did you live in the countryside where there were lots of grasslands and wild animals?

What made you use a tiger as the evil character in the story? Did tigers live in your homeland?

It's cool the way you created your story to explain how daylight and moonlight came to Korea. What inspired you to write this por quoi tale?

When you drew your illustrations for **Sun Girl, Moon Boy** , did you draw your pictures based on what you experienced around you during your life?

Did you write this story to remember something that happened to you in your childhood?

Is your personality like any of the characters in the story? Were you disobedient when your mother told you to do something, like the children were in this story?

Did you act mostly like the boy character in your story, like you were bossy and in charge?

Did where you live influence the setting in your story--did you live near deep, dark woods so you wanted to tell a spooky story?

Do you practice traditional religion or are you a Christian? Did your religious belief influence the way you wrote this story? I ask because we learned that in Korean culture, many people believe that when you die, the one who passed away looks over you. So, did your religious belief influence the way you wrote this story?

It seems like the girl in the story was independent, and the boy stayed with his mother? Did your upbringing influence how you portrayed these characters in the story?

Peach Heaven/Storyline: *Yangsook loves peaches, but they are too expensive for her family to obtain, so she dreams of them often. A turbulent storm transpires, such that it appears hailstones are falling from the sky. The rains continue, and the farming community known for its peaches is affected by the storm. Yangsook and her family soon discover that peaches are falling, as a result of strong winds catapulting them from nearby peach orchards. After flood rains subside, Yangsook feasts on peaches. Suddenly and unselfishly, she becomes concerned that her community may be affected by the loss of this crop. Yangsook rallies to gather the remaining peaches and return them to the farmers. Her friends agree--they even use yarn to hang several back up on the trees.*

Did you ever live in Puchon, South Korea? Did you draw your illustrations just how the city looked?

In the story, it seemed like people worked together so that everyone would be able to make a living. Was it like that in your hometown?

We notice "Yangsook" is the name of the main character in this story, and your name is Yangsook. Is this story based on your relationship with your Grandmother?

How did you come up with the name "Peach Heaven" for the title of your book? Are "peaches" an important part of Korean culture? How are they important?

Did you really experience peaches falling out of the sky, or did you use your imagination to create this part of the story?

When you wrote about the children tying peaches back onto the tree branches, did that really happen? How did you do that?

The Name Jar/Storyline: *Reluctant to introduce her Korean name for fear that she would be ridiculed by her new classmates when they heard it, Unhei refrains from sharing it for a long time. Instead of introducing herself, she announces that she will choose a name for herself on the following week of school. Curiosity aroused, her new classmates attempt to help her in this effort. They each jot a proposed name on individual strips of paper, fold them, and place them in an oversized, lidded glass container designated "the name jar." In a lottery type set-up established by her class, Unhei goes through each name and finds none that suits her. One day, the name jar mysteriously disappears. The mystery is solved, and a very special friend helps the immigrant newcomer realize that her birth name is the best name of all.*

Did you have to learn how to speak English before you moved to the United States? Was the English language difficult for you to learn?

Sometimes, people who come from different countries and speak different languages sound different when they speak English: did you have an accent, and did anyone tease you about the way you spoke when you moved to America?

Unhei was so afraid to say her name in front of new students because she wanted to be accepted; did you go through a similar experience like the character in this story? If so, how did you feel about your experience?

Is this book based on something that really happened in your life, or did you know someone who went through what Unhei experienced and put yourself in that person's shoes?

Behind the Mask/Storyline: *It is Halloween eve, and the neighborhood children are preparing to go trick-or-treating. Kimin, a little boy and main character in this story, wants to make an impression among his friends when wearing his costume. He misses his grandfather who had passed away. Before he expired, his grandfather left Kimin a box filled with costumes, a special mask, and memorabilia regarding his experience as a famous traditional Korean mask dancer. His grandfather also taught Kimin a few traditional dance steps to execute when wearing the mask. Kimin decides he wants to dress up as his grandfather for Halloween; his friends laugh when they learn of Kimin's intent. Suddenly, Kimin recalls that one of his grandfather's masks possessed a frightening expression. The mask scared Kimin such that he never wanted to open the box in which the mask was contained. The youngster soon musters up courage and decides to wear his grandfather's costume. In an unexpected ending, Kimin comes to honor his grandfather while engaging friends in a*

memorable cultural exchange.

It seems like you create a lot of realistic fiction stories that include diverse groups of characters who learn about one another. What inspires to create stories like this?

Are masks an important part of Korean culture? How and why are they used (to scare people, to convey or hide feelings, for decoration)?

Did you have a grandfather that was a traditional mask dancer, and is that why you were inspired to write this story?

Do you have Korean masks in your possession? How and why do you use them?

Do you have traditional dance masks in your possession, and if so, did you use them as a model to create the mask illustrated in your story?

Did your grandfather teach you about masks, and did you come up with this story because he tried to scare you with them?

Did you ever experience trick-or-treating in the United States? Do children go trick-or-treating in South Korea?

Like **Sun Girl, Moon Boy**, is this story also based on the Korean religious belief that people who die can come back to look after family who is still alive? Did you create this story for that reason?

Collective Effort - Collaborative Outcomes

My students were ecstatic, for Yangsook Choi candidly responded to almost every question they had asked. Through their on-line interview sessions and supplemental research, my students worked together to create their initial biographic sketch. Because my "little biographers" did not obtain all of the responses to their questions at the time of this writing, they decided to work with what they had. They also decided they wanted to target the author's childhood, a few life experiences, and whether those experiences influenced her story creations. What follows is a collective, first attempt at doing biography:

An-nyong! Meet Yangsook Choi

Have you ever met a dynamic author who puts herself into her stories and illustrations? Well, we have. That author's name is Yangsook Choi, and we have read several of her books to learn about the author and how she crafts her stories. What we learned about Miss Choi is amazing—an encounter we will always remember!

Yangsook Choi was born in Seoul, South Korea. As a child, she lived with her mother, father, and two younger brothers. The oldest of three children, Yangsook often took care of her little brothers. Because of this, she learned to be responsible and caring at a very young age.

Proud of her cultural heritage, Yangsook loved to draw. She started drawing pictures at age 4. She can

remember her parents—especially her father—pushing her to work hard in school and be a good student instead of doing art. Her family's desire did not stop her from drawing. At times she would squeeze herself into a quiet place or would hide inside a closet to draw. For many years, she kept her dream of wanting to draw tucked away in her heart. Not until she moved to the United States and became a college senior at age 24, did she let her parents know that she truly wanted to be an artist. Her parents were still not happy with her career choice, but Yangsook persevered, and in our opinion, it was the best thing she ever did!

Many of the stories Miss Choi has written are about the experiences of Korean people or about Korean traditions. "**In The Sun Girl and Moon Boy**," she noted, "I used the tiger as a character that symbolized evil. Long, long ago, Siberian Tigers lived in Korea. They had big frames, long fur, and good looking faces, but people were afraid of the tigers. Fortunately, I was never chased by a tiger. That's probably why I'm living to tell stories, but people liked to tell and hear scary stories about them."

We were curious to know if the author wrote Korean folktales and realistic fiction stories because her parents or grandparents told her these types of stories. "Actually, it was the opposite," she responded. "I told stories to my grandmother, and she enjoyed hearing them. My grandmother lived two hours away from our family, and most of the time, she was the only one who listened to my stories. I told many folktales to her whenever she visited us. I would tell her real old stories about a sweet faithful bird or Korean ghosts and many other stories. The stories came from my imagination."

Yangsook shared that at times, things she has done in her life influenced the way she builds the setting or characters in a story. "Like the children in **The Sun Girl and The Moon Boy**," she noted, "I didn't always obey my parents when they requested something of me. Many times, I made my own decisions and did things my own way. Sometimes, I learned great lessons when I did not obey. I made mistakes, but I also learned that my parents had my best interest in heart."

Yangsook grew up in a culture where people believe that ancestors watch over and protect loved ones who are still living. Because of that awareness, she was able to weave that knowledge into her story. Miss Choi added that although she never lived near a deep, dark woods like the scene depicted in my **Sun Girl, Moon Boy**, she has gone to a graveyard in a deserted mountain town at one o'clock at night. "My friends and I hiked up that mountain all during the day to get to that graveyard," she noted. "Because of that, I experienced what it feels like to be in a spooky setting, AND BOY WAS I SCARED!" Our class decided that there is no way we would have visited a graveyard past midnight, but because she did, Yangsook Choi sure knew how to create spooky settings in **Sun Girl and Moon Boy** and **Behind the Mask!**

Our research revealed that Yangsook Choi was already a grown woman when she first came to America. Unlike Unhei in the story **The Name Jar**, Yangsook did not experience being teased because of language differences. "That's where using one's imagination comes in," the author shared, noting that when she exhausts ideas, she writes stories based on the experiences other people she has met or known.

We noticed that the name of the main character in **Peach Heaven** was Yangsook. The little girl took charge and used her brain when she had a problem. Unhei was also thoughtful of others. We discovered that the author grew up in a small town at the bottom of a hill that had many peach orchards. We wondered if the story was true. "Yes, it was a true story," Miss Choi revealed, "except the end part where the kids gathered fallen peaches and returned them to the orchards. That's the only part that was fictional." Most of us guessed the part where Yangsook tied the peaches back onto the trees had to be from her imagination. We're glad she shared this information with us because a few kids in our class said they were going to try to fasten pieces of fruit onto some tree branches!

Yangsook Choi also revealed that she creates many of her children's books based on things she remembers from her childhood along with the way she felt because of those experiences. "When I first heard the folktale **The Sun Girl and Moon Boy** , I thought about how excited and scared captivated I felt when I listened to it. I was anxious for the boy and the girl in the story to be saved from the danger, that's because I prefer to write stories that have a positive ending. Whenever you face danger, I hope you remember that the danger is not the end of your story. There's always that overcoming climax waiting to turn your story around."

Yangsook embraces diversity through her stories. We evidenced that when we read **Behind the Mask** and **The Name Jar** . "Learning from one another is one way to help build relationships and community in our multicultural world," she noted. I think it's so fun that we are created in diversity. And my job is to celebrate that with my stories. That's why we love Yangsook Choi. She creates wonderful books!

Yangsook had not yet responded to all of the inquiries my students had asked her at the time of this writing. As a result, my third graders will follow up doing additional, detailed biographies based on responses received specifically regarding **Behind the Mask** and **Peach Heaven** . In the meantime, the children collectively crafted this wonderful biographic snapshot. They brainstormed in small groups and convened to discuss vocabulary, use of descriptive words and phrases, and dialogue to bring the biography to life; input was provided across abilities levels. I served only as a facilitator, guiding them to be mindful of organization and fluency. Note that the tone and style of this writing effort differed significantly from Vaughn's autographic sketch. Nevertheless, the students made use of the author's storybook creations to convey their perception of Yangsook Choi as a creative, persevering, comedic, compassionate, global, and gregarious artist willing to share her talent and know-how with others.

Story, Art, and Mr. Cooper

It was my intent to have students solely read literature written and illustrated by this author. My children, however, decided that they also wanted to read books that were illustrated but *not written* by Floyd Cooper. Because assessing illustrations to make sense of the storyline is an integral part of evaluating author's craft AND because I welcome student input to direct instruction, I went along with their requests.

My boys and girls enjoyed reading the author's biographic works **Jump!** , **Langston** , and **Mandela** . They observed that Floyd drew readers into each narrative using descriptive language and realistic illustrations. Looking intently at the pictorial images, my students also dove into Mr. Cooper's illustrated works **Mississippi Morning** , **Cumbayah** , **These Hands** , and **Incident** and **Harriet Tubman** (excerpted from an anthology of children's poetry entitled **Pass It On**); these auxiliary resources, written by different authors, proved to be equally engaging for my young learners. Unlike the queries they came up with for Yangsook Choi, the children did not focus in on the events in each story to develop their questions. Rather, after being immersed in Cooper's stories and illustrations, the children brainstormed on key questions that embraced the overarching theme found in each work. In this regard, provided below is background information pertaining to each of the eight works embraced by my students, followed by their collective questions.

Jump!--From the Life of Michael Jordan/Storyline: *As a child growing up in Wilmington, North Carolina, Mike enjoyed playing basketball and baseball. Basketball, however, was his favorite sport, but for some reason, he could never beat his brother, Leroy, at the game. Michael got along well with seemingly everyone*

in his community and had many friends across cultures. That's why he was surprised when he went swimming with friends and suddenly all of the white children darted out of the pool. He never let that incident interfere with his multicultural friendships. Outside of that, he still could not compete with his older brother playing B-ball. Michael befriends a basketball coach and practices rigorously until young Mike is good at his game. Then, one day, while shooting hoops with his brother, SWISH! With a high-flying slam dunk, he wins the game!

From the Life of Langston Hughes/Storyline : *Young Langston had no easy life. His parents separated during his formative years. He lived with his grandmother, Mary Langston, in Lawrence, Kansas. An often isolated youngster, he met with race prejudice in the public school he attended. He observed the debilitating impact of racial hatred on black people and experienced personal heartbreaks with pen and paper in hand. He too recognized the beauty in his people. Life trials and a persevering spirit propelled young Langston to become one of the most renowned poets and writers of his time.*

Mandela--From the Life of a South African Statesman/Storyline: *Born on July 18, 1913 in Mvezo, South Africa, Nelson Mandela was the son of a paramount chief. An extremely intelligent youngster, he dreamed of one day making a contribution to the freedom struggle of his people against Apartheid, a system of racial segregation enforced through legislation by the white-ruled, South African government. During his childhood through early adult years, the young man worked diligently to acquire a good education. In time, Mandela became committedly involved with the African National Congress, an organization that fought against the injustices perpetrated on black South Africans. Because of his involvement with the ANC, he was incarcerated for the majority of his life. Not until February 1990 was he released from prison. The following year, he was elected President of the African National Conference. On May 10, 1994, he received the Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian effort and fight against racial injustice. He went on to serve as President of South Africa from 1994 through 1999.*

Mississippi Morning (solely illustrated by the author)

James William, a white child who lives in Mississippi during the Depression, is unaware of segregation practices that transpire around him. "That's just the way things" is his conviction. Not until he candidly talks with his best white friend, Red, and best buddy, Leroy, a black sharecropper's son, does Leroy begin to learn that discriminatory practices against blacks go on in his community. Red alleges that Leroy's father plays a major part in implementing those practices; Leroy claims that people who perpetrate those heinous acts against blacks are members of the Ku Klux Klan. Curious, Leroy approaches his father to ask if he knows of such activities; his dad quickly skirts the line of questioning. One morning, while out and about doing his chores, James William notices an ominous figure--a man donned in a full length, white, pointed hood--running down the road towards his home. Frightened, Leroy hides, hoping to get to his house to warn his family. Suddenly, the hooded figure stumbles, and his headdress falls off only to reveal that the man is James William's father. James William is flabbergasted by what he has observed; his and his father's lives are never quite the same.

Cumbayah / Storyline (solely illustrated by the author): *Societal ills and injustice plague our world. Many people cry out, unite, and persevere despite it all. Translated from the Gullah language, key words and repetitive phrases have been transformed into a song that heralds hope and possibility for people across cultures: "Come by here!"*

Harriet Tubman/Storyline (solely illustrated by the author): *This lyrical work portrays how the feisty abolitionist known as the Moses of her people helped over 300 slaves escape from bondage.*

Incident/Storyline (solely illustrated by the author): *Rhymed verses tell of a young black child riding on a bus in Baltimore, Maryland, who notices a white child sitting on the bus staring at him. The black youngster smiles; the white child responds, sticking out his tongue followed by using a derogatory epithet.*

These Hands/Storyline: (solely illustrated by the author). *For decades, Grandpa has used his hands to do everything from sweeping floors in a bread manufacturing plant to nurturing his grandson. But Grandpa was never allowed to knead or bake the bread in the Wonder Bread Factory. Grandpa shares his story with his grandson who soon learns how Grandpa's fight and the collective effort of others against discriminatory practices of the 50s paved the way for possibility in the little boy's life today.*

Related Questions

All the characters in each of these stories and poems had to overcome racism; did you ever meet a challenge like any of the characters in these books? If so, how did you overcome your challenge(s)?

Did your life challenge(s) inspire you to become an award-winning author/illustrator?

What inspires you to draw your pictures so realistically? Did you ever want to see your artwork in a museum?

How old were you when you discovered that you wanted to be an artist, and how did you know that's what you wanted to be? Do you want to do this type of work for the rest of your life?

We notice that in your illustrations you show all different types of people coming together, like we are all part of the global community; does this viewpoint affect how you create your illustrations?

You are one of the few authors who draws illustrations that show African-American people? What inspires you to do that?

Mr. Cooper responded to the children's initial questions on-line, and they were ecstatic to receive his feedback. Again, the children collectively brainstormed on how they would craft their biography. What follows are the results of that collaboration:

Exciting and Fabulous Floyd!

Visit the Zimmerli Art Collection at Rutgers University, the Mazza Art Collection in Ohio, the California Afro-American Museum, the Afro-American Museum in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, the Chicago Art Institute in Illinois, or the Eric Carle Museum in Massachusetts, and you will be in for a surprise. You will learn that Floyd Cooper's artwork has been featured there. But don't worry. If you don't get to see his work at these museums, you can see his masterpieces inside over 60 children's books!

Floyd Cooper knows how to take oil paint, a kneaded eraser, and imagination to make magic on canvas. He is an extraordinary children's book writer and illustrator. Born on January 8, 1959, he lived during a time when black people and other concerned Americans were fighting against racial injustice. Many of his books are about the black experience. We guessed that he created his books because he experienced some of the horrible things that happened to black people during the civil rights era. We guessed wrong.

"I am fortunate for the work of the great civil rights leaders, community leader, and common folk who stood their ground in those days," he shared. "They made my path easier to pursue my dreams because of their tireless work before my journey began. In earnest, I faced little in the way of overt racism that impacted my

career achievements. It is ironic that the very heroes I write about and illustrate are the ones to whom I owe my ability to do so! They are the ones from whom I get my inspiration."

We are glad he was inspired because we had a chance to read LOADS of Floyd Cooper's books. His story, **Jump!**, tells a little about Michael Jordan's life. When you read the book and reach the middle section, suddenly, Mike jumps right off page! It's amazing! We had to ask Mr. Cooper, "How did you do that?!" The author shared how.

"Everyone has their own way of walking, talking, singing, dancing, or writing and illustrating," he said. "Each person's style is unique. My art looks the way it does because of my personal approach to making the pictures."

Sometimes, kids think about what they want to be when they grow up. We wondered if Mr. Cooper knew what he wanted to be—like many of us do. We thought about this because we learned that over the years, the author-illustrator spent much time developing his talent. Can you believe that he started drawing pictures at the age of three! "I loved drawing pictures before knowing that I even had to grow up to be anything," he noted. "It's always been that way for me. I just enjoyed doing this art thing, and I'm lucky that it has been the way I can make my living."

When you turn the pages in the book **Cumbayah**, beautiful pictures of people from many cultures "shout" off the page. The pictures are like music. Maybe that's because the words in this book are the words to a spiritual often sung in churches. Mr. Cooper's illustrations make us feel like people are crying out for the world to be a better place because a lot of hurt and pain and love and hope in the pictures. We wanted to know if his view of the world inspired him to create pictures like the ones we saw in this book.

"To be honest," Mr. Cooper shared, "I usually follow the text of the author for cues about what and who to draw. But I am sure that my personal views of the way I view the world find their way into my art!"

Although Floyd Cooper draws pictures that show beautiful images of people across cultures, he also creates many positive illustrations about black people—images that we hardly ever see in books or on TV. We wondered if things that happened in his personal life had anything to do with that. "When I was a kid, the great soul singer James Brown released his hit song, 'Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud!' At the time, no one had ever said that—let alone have it be like a national anthem for Black people everywhere!" the author noted. "So this is part of what impacted me as a child and is still with me today. Black is beautiful, baby!"

We think Floyd is beautiful, baby! He is definitely way cool because his work shows how people across cultures can live and work together. Floyd Cooper: an inspiration to us all

Through his writing and illustrations, my blossoming biographers gained insight into author's craft and into the life of the author. My students noted that Floyd Cooper seemed to be drawn to realistic fiction narratives and poetry with a historic content; their line of questioning embraced that realization. They agreed that, like Yangook Choi, Mr. Cooper's life experiences and viewpoints influence his work—at times unintentionally. They too deduced that the author is not a follower because he has his own creative style. The children deem the author to be a creative, diligent, caring, global, and outgoing writer and artist who is willing to share his talent and know-how with others. They also agree that he creates story and art that resonant a powerful message: to learn about, boldly share, and celebrate the stories and life experiences of diverse cultures.

My children are excited about Floyd's upcoming visit. They intend to revisit the author's books—particularly his biographic works on Langston Hughes and Nelson Mandela--and are currently devising additional questions to grill Mr. Cooper with when he arrives. I can't wait to see the biographic outcome of their live interview session!

Releasing the Reins

Through our autobiographic and collaborative biographic writing exercises, the children have begun to embrace what it takes to do biography. They have begun to make engaging text-to-world, language arts connections making use of prediction, logical thinking, and investigative research skills. They have interpreted information and established lines of questioning regarding story content and author's craft based on select readings; they have evaluated and drawn opinions and conclusions based on those story selections; and have gotten a sense of the persona of each author based on their story creations. The children have experienced that organization, fluency, and descriptive language are key elements in creating engaging stories. They have embraced the importance of establishing the setting (with a focus on time and place), the main character and major events in the character's life that help to convey a particular perception of the spotlighted subject.

The ultimate awakening is that our "experienced biographers" have learned that author's craft can be examined through the author's literary work itself, and that much background information about the author can be deduced through visiting the author's literary creations.

Extension Activities

Keep the momentum going: have students try their hand at these additional autobiographic and biographic writing exercises:

"More About Me!" **Autobiographic Sketch:** Revisit the autobiographic snapshot exercise noted in the beginning of this unit. Have children select additional descriptive words to best describe other aspects of their personality. Upon completing the first draft, have students undergo the editing, peer conferencing, and rewrite process. As the student finalizes and produces each finished product, compile and bind his/her writings, creating a keepsake compilation that portrays the persona of the child from multiple perspectives.

"My Best Bud" **Biographic Snapshot:** Have each student identify a classmate or neighborhood buddy. (Have the child who struggles in developing friendships write about a favorite pet, teacher, or family member who they consider to be a friend.) Subsequently have students target a key event that occurred in their lives that epitomizes the quality of the friendship and personality of that friend. (Refer to the previously developed personality trait list for descriptive word suggestions.)

Host an Authors' Tea, inviting parents and administrators visit the classroom to observe students read their biography and autobiographic sketches aloud. Take photos of the event, posting photos and student story creations on a bulletin board for school-wide viewing.

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AUTHOR CONTACT INFORMATION

Arrangements can be made to have these award-winning authors visit your school. To learn more about their availability, programs, presentation format, and fees, contact:

Author/Illustrator Yangsook Choi – yangsookchoigmail.com

<http://lindalaib.tripod.com/id26.html> (author bio, book analyses, and more)

Author/Illustrator Floyd Cooper – fcooper4msn.com

http://www.floydcooper.com/index_files/aboutfloyd.htm (about the author/illustrator)

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Appendix

Meeting Connecticut Educational Standards

Authors Behind the Pages correlates with the Connecticut Framework K-12 Curricular Goals and Standards for Language Arts and the Visual Arts. Generally, students will read literary works across genre with understanding and respond thoughtfully to text; create biographical works using the language arts through biographic and autobiographic text and story creations; understand and appreciate texts across time periods and cultures; choose and apply strategies that enhance the fluent and proficient use of language arts; write and speak the English language proficiently to clearly communicate ideas; use different media, techniques and processes to communicate ideas, feelings, experiences and stories; express their understanding of written text through developing, communicating, and sustaining characters through biographic and autobiographic story creations; and employ the language arts and the arts for lifelong learning, work, and enjoyment.

As it pertains to specific content standards, students will be engaged in the following:

Language Arts – Content Standard 1: Reading and Responding. Students will describe their thoughts, opinions, and questions that arise as they conduct interviews, read and listen to a text, and use relevant information from the text to summarize content. Students will use what they know to identify and creatively convey characters, settings, themes, events, ideas, relationships, and details found within the text.

Language Arts – Content Standard 2: Producing Texts. Students will individually work on the creation of biography and autobiographic sketches; will collaborate on the critiquing of biographic and autobiographic. Students will read/share their biographic and autobiographic creations with partners, who will constructively critique the work, highlighting elements in the literary piece that work along with questions they have about the writing.

Language Arts – Content Standard 3: Applying English Language Conventions. Students will understand that

words and expressions in the form of descriptive language that includes metaphor, similes, onomatopoeia, dialogue and more can be used to convey meaning; that time and place impacts biography, autobiography, and other forms of writings, and that elements of story creations can evolve and/or change over time.

Language Arts - Content Standard 4: Exploring and Responding to Text. Students will internalize and establish opinions about each of the works read, listened to, and viewed, subsequently evaluating them according to such features as subject/character development, the character/subject's voice, life conflict as it impacts that voice and author's overarching purpose.

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