



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1990 Volume V: American Family Portraits (Section II)

Faces of the Family

Curriculum Unit 90.05.02
by Diana Doyle

Whenever I think about this unit and the concept of family, I realize that the term “family” has different and changing meanings for both the middle school student and the teacher. Many of our students have difficult and fragmented homes, many come from single parent homes and many do not even live with or know their parents. They do not know what one might call the ideal family. Yet, children read about and watch television about families every day. The books I read with my students are about unfamiliar situations and yet the children enjoy them.

My primary goal with this unit is to encourage, urge, and cajole students to read. As a teacher in an inner city middle school, I have to compete with all kinds of visual stimuli—television, movies, computers—and children find them far more interesting than reading. Reading is static, dull, boring. Nintendo and other video games are fun, and of course television is great. In addition, in New Haven elementary classrooms, we have the competition of computers. I have four computers in my room and lots of software from Garfield to Bank Street Writer with reading and math skills in between. My students beg to use the computers. They don’t beg to have free time to read or write. I have to insist on reading and on reading novels or on writing in journals, and yet I have found that when students become involved in a book, they can become focused and interested. When students are interested and are reading, they are open to learning.

My second goal is to involve my students in writing as much as possible. Writing, like reading, is often a bad word or a painful experience for children. “I don’t know what to write about” . . . “I can’t spell” . . . “I make too many mistakes” . . . I have heard these complaints over and over. Yet I have found that students like to write about themselves and their experiences. Personal narrative is a good way for them to begin. Most of their experiences involve their own families and their relationships within the family, with parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins, uncles and aunts. Personal writing, such as journal keeping and personal narrative can grow out of discussions of similar situations within the novels they read. After reading about a situation, students can share and retell their own experiences. This personalizes the reading and helps the student participate in the understanding of what has been read by the creation of his or her own story. Remember the very first day you rode a two-wheeled bike? How did you learn it? Who helped you? Most children, indeed most adults, can remember that momentous day vividly and wish to share it. Most of those memories involve family members. These are the kinds of memories and experiences that children can read and write about with intense involvement.

I plan to develop a unit on both real and fictional families. The real family will center around the Ingalls family

as depicted by Laura Ingalls Wilder in the book *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. Because the Ingalls family was a real family, photographs and diaries of the family members are available. Children can look at photographs of the actual Pa and Ma, of the young Laura and at the older famous Laura. Motivation is also high because most children have seen some reruns of the television show “Little House on the Prairie” which is based on the series, and therefore are familiar with the characters. The problems and hardships, as well as the joys and pleasures of a pioneering prairie family are all portrayed very vividly and simply. Laura is not a perfect little girl; she gets in and out of trouble. She is very real. Even if they cannot relate to the pioneer situation, children can see a family situation and they can see likenesses and differences in feelings and reactions.

Another book I plan to use is a very lovely and very simple story called *Sarah Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan. This book has a similar setting to the Ingalls story, but in this story, two motherless children hope their family will become complete. Their father has advertised for a wife and Sarah, who comes from Maine, has answered. The children are fearful once she arrives that she will miss the sea and will leave them. They yearn desperately for a completed family.

I plan to use at least two books that are contemporary in setting, *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* by Beverly Cleary and *Freaky Friday* by Mary Rodgers. Both are books that children enjoy reading, both are funny, both have strong family portraits and themes. The adventures and misadventures of Ramona Quimby are especially appealing—to boys as well as girls, and this particular book is rich in discussion material. The Rogers book, *Freaky Friday*, might seem a more frivolous choice, but it has a strong family focus, as a mother and daughter understand more about each other and themselves as they switch roles. What I also like about these two books is that video tapes are available and the children can watch the characters that they have read about. Children then become critics and evaluators as they observe differences and changes from the reading.

Another book I plan to use has a very different focus. In *The Slave Dancer* by Paula Fox, the young protagonist, Jessie Bollier, is kidnapped from his New Orleans home and is separated from his family. In 1840’s America he is made to play his fife to exercise slaves aboard a slave ship.

Although I have mentioned and will discuss these five books, there are many good books that can be used. This particular unit is planned for fifth and sixth graders of average reading ability. I have chosen them because they are books that children enjoy reading and are good reading. Children are very discriminating readers. They can spot a fake. Even though the situations in these books are far from my students’ experiences, the people and the feelings are real and the children respond to them.

On the Banks of Plum Creek is a book that is rich in family traditions and values. The book itself covers a three-year period in the Ingalls family life in Walnut Grove, Minnesota. During the course of the story the family moves from a dugout carved from the prairie sod to a “boughten wood” frame house built by Pa on the strength of the wheat crop to come. The children see a close warm family, Pa, Ma and the three girls. The story is told in the third person, but it is Laura’s memoir, and told from Laura’s point of view. The students get to know the two oldest, Mary and Laura, very quickly, and with some discussion can see differences between the two. How do the girls react to a crisis? Mary is paralyzed, too frightened to move, while Laura must act, too frightened to stay still.

When we look at Ma and Pa, we see fairly traditional roles for frontier men and women. Both work extremely hard but within fairly defined spheres. Ma works in the house, taking care of all the domestic chores, while Pa tends to the outside, plowing and planting, tending the stock. The girls are expected to help their mother, although Laura, who likes to be outdoors, does more with Pa, helping him with fishing and feeding and milking the cows. For Laura the worst punishment is to be kept inside with Ma, sewing, cleaning, sweeping. This is the

original “grounding”, and this punishment is a good discussion topic.

We get a strong sense of the values instilled by Pa and Ma into their children. Early in the story Laura disobeys a rule and starts to go to the pond by herself. She is frightened by a badger and returns home, and no one knows but herself that she has been bad. Laura cannot sleep and finally tells her parents what she has almost done, knowing she will be punished. This chapter elicits a lot of discussion among students. Many think she is silly to tell on herself. Many think she is brave, but they would not tell on themselves. This is a good writing assignment and could be put into a journal. When did you tell on yourself? Did you ever admit you had done something because you were so ashamed of yourself? Did you ever wish you had confessed or told the truth?

In this book Laura has problems with Nellie Oleson. Many students have seen the early episodes in the television series when young Laura and snobby Nellie were rivals in school. Nellie gets Laura very angry. She is haughty and vain and is even rude to Ma. Laura wants to hit her, to box her ears, but she has been told by Ma not to fight, and therefore she cannot fight. Again and again we see the values instilled by Pa and especially Ma. But Laura is a normal little person, and so she gets revenge. She tricks Nellie, makes her cry and laughs heartily. And we laugh with her.

We see a strong contrast with Nellie and her brother and their relationship to their parents. Mrs. Oleson is overbearing and showy. She is teaching her children not to share, to be rude and selfish. She also dominates the household. Consequently, the Ingalls sisters watch the Oleson children ignore their father and pay no attention to him when he tries to quiet them. The children are spoiled and willful and cannot be controlled. The Ingalls girls are shocked by such behavior. They don’t like it and they do not envy Nellie her possessions—they would not want her family.

There are many photographs available of the Ingalls family. It will be fun for the children to see the “real” family, young Laura and Mary and Carrie, and the older Laura and her accomplished daughter Rose. They can see pictures of the dugout where the Ingalls family first lived. They can read more about the rest of the family and what they were like when they grew up. There are many short articles and a fascinating diary kept by the youngest girl Grace who wrote about her big married sister Laura. Since Laura lived to be ninety, she is seen as an established author in a very modern setting with her school children fans.

This can also be a chance for the children to create their own photographic and visual memory book. Seeing the pictures of the Ingalls family can stimulate the students. They can bring in family photographs and create either a classroom or a personal memory book, with pictures and stories. As they read more books, they can add to the album with both visual and literal memories.

In *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, by Patricia MacLachlan, Anna and Caleb are motherless prairie children. Their mother died when Caleb was born. Caleb misses what he has never known and he asks Anna, who remembers, what she was like and if she sang. Anna tells him that Mama sang every day, and Papa sang too. Their father no longer sings. Then, one day, Papa puts an ad in the paper asking for a wife and a letter comes from Sarah from Maine. She decides to come for a month before anybody decides.

Sarah is not, as she writes, “mild-mannered”. She has very decided ideas about what she wants and she misses the sea. The children love her and want her to stay, to make their family complete, to make their family “sing”.

It becomes very clear that some of the traditional male-female jobs are blurred. Sarah has authority and makes decisions. As Papa says, “She does things her way, you know.” She will not settle for a secondary role.

Sarah is a very good carpenter, and fixes the roof. She learns to plow and to drive a horse and wagon. And she wears a pair of Papa's overalls. She sings and she paints and she makes the family complete. This will no longer be the traditional frontier family. The book is a charming one, very short and easy to read, yet full of discussion and writing material. Interestingly enough, the author has written from family stories. There was once a mail order bride in her family, and she has taken this theme and embroidered it to become a new story.

Ramona Quimby, Age 8 by Beverly Cleary is an old favorite. Children love reading all the Ramona and Beezus books and many times children will tell me that they have already read the book. Because we discuss so many aspects of the book, the children find they are rereading it with fresh eyes. Ramona is a third grader with an older sister Beezus in junior high school. Her father is going to college to become a teacher so he will not have to be a grocery clerk and her mother works part-time as a receptionist for a doctor. Money is tight and everyone in the family has a responsibility.

The story is funny—Ramona has interesting episodes at school—and true to life. The Quimby family is an ordinary family struggling to make ends meet. A breakdown of the car can cause a serious strain on the family budget. For Ramona, going to Howie Kemp's house after school, being watched by his grandmother and playing with four year old Willa Jean is an intolerable chore. She does not like to play with Willa Jean who is bratty and demanding and who gets her own way under the dotting eye of her grandmother. Ramona feels she bears the weight of the family on her shoulders (she must go to Howie's house so her mother can work part time so her father can go to school) as well as the burden of entertaining Willa Jean.

The Quimbys have family problems—the girls won't eat liver disguised as pot roast—with the result that they must prepare dinner the following day. What mean parents! Did your parents ever treat you unfairly? Did they ever make you eat something you hated? What is the food you hate the most? Have you ever been angry and yet deep down know that you were wrong and wanted to end the anger and yet couldn't admit it? A complicated question, but actually one that students love to discuss, talk about and then write about. This one chapter can give rise to many journal writings and/or writing assignments.

The roles in the family are changing also. Mr. Quimby is a student, like his daughters. He worries about his assignments and no television is allowed so he can do his homework. Mrs. Quimby works to help support the family so he can go to school full time. Unlike Laura's Ma, she gets tired, cross, and grouchy. She worries about bills. She is understanding, but she has more wrinkles.

Freaky Friday is a lot of fun to read. For one thing it deals with an older girl, a fourteen year old high school student in a private day school in New York City. This book has a touch of fantasy as well. Annabel Andrews has been changed into her mother and has to cope with her mother's day. What she thought would be easy—what does her mother have to do all day—turns out to be an adventure. Along the way she has to come to terms with herself, her brother and her parents. She has to learn about her family.

Annabel has been the typical adolescent, self-involved, self-pitying, sloppy, etc. She has dismissed her adoring little brother and finally sees him as a person in his own right. She has a new appreciation of her mother's role, and yet helps her mother by handling a few things for her. Most of all she gets a new appreciation for herself, her own worth as Annabel Andrews, and her own importance in her family. Students have fun writing about body changes, sibling rivalry (who gets more attention in your family) and role models. The book is gimmicky but appealing, and rings true to life. The Disney movie is very funny, has a different setting, which is fun to discuss, and students love to watch it. Why was the setting changed? Was it better? Students become critics and evaluate the changes and the additions.

The Slave Dancer is an entirely different kind of book and I would only read it with a group of good sixth grade readers. This is a more difficult book and has far stronger subject matter. The book is told from the young Jessie Bollier's point of view, and we see his feelings and his reactions to the events that he lives. Although this is fiction, the story is typical of what would have happened to a boy forced to be a slave dancer. Jessie, a young boy who plays his fife on the docks of New Orleans, is kidnapped and brought aboard *The Moonlight*, a slave ship carrying a cargo of rum to trade for African slaves. On the way back his duty is to play the fife to exercise the slaves to keep them as healthy as possible. The crew doesn't care about the health of the slaves, but only about profits. A dead slave has no value.

Jessie is alone, separated from his family. He has a harsh, unexpected growing up. He loathes the crew and he doesn't trust them as he sees their cruelty to their captives. Jessie has never thought very much about slavery before but is horrified by what he sees. Seeing a young boy his age, he tries to communicate with him. His family extends more to the unhappy slaves than to the inhuman crew. When the ship is finally sunk during a storm, Ras, the young boy, and Jessie are the only survivors. They need to communicate with each other and to trust each other in order to escape. They need to forge a new family. This is a very moving and realistic book, powerful in its depiction of the worst and the best of human nature. Slides of paintings by Homer and Copley could be used with this book as well.

There are many fine books that could be read by fifth and sixth graders. I have chosen books that I like and that I know children enjoy reading. Although these books center mainly on the family, and discussions will center on the family, and each child's place in his and her own family, I hope the real impact of the unit will be to encourage individual reading. The unit should be fun to teach and I look forward to it.

LESSON PLANS AND Activities

These are suggested and continuous ideas for activities. I want reading to be as uninterrupted as possible. I try to include activities that I feel will enhance a child's enjoyment of the novel.

1. On the Banks of Plum Creek

This book is so rich in material for reading, writing and class discussion. Students will be keeping daily logs or journals in class, and can use Laura's adventures and memories as jumping off points to their own lives. Laura's physical descriptions are particularly vivid and are a good way to introduce descriptive writing to children.

After reading the description of Ma's vanity cakes at the country party, children can brainstorm words that describe their favorite foods. Encourage the students to find words that will bring out texture and smell as well as flavor—moist, juicy, gooey, crunchy, airy, crisp, etc. They can make up combinations of words if they want. Then have them describe their favorite food as vividly as they can using as many of the different adjectives as they can. They should try to recreate what they love most about the food so that others can imagine it as they read or listen to the description.

Laura also created very strong memorable characters as she described herself and her family. Children get to know the Ingalls family and what they are like. They understand Laura, her anger, her frustrations with Nellie Oleson, and they also understand Mary, the quiet one, who always tried to be good, who was frightened easily. Pa Ingalls, with his fiddle and his singing, his hard work and his good humor, is especially impressive.

The children are always struck by his generosity—when he gave the carefully saved three dollars for necessary new boots for a bell for the belfry of the church—and are impressed to learn the bell is still there. They can write on elements of these people that they admire. What do you most like about Pa? If you were Laura, how would you get back at Nellie? Write a letter to Laura and tell her about your life here and what you think you would most like to do with her.

2. *Ramona Quimby Age 8*

This is a good book to use in September as Ramona is beginning her school year as well and children can identify with many of her new school year problems. Journal writing activities can follow many of Ramona's adventures. What was your first time on a school bus like? Describe your first teacher. Describe your last year's teacher. What is your most important responsibility at home? What is fair about it? When do your parents treat you like a baby?

When Ramona goes to Howie Kemp's house to be watched by her grandmother, she is allowed to ride Howie's two-wheeler. Watched by Howie and his friend, she wobbles slowly down the block and returns, happy that at least she didn't fall off. Children discuss, then write about the very first time they rode a two-wheeler all by themselves. This seems to be a pretty universal memory and the children love it. They all like to share this memory as well and it is fun to hear kids tell about themselves and learn about others. This is a particularly effective writing assignment—it can be put in a journal or used as a classroom book—but there are several others that are also fun for children.

1. When did you follow a fad blindly? After the egg cracking episode.
2. Disaster in the kitchen—after Ramona and Beezus cook dinner.
3. When were your parents mean to you unfairly? After the pot roast (tongue) episode. Also what food do you hate the most?
4. Your most embarrassing moment? After Ramona throws up in class.

These are but a few examples.

3. *Sarah, Plain and Tall*

The children hope that Sarah will sing and she does. They want to learn new songs and of course they have no television, radio or movies. They learn songs when other people sing them, and so they learn new songs from Sarah, songs from the East. The children can think of chants and songs they may know this way. Are there any family songs that are special to their particular family. How did they learn jump rope chants? This can be a journal assignment and it can be a topic for discussion.

Sarah draws pictures of her life on the prairie to send to her brother in Maine. The students can draw pictures of themselves at school and at home and send them to grandparents, cousins, etc, who live elsewhere. What will they include? What can they show about their lives that they might not put in words?

4. *Freaky Friday*

Many writing and discussion ideas come immediately to mind while reading this book.

Have students make a list of those traits of theirs that they think most annoy their parents. Then have them make another list of things about their parents that annoy them the most. As they read the novel, they can refer back to the list. Are there any parallels to the book? Do they understand some of the irritations better?

Imagine changing places with a parent for a day. What would it be like? What do they think their parents do all day? How difficult would it be for a parent to be them? What would they not want their parents to learn about them?

If a parent switched places with a student for a day, what changes would he or she try to make in the life of the student? How would these affect you (the student)? Would you leave the changes once you got your body back?

5. *The Slave Dancer*

As the students read this book, there should be a lot of discussion in order for them to understand and try to imagine the conditions and helplessness of the slaves and Jessie.

Examples of questions:

What sorts of people would be willing to work on a slave ship?

If you were forced, like Jessie, to work on a slave ship against your will, what would concern you the most?

Why is Jessie whipped if he refuses to dance the slaves? How would you react?

What is one of the things Jessie learns that affects him the most?

What are the attitudes of the crew members? Are they alike? How do they rationalize their activity?

What happened in the story that surprised you? Why did you not expect this to happen?

At the beginning of the voyage, Purvis tells Jessie: "You'll see some bad things, but if you didn't see them, they'd still be happening, so you might as well."

What does that mean? What does that tell you about his reason for being on a slave ship?

At one point Jessie makes this statement: "I thought that now I understood the phrase, 'lost at sea.'"

What does he mean? What makes him feel the most lost? What would make you feel lost?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Student Reading

Cleary, Beverly, *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* Dell Publishing, New York, 1981. (paperback)

This is my favorite, but Beverly Cleary has written many books about Ramona and her family and friends.

Fox, Paula, *The Slave Dancer* . Dell Publishing, New York, 1973.

This is a Newbery Award book and really excellent. She has also written *How Many Miles to Babylon?* and *The Stone-Faced Boy*.

MacLachlan, Patricia, *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1985.

This is also a Newbery Award book and a wonderful warm gentle story.

Rodgers, Mary, *Freaky Friday* . Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1972.

A funny book that kids love, yet deals with real issues and problems.

Wilder, Laura Ingalls, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* . Scholastic Inc, New York, 1937.

A classic. Any of the books in the series could be used, of course, but I like this one in particular.

Teacher Reading

Calkins, Lucy, *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Heinemann, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1986.

One of two “bibles” about concretely teaching writing to children.

Gilford, Henry, *Genealogy—How to Find Your Roots* . Franklin Watts, New York, 1978.

A useful and interesting book about ways of tracing source material, and collecting data.

Graves, Donald H. *Writing; Teachers and Children at Work*. Heinemann, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1983.

Another really wonderful process book about writing with young people. This book gives lots of ideas.

Hilton, Suzanne, *Who Do You Think You Are?* The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1977.

More concrete ways of learning about who you are for the young person. Includes pictures and ways of creating pictures.

Weitzman, David, *My Backyard History Book* . Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1975.

This book is really fun. All kinds of ways to learn about your family, with practical suggestions that children can do easily.

MAGAZINES I would also suggest issues of “Writing!” Many have interesting ideas and articles. I would particularly recommend:

September, 1988, Vol 11, No 1

November 1989, Vol 12, No 3

Materials on Laura Ingalls Wilder

A number of materials have been published about the Ingalls and the Wilder families.

Anderson, William, *The Story of the Ingalls* , booklet, 1971.

Anderson, William, *The Ingalls Family Album* , Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, Inc., 1973. Lots of wonderful pictures.

Lichty, Irene, *The Ingalls Family from Plum Creek to Walnut Grove*, booklet, 1970. Details the life of the family in the book.

Mooney-Getoff, Mary J., *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Bibliography* , Wise Owl Press, Southold, New York, 1971. A valuable selected annotated listing of writings about Laura and her family, including audio-visual resources the names and addresses of the seven memorial sites organized around her homesites.

Thurman, Evelyn, *The Ingalls-Wilder Homesites: A Diary of Visits 1972-81*, Bowman Kelley Press, Bowling Green, KY. A 64 page illustrated guide to homesites and museums of Laura, Almanzo and their relatives.

Memorial Societies at the Ingalls-Wilder homesites

These are for the most part volunteer groups, organized around the homesites. They welcome letters, especially from students, and writing letters is a wonderful activity for young enthusiasts.

The Franklin County Historical Society and Museum

51 Milwaukee Street

Malone, New York 12953

Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, Inc.

Pepin, Wisconsin, 54759

Little House on the Prairie, Inc.

Box 110

Independence, Kansas 67301

Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, Inc.

Box 344

DeSmet, South Dakota 57231

Laura Ingalls Wilder-Rose Wilder Lane Home and Museum

Mansfield, Missouri 65704

Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum and Tourist Center

Walnut Grove, Minnesota 56180

Laura Ingalls Wilder Park and Museum

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