

## A Curriculum Guide to

### ***Katerina's Wish***

by Jeannie Mobley

#### **About the Genre**

Historical fiction is the most powerful way to bring a time period alive to children. They can read a textbook from cover to cover and never get a clear picture of what life was like in a given time. A good historical fiction novel will paint the characters so vividly and describe the setting so fully that readers will begin to live in that world with them. In addition, readers will have a realistic sense of what daily life was like for the characters. What did they eat? Where did they live? How did they earn money and feed their families? What inspired them to make the decisions they did? What were their hopes and dreams?

#### **About the Book**

Katerina's father moves his wife and three daughters from Bohemia, an area within the Czech Republic, to America in 1900. He leaves behind a future that held little for him to buy a farm, work the land, and build a peaceful life for his family. But farms cost money and Papa did not come with much money in his pockets. To make ends meet and to save for a farm he takes a job in the mines in southern Colorado. The work is dirty, physically difficult, unhealthy, and very dangerous but he has little choice. His family is crowded into a small house that the mine owners provide and they are never able to get ahead enough to save for their farm. Momma is pragmatic and she has always seen Papa's dream as only a dream—not something that will ever really happen. She supports him but never gets her hopes up.

Katerina, called Trina, is the eldest of three daughters and our protagonist. While the girls all attend school, there is much to be done at home after school and in the summer. A neighbor of theirs from the old country, Old Jan, is a frequent visitor and tells the girls stories. Stories that Trina now finds silly. Since all hope of getting the farm has gone out the window, Trina is saddened to think that living in a coal-mining town may be their ultimate fate. But Old Jan tells the story of a magic fish, and despite not believing wholeheartedly in the story, Trina wishes for the farm her Papa wants. In the days following, things begin to happen. Is it magic or is it Trina's sheer determination to succeed and her hard work that is causing these changes?

#### **Before Reading Activity**

The activity below correlates to the following Common Core State Standards: (SL.3-7.1)

Sending children off into a book without any direction is not terribly effective in terms of comprehension. Taffy Raphael's work on the Question-Answer-Relationship (QAR) allows us to guide them into a book by asking them a well thought-out question that you want them to think about as they read. This is a QAR question called "On My Own," which they do not have to have read the book to answer. Instead it can serve as a guiding question at the outset and it can also double as a discussion question at the end. In this way, it comes full circle and allows the reader to reconsider their answer once the book has been read.

In this case, a good On My Own question would include showing them a photo of a glass filled halfway with water, and then asking them whether they see the glass as half full or half empty. Once they have decided which it is, talk to them about the meaning behind this idiom. If we see the glass as half empty we tend to be pessimistic and think things are going badly. If we see the glass as half full we tend to be optimistic and think things are going well.

Tell them that this is a story where the characters tend to fall into one of the two categories: glass half full *or* glass half empty. Which do you think YOU are? Are you the kind of person who will give up when your team is really losing or do you believe you can change it and get back on track and win the game?

Learn more about Taffy Raphael’s QAR procedure at <http://www.education.com/reference/article/question-answer-relationships/>

### **During Reading**

The discussion questions below correlate to the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.3-4.1) (RL.4.6) (RL.5.2) (RL.6.1) (RL.7.6) (SL.3-4.1) (SL.3.6) (SL.7.1)

Using a two-column note with one column headed “Glass Half Full” and the other “Glass Half Empty,” put each character in the column that suits them. Make a quick note as to why they ended up in that column.

### **Critical Thinking Questions Throughout the Reading of the Text**

1. Trina’s family moved to America to find a better life for themselves. Their hopes lie in an idea called “the American Dream,” which is based on the notion that if you work hard, good things will come to you. How would you characterize this family? Are they hard workers? Who, in particular, was working hard?
2. Trina is referred to as *determined* quite a bit in this story. What does it mean to be determined? Will determination alone make her dreams come true? What else might be needed?
3. Trina wants Papa to have his dream of a farm more than anything else. She hates the coal mine for a number of reasons. Why does she hate the coal mine so much?
4. Trina has two younger sisters. Where did you put Aneshka (age 8) on your two-column notes? Why? And Holena (age 6)? Where did she end up? Do you think their glass-half-full/glass-half-empty status was determined by their age or their personalities?
5. In 1900–1901, when this novel is set, society was very different from the way it is today. Compare and contrast the differences in expectations for women back then versus present day.
6. A boy from the old country, Mark, takes a shine to Trina, and Trina realizes she likes him as well. Mark gives her a ring and she is initially happy about it. What makes her start worrying that

being Mark's wife might not be the best thing for her? What do you think? Should she compromise her dreams to be with Mark?

7. Trina takes on extra responsibilities when she begins to have ideas about how to raise money for the purchase of a farm. What does she do? Were they good ideas? Why?

8. If you had to describe Mr. Johnson, who ran the company store, what are some words you would use and why?

9. Trina stumbles upon some clues that suggest that Mr. Johnson was the one who destroyed her backyard plants and her hen house. What were those clues? Why did that destruction hit Trina so hard?

10. At the end of the book Trina's family leaves the coal town and heads toward a farm that they have leased. Mark asks Trina to stay behind with him, and even though she loves him, she says no. Why do you think she said no?

11. Much was made of magic in this story. Old Jan tells a story about a fish that grants wishes. Do you think that magic exists? Trina doesn't think so but can't help but make a wish when alone with the fish. What kind of magic exists in the story? Is it "abracadabra" magic or is it a mental determination, believing that anything is possible?

12. The genre of the novel is historical fiction and its job is to recreate the time period in which it is set. Describe ways in which the author did just that.

### **After-Reading Activities**

The activities below correlate to the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.3.5, 6, 9) (RL.5.2, 3, 5, 9) (RL.6.2, 5, 7, 9) (RL.7.2) (RI.3-5.7) (RI.6.9) (SL.3-4.4) (SL.5.1a-d, 2) (W.5.1) (W.4.3d,) (W.6-7.1)

Some of these activities can be used at any place in the story where a question becomes an important one for the readers. Conversely, some make great after-reading extensions. It is perfectly all right to stop midstory and spend some time fleshing out their background knowledge as they are reading. Just don't stay away from reading for any extended length of time. You never want to interrupt the flow of the story itself.

1. In a small group, put together a storyboard of the main events of the story using the free program, [www.storyboardthat.com](http://www.storyboardthat.com). With that in place, discuss how the author built a case for the reader to understand the family's situation, how desperate they felt, and how they ultimately were able to break free. Present to the class.

2. The company store plays a large part in this story. Mr. Johnson who runs the store will do anything to eliminate his competition. That way he can continue to charge exorbitant prices that bankrupt the families that he serves. If the families can't save for a better life, they are doomed to

stay right where they are which is what the mine companies want. In small groups, research and discuss what a “company store” is and what the pros and cons are of having them?

3. Mines are notoriously fraught with danger. Have readers discuss in small groups or as a whole class the problems associated with coal mining. Go to the World Coal Association’s website and click on <http://www.worldcoal.org/coal-society/safety-issues/> to read about all the safety hazards miners contend with. Share passages and photos from *Trapped: How the World Rescued 33 Miners from 2,000 Feet Below the Chilean Desert* by Marc Aronson (Atheneum, 2011). The pictures of the trapped miners alone will help students understand the dangers inherent in mining.

4. Papa is accused of hosting union organizing meetings in his house. The coal company does NOT want them to unionize. What is unionization and why would companies be against them? Click on <http://www.illinoislaborhistory.org/articles/172-mother-jones-the-miners-angel.html> and <http://www.aflcio.org/About/Our-History/Key-People-in-Labor-History/Mother-Jones-1837-1930> to read about a woman, known as Mother Jones, who played a pivotal role in getting rights for miners. Her story will help you answer this question about unions.

5. After the coal mine disaster, Papa returns to work the very next day. Trina is shocked and asks Momma why. Momma tells her that Papa lost pay for the time he spent trapped in the mine. Is this just or unjust? Have students write a paragraph in support of their opinion.

6. Where do you stand on organizing? Are you pro-union or anti-union? Have the students research some of the pros and cons of unionization back then and present day. Then have them debate on where they stand.

7. In *Katerina’s Wish*, the air of the coal mine is referred to as “unwholesome.” What were some of the health concerns related to working in a coal mine in the 1900s? Using the Internet, compare mining safety then to how it is now. These two websites are a good place to start: [http://www.coloradomining.org/pl\\_minesafety.php](http://www.coloradomining.org/pl_minesafety.php) & <http://www.usmra.com/barrick/colorado.htm>.

8. Using a Compare and Contrast Diagram, have the students begin by entering *Katerina’s Wish* as one concept and a contrasting title having to do with leaving home for a new place or child labor laws and unionization as the second concept. Suggested secondary titles could focus on stories of frontier life like *Little House on the Prairie* (Wilder), *Hattie Big Sky* (Larson), *Grasshopper Summer* (Turner), *Black-Eyed Susan* (Armstrong), *Trouble River* (Byars), and *Our Only May Amelia* (Holm). Another alternative is contrasting books that have to do with child labor laws and unionization in books like *Counting on Grace* (Winthrop), and *Lyddie* (Paterson).

Once the concepts/titles have been established, move their attention to how these books are different? Specifically, how do they differ with regard to:

- a. The way male and female protagonists are treated
- b. The protagonist’s educational opportunities
- b. The protagonist’s ability to extricate herself from her problems

- c. The problems holding the characters back
- d. Do children work alongside the adults?
- e. Is there evidence of injustice in the text?
- f. Feel free to add other “with regard to” topics to flesh out the discussion as you see fit.

This strategy helps as a graphic organizer, a summary, and a wonderful sheet full of ideas to end a unit with a powerful final discussion or written report.

9. a. Head back to that opening question we used at the beginning of this novel. We used the image of the half-full glass and asked students whether they themselves were of the “empty” or “full” variety. They were also asked to keep two-column notes on where the characters fell with regard to seeing the glass half full or half empty. Discuss what the students found and ask whether they thought there was a difference between those two groups. Which group accomplished more? Was it the characters who always felt that the glass was half empty or the characters who felt the glass was half full? Why do you think that is?

b. What message did the author send by showing that those with hope, who believe that anything can happen, will prevail?

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