

A Teacher's Guide to

Stella by Starlight

By Sharon M. Draper

Author's Note

In the middle of fifth grade, the girl who would grow up to be my grandma Estelle was forced to leave school forever so she could help on the family farm. It broke her heart but not her spirit. No one knew it at the time, but she would sneak out each night after everyone was asleep and write in a journal she kept hidden under the steps. When my grandmother passed away in 1983, I was given the only one of her journals that survived—it is one of my greatest treasures. Estelle, at age ten, could not know it, but she would become my muse, my spirit guide to write and create and dream. She *is* my Stella by Starlight.

Discussion Topics

1. The novel opens with a powerful description of a fire burning in the woods in the middle of the night. How does this help capture the reader's attention? What predictions can the reader make about Stella? About Jojo? About what might happen in their town?
2. Describe the family's home as described in Chapter Two. In what year and what town does the story take place?
3. Describe Stella's parents. How would you describe the relationship between the parents and the children?
4. How would you describe Tony? Describe some of the frustrations the two children face. How does Stella feel about sitting outside at night with a boy she's known all her life?
5. Discuss Stella's love of newspapers. How does her father inspire her to be interested in the news? How does the room decoration affect Stella's connection to newspapers?
6. Describe Stella's walk to school and the children who lived nearby that walked with her. What can you learn about their community from this description?
7. Describe Stella's classroom (which was the whole school!) and her teacher. What does this say about the school system in Bumblebee and North Carolina at that time?
8. How does Stella compare herself to the old apple tree outside the classroom window? What problems does Stella have in school?
9. Why does Stella sneak out at night? What does she keep in her hidden cigar box and why?
10. Why is a visit from Spoon Man a reason for excitement in the town? Describe Spoon Man and his wagon and his effect on the community.
11. In your own words, summarize Spoon Man's story about the eagle who thought he was a chicken. What does Stella think of the story?
12. What does Stella learn about her father as they ride to town? What do you think most surprises her?

13. Describe the voting registration. How do you think Stella felt throughout the ordeal? What do you think she learned from that experience?
14. What does Stella think about the writing contest? Make a prediction about how you think she will do in the competition.
15. Why is the Sears Catalog exciting to Stella and Carolyn? Compare the reality of cleaning a chicken coop to her dreams of being able to buy some of the items pictured in the catalog.
16. Describe the fire. Why doesn't the fire department come and put it out? What do you learn about the community as they fight the fire?
17. Do you think Stella is a hero? Explain. How does she feel about what she did? How does the community show their pride?
18. In your own words, tell the teacher's story of the people who could fly. Why is that story significant because of what had happened in their community?
19. How do you think the typewriter changed Stella's attitude about and ability with writing?
20. How does the community come together on Election Day? Do you think the vote from Stella's father made a difference? Explain.
21. Describe both the negatives and the positives that happened as a result of the attack on Tony. Describe Stella's feelings.
22. What does Stella's mother teach her as they hunt for herbs and plants? How does Stella use that information later?
23. How does Mrs. Odom save the day? Why is it surprising? What more do you learn about the community because of what she did?
24. What problems does Paulette face at home? What is surprising about Paulette's revelations?
25. Describe the humorous parts of the Christmas play. Why is it a good place for the story to end?

Activities and Research

1. Put yourself in Bumblebee in 1932. Write a paper that tells what it would be like to be Stella for one day. Write about your clothes, chores, community, and friends.
2. Investigate the recent changes in voting rights laws in many states. How similar are some of the new laws to the voting restrictions in 1932?
3. Investigate the art of storytelling, both long ago and today. Why is storytelling important for human beings to share?
4. Research current social and community problems in the news. Comment on what can be done to make our communities safer and make sure that everyone is treated fairly.
5. Research old typewriters and how they worked.

6. Research old folk songs and gospel songs like those mentioned in the novel. What part do traditional songs and music play in the role of a community?

7. Write a letter to one of the characters in the book explaining your feelings about the events in the story. What advice would you give Stella, Tony, or Paulette?

8. Imagine it is the last day of fifth grade. Write a letter or create a conversation between one of the following pairs of characters:

- Stella and Mrs. Grayson
- Stella and Tony
- Paulette and Stella
- One of the Spencer children and their parents

9. Trace the story of one of the following characters. Imagine you are a reporter doing a story on one of their lives. Write everything you know, as well as whatever you can infer about the character in order to write your magazine article.

- Dr. Packard
- Mrs. Cooper
- Stella's mother
- Stella's father
- Jojo

10. You are a reporter at one of the following scenes. Write the story for your newspaper.

- Local House Burns Down
- Local Woman Bit by Snake
- Local Child Almost Drowns in Kilkenney Pond
- National Storyteller Comes to Town

Writing Activities

Read the quotes. Then write the essay that follows.

1. COMPARISON/CONTRAST PAPER

A.

“Uh, my little brother is sick,” Stella said. “He’s got a bad cough, an upset stomach, and a fever.”

Mr. O’Brian looked genuinely concerned. “I’m sorry to hear that. Sounds like a touch of the flu. Some Sal Hepatica might help the young fella,” he said. “It’s a good product, but tell your brother to be warned. It fizzes going in, and fizzes coming out!” He laughed at his own joke, but Stella was in no mood for humor.

“Thank you,” she said politely.

“And for the cough, try Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup. It’s got a little camphor and a little menthol, and probably lots of other things they never tell us about. But it works.”

“That’s exactly what Mama asked for,” Stella agreed. “I appreciate this. How much?”

“Let’s see. The cough syrup is 18 cents and the medicine is 32 cents. That comes to fifty cents.”

Stella fingered the two dimes and a nickel in her palm. “I’ve got half that,” she said awkwardly, flushing with embarrassment. She looked around self-consciously, but thankfully, Paulette was nowhere to be seen.

“Well, what do you know!” Mr. O’Brien said cheerfully. “I forgot to tell you—today is half-price day! And you have exactly enough.”

Stella looked up at him. Their eyes met, then she bowed her head with gratitude. “Thank you, sir,” she said. “Very much.”

“I hope little Jojo feels better,” Mr. O’Brien said gently. He reached under the glass counter, pulled out a cinnamon cookie, and handed it to Stella, still warm. “My wife just took these from the oven. It’s chilly today, and you’ve got a long walk home. This’ll help keep you warm.”

Almost in tears at his kindness, Stella thanked him once more, and walked out of the store, the brown paper bag in her left hand, and the cookie in her right.

B.

“What you doin’, gal?” a raspy voice said behind her.

Stella turned uneasily. Sitting on the bench in the front of the store were Max Smitherman and Johnnie Ray Johnson. They had not been there when she went in—she surely would have noticed.

“Girl, he asked you a question,” Johnnie Ray said.

“Just . . . just getting medicine for my brother,” Stella replied, looking down at her shoes. Even though she could feel anger creeping up in her, she’d been taught since she was very young to say as little as possible to mean white people.

“Your mama know you spent her money on cookies for yourself?” Mr. Smitherman said, his voice taunting. “Or maybe”—he turned to Johnnie Ray—“her daddy too busy votin’ and such to be teachin’ manners to his daughter.”

“The cookie was a gift,” Stella mumbled, the anger turning to fury.

“I’m thinkin’ she don’t need that there cookie,” Smitherman said to Johnson.

“I’m thinkin’ she musta stole that there cookie,” Johnson said to Smitherman.

“Maybe she went in there and *voted* for the cookie,” Smitherman said with a cruel laugh.

Johnnie Ray, with two huge steps, was beside Stella. He snatched the cookie from her hand.

Stella could take no more. “You give that back!” she exclaimed. Even though she would have never put the cookie in her mouth now that he had touched it, she added, “You can’t just steal other people’s stuff!”

Johnnie Ray stared her in the eye and stuffed broken cookie chunks into his mouth. Max Smitherman threw his head back and hooted.

Compare and/or contrast the attitudes and behavior of Mr. O’Brien and Johnnie Ray Smitherman. Discuss their roles in the novel, the effect of their actions on the plot of the story, and their effect on the reader of the story. Use specific examples from the book to support your statements.

2. DESCRIPTIVE PAPER

“The sun grew golden, then rusty as it slipped slowly toward the horizon. Then, out of the blue, a gaggle of silvery geese erupted from the reeds at the pond’s edge, honking and swirling in circular disorder. Stella went instantly alert. What had them all riled up? A fox? It wasn’t more of those men, was it? Then she heard a crackling of underbrush—or was it just the random movement of the fallen leaves? There was no way to be sure, but she decided not to take any chances. Stella hurried back into her house, pulled the back door shut, and locked it.”

Write a descriptive paper that uses sensory imagery. Describe a specific scene and bring it to life with your words. Use vivid verbs and powerful adjectives and adverbs as you write. Use as many of the senses as you can (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste).

3. NARRATIVE PAPER

“Every once in a while, I bring a notebook out here and write about animals and stuff. Anything to get my mind off things going on at home.”

Amazed, Stella asked her, “So why did you take your shoes off? It’s freezing out here.”

Paulette started crying again. “I was, uh, being stupid . . . I thought maybe . . .”

“You didn’t go in on *purpose*?”

“I didn’t! I swear. Well, not really. But—I was just so upset! I figured if my daddy. . .” She dropped her head and sniffled. “If I got, well, sick with something really awfully bad like pneumonia or cholera or something . . .”

“You can’t get cholera from cold water,” Stella scoffed, crossing her arms.

“I know. I know. But I wanted to get sick with something really bad so he’d pay attention to me for a change! He’s a doctor—if I had to go to ah hospital or something, maybe he’d remember he had a little girl. Maybe my folks would stop fighting.” She started to cry again.

Stella frowned. She wasn’t sure how to react to the shivering white girl. How unhappy she had to be!

Write a narrative paper from the point of view of Paulette, or about Paulette. Describe her daily life. Discuss her strengths and weaknesses and problems.

4. EXPOSITORY PAPER

“The family sat huddled around the only table in the house, with Dusty, their brindle hound, curled underneath. Stella loved the feel of that table—she loved to trace the circular patterns in the warm brown wood. Made of elm and built by her father when he married her mother, the table was large, sturdy, and dependable—and so much more than a place for meals. It was a sewing table for her mother, a place to clean fish for her father, the battleground for many family games of checkers, and even a pretend track for Jojo to race his two wooden toy cars. Stella, now nervously circling the burl of the wood grain at double speed, thought tonight could be the one when she wore a hole clear through it.

Scooching her knees up, she gazed at the newspaper-covered wall next to her bed. Most every plank of pinewood inside the house was covered with old newspapers. Newsy decoration, Mama called it. The pages were glued on with wood paste and randomly selected: a wall might sport an ad for medicine next to an article on the price of eggs. As the pages yellowed or peeled, Mama slapped fresh ones up. Stella could not remember when she wasn’t surrounded by newsprint. Tonight she reread a piece about what the paper called a crime wave—three robberies—which was next to a story about a college debate team and their success. It seemed like only seconds passed when she woke with a start as her mother tickled her nose with a feather.”

Write an expository (explanatory) paper that describes a room at your school, or your house. Tell what is unusual or unexpected about the place. Use as many specifics as possible.

5. PERSUASIVE PAPER

“Outside the classroom window stood an ancient apple tree, its branches gnarled and entwined. They’d all feasted on the fruit since the start of school, but the last of the apples had fallen in the past week. Stella gazed out at the few remaining leaves that stirred in the sharp breeze. When she opened her notebook, her thoughts snarled like those tangled branches. Stella didn’t like to write.

When she was in first grade, it had taken her longer than anyone else to figure out the connection between words in her head and the charts on the wall that listed both the printed and cursive versions of the ABCs. Reading had come slowly. Mrs. Grayson had been patient every year, letting Stella work at her own pace, but she’d struggled with putting it all together. For sure, she’d never be the class spelling bee champion like Carolyn.

So instead of beginning her essay, Stella busied herself with getting ready to get ready. She had a system—pencils on the left, notebook on the right, books in the middle. She liked everything neat and lined up so the edges matched.

Not that any of that mattered, she thought glumly. A neat desk couldn’t cover up her struggles. The inside of her notebooks were a jumble of half-finished work, scratch-outs, and mess-ups. Arithmetic wasn’t so bad—numbers lined up in an order that made sense to her.

But writing, oh Lordy. It wasn't that she didn't have strong opinions on lots of things. She sure did! But putting them on a piece of paper just wasn't her piece of cake. Or pie. Or pancakes with molasses, which she dearly loved. Writing was more like trying to chew chicken bones—hard to do and not worth the effort. She even had a couple of bad grades in that notebook that she'd hidden from her parents, which she knew was dumb. Eventually her mama and Mrs. Grayson would get to talking at church, and her life would be over.

Stella's mind was spinning with ideas, images of flames sealed in her memory. So she really did try to start on her essay in earnest. She scratched out words. Started again. Erased half of it with her almost-used-up gum eraser. Started again. Stopped.

Shoulders slumped, she stared out the window. A slight breeze blew through the arms of the apple tree, causing a few curled and ruddy leaves to dance aimlessly to the ground. Stella figured sticking those leaves back on the branches would be easier than trying to move the stuff in her head to the empty blue lines in her notebook.”

Write a persuasive paper that discusses one of the following options: (a) “Stella’s struggles reflect most students at one time or another. (b) Stella is unique in her struggles because of the time in which she lives and her education and background. Be sure to use specifics to support your answer.

6. FICTIONAL ANALYSIS PAPER

(a) “Now it came to pass that a young woman was living on one plantation, a woman of strength, a woman with dreams. Her name was Zalika, which, in the Swahili language, means, ‘born to royalty.’ She constantly looked to the sky. She was able to predict the moment the sun would peep above the horizon, and the instant the land would fade into night. She had named every cloud, even though no two were ever the same. She knew when the sky would pour down rain upon them, and when the sun would burn their backs. She memorized the flight patterns of the birds as they soared above, studying them every single day.”

(b) “Once, long, long ago, there was a noble eagle who laid three eggs. She carefully set them in her nest atop the tallest mountain. She watched those eggs, and kept them warm, and loved her little nestlings even before they hatched.

“But one day a great storm raged around that mountaintop. The winds blew something fierce, and heavy rains pelted the eagle and her nest. Thunder crashed and lightning crackled! An earthquake rocked the earth. Why, the whole world shook with the power of that storm!”

Analyze the stories or the storytelling of Spoon Man and Mrs. Grayson. (You can go back and reread the entire story that each character told.) Discuss their effectiveness at telling the stories, the effect of the stories on the listeners, and the effect of their story on the plot. Use specific examples from the book to support your statements.

7. WRITING ANALYSIS PAPER

Read each of Stella’s writings in the novel and describe how she improves and becomes a better writer. Use specific words or phrases or sentences to prove your points.

8. POETRY

Write a poem about one of the following topics, or a topic of your own choice:

- The Girl Who Couldn't Write
- Fire
- By the Water in the Moonlight
- Fear
- The Power of Friendship

- Courage

9. CHARACTER SKETCH PAPER

Only one had a car—Mrs. Odom and Claudia. But Mrs. Odom rarely drove it, not even to church. She kept it in her barn, covered with blankets. . . .

Mrs. Odom, who usually dressed in demure long dresses and straw hats, had on a pair of men’s overalls and an old plaid work shirt. Her hair was unstyled and all over her head. Her daughter Claudia, looking sleepy, wore a nightgown. And Dr. Hawkins—Dr. Hawkins!—in his Sunday-go-to-meeting three-piece suit and fedora filled the room with his authority. . . .

Stella hopped up, patted the place she’d been sleeping, and tucked Claudia in. Claudia was out before Stella even had the blanket fully around her. Then Stella ran over to the adults. Her father was in the midst of giving Mrs. Odom a bear hug. He pulled Stella into it.

“Stella girl! Praise the Lord! Mrs. Odom here heard about the snake bite, got in her car, and drove all the way to Raleigh to get Dr. Hawkins from his medical conference!” Papa told her, mashing them both.

Mrs. Odom extracted herself from the embrace, but her cheeks were flush with pride.

Stella felt she was going to burst. Mrs. Odom? She *drove*? The woman who wouldn’t ever take the car out for fear of getting dust on it? Praise the Lord indeed!

Write a character sketch of a family member, a friend, or a relative. Use strong verbs and adjectives, and lots of specifics, as well as sensory imagery.

10. PERSONAL ESSAY

“My name is Estelle Mills, and I am not nobody. Mrs. Grayson would say that’s a double negative. Well, I’m here to say I’m not no negative. I am me, and that’s a fact.

I like to be called Stella because it reminds me of stars and I like the night. Mama tells me I was born at midnight during a full moon. Maybe that is why.

I am left-handed—the only student in the whole school who is.

My family reminds me of good things to drink.

Mama is hot chocolate.

Papa is black coffee.

Jojo is sweet tea.

Me, I’m the color of rum. Mama cooks with it sometimes.

I’ve got thick black hair, and bushy caterpillar-looking eyebrows. When I look in the mirror, I don’t see pretty. I just see me.”

Write a personal essay that describes YOU as Stella described herself. You can also describe a special memory or event. Explain why it is meaningful to you. Be sure to include sensory imagery—sights, smells, touches, tastes, sounds.

Guide written by the author.

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