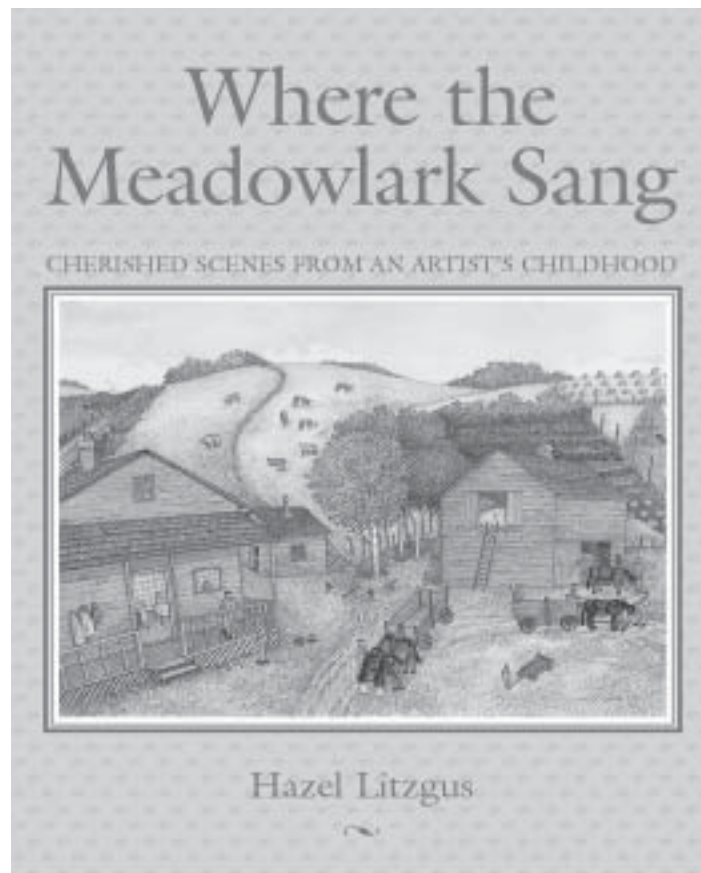


WHERE THE MEADOWLARK SANG

Cherished Scenes from an Artist's Childhood



TEACHER'S GUIDE



ABOUT THIS BOOK

“Almost everyone has a farm in their memory,” writes artist Hazel Litzgus in her introduction to *Where the Meadowlark Sang: Cherished Scenes from an Artist’s Childhood*. A collection of her memories about growing up near Lloydminster, Alberta, the book captures a child’s view of Canadian farm life in the 1930s.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

The activity suggestions in this guide are easily adaptable to your students’ knowledge and skill levels. The activities integrate the language arts (reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and representing) with other curriculum areas such as art, drama, science, and social studies. A suggested skills focus is offered at the beginning of each activity to be used as a general guideline for adapting the activity, if necessary, for your class.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Access Prior Knowledge

In the introduction, the artist states that “everyone has a farm in their memory.” Engage students in a discussion about this idea. Do they agree? Why might this be less true now than it once was? (*increasing urbanization*) The following questions might help lead the class discussion:

- Are there any students who live on a farm now or visit a farm regularly?
- Has anyone ever been on a farm in another country?
- What are some of students’ memories? Are there common threads to the memories? (*animals, plants, machinery, food, work, weather, etc.*)
- What ways has farm life has changed and stayed the same since the 1930s?

Following the discussion, students could write about their memories and responses to the questions in their journals. If you have students who do not have “a farm in their memory,” have them write about their impressions of farm life that they may have gleaned from books, film, or television.

2. Access Prior Knowledge

You may wish to give students (or help them recall) a wider historical context for Litzgus’s work. To lead into a discussion of the historical events taking place in this time period, have students read the book’s introduction. Then ask them to figure out what years Litzgus is remembering and how old she was at the time of the book’s publication. (*Students can look on the copyright page to find the year of publication and the author’s birth year after her name in the cataloguing in publication data. The introduction says she lived on a farm until she was twelve, so the book is about her memories of life on a farm in Alberta from 1927–1939.*) The social context surrounding her memories includes the aftermath of First World War, the beginning of the Second World War, the Boer War, and the Great Depression.

3. Background

Explain that Litzgus’s artwork belongs to a body of artistic practice known as folk art. Ask students to explain what they think “folk art” means. You might suggest that they first define “folk” and then “art” to arrive at their definition. Hazel Litzgus’s book offers an excellent opportunity to have students explore the topic of folk art in more detail—Activity 4 lists several general suggestions.

The following ideas could be raised in a class discussion to introduce the topic, either before students read the book or after they have begun:

- Much folk art is done by people without formal training in art, although this does not mean the artists are not highly skilled. Some folk artists carry on a tradition of work that has been passed down through families or cultures for generations (*i.e.*, carving, quilting, rug making).
- Folk art is traditional in the sense that an individual artist's work usually falls within traditional forms of expression common to a particular community (or folk). For example, one woodcarving by a French Canadian farmer might have many characteristics in common with other woodcarvings by French Canadian farmers, although because they are not mass-produced, each has its own quirks and special qualities. Individual works of folk art are often collected because they are skilled representatives of an artistic tradition. In contrast, "high art" is often prized for its departure from tradition.
- Canadian folk art is a reflection of Canada's multicultural heritage. For example, artwork by European immigrants often reflects traditional European crafts with a Canadian spin. The pattern on a carpet might include a camel and peacock motif alongside Canadian elk.
- A characteristic of the "naïve" or "primitive" folk art tradition is an attention to detail over formal design qualities. Students can find many examples of this attention to detail in Litzgus's work.
- Many early examples of folk art are anonymous. They were created by "ordinary" people who may not have known they were creating "art." Sometimes folk art is defined as "the uncommon art of common people."
- Folk art is often useful as well as decorative. Carved cups, intricate weather vanes, toys, painted wooden boxes, quilts, carpets, cradles, and gravestones are all common objects that are sometimes collected as folk art. Many folk artists use the materials at hand: wood, fabric scraps, and recycled "garbage."
- Some believe that folk art gives evidence of a basic human need for creative expression. A quilt made of two pieces of fabric stitched together with feathers in between would work to keep someone warm at night, but something makes the artist stitch colourful bits of fabric together in a pleasing design. The quilt is then functional *and* beautiful when it really only needs to be functional.

4. Use Strategies and Cues Help your students see how reading an unfamiliar word in context can make the meaning of the word clear. Ask students if they know what the following words mean: stoneboat, Percherons, Bunter, and Schottische. Then ask students to read each of these words in the context of the surrounding text and illustrations. (*pages 13, 18, 21, and 61*) Ask again for definitions. Students will now likely have a functional understanding of the terms. Ask how readers might be able to get even better definitions. (*look in the glossary, look in a dictionary, research the words on the Internet or at the library*)

ACTIVITIES

1. Story Starters

Skills Focus

- *explore thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences*
- *enhance the clarity and artistry of communication*
- *celebrate and build community*

Ask students to use some part of the book as the inspiration for their own creative work (*i.e.*, short story, personal essay, poem, play, monologue, drawing, painting). For example, students could:

- start with one of Litzgus’s illustrations and write their own story to accompany it
- use the title of one of the book’s stories as the title for their own story or illustration
- use the first line of a Litzgus story for their own story

When students have their work almost ready to hand in, ask them to exchange their work with another student for feedback. Have each “reviewer” write at least one positive statement as if they were reviewing a movie or book and one tactfully worded suggestion for improvement. Have the “author/artists” either revise their work based on the suggestion or justify in writing why they did not make the suggested change.

As a variation of this activity, prepare slips of paper with “first lines” or page numbers of illustrations and ask students to draw slips from a bag. Give students three minutes to write down as many ideas and responses as possible to the slip’s suggestion before handing the slip in and choosing another (or they could pass the slips to the student sitting next to them). After four or five brainstorming sessions, ask students to share some of their responses with the class, or ask them to choose the “starter” that most appeals to them and develop it into a polished product (story, personal essay, drawing, etc.).

2. Memories

Skills Focus

- *explore thoughts, ideas, feelings and experiences*
- *comprehend and respond personally and critically to texts*
- *celebrate and build community*
- *manage ideas and information*

In the introduction, Hazel Litzgus describes her memories as “a head full of slides that can be brought forward when needed.” The book’s structure reflects this statement. Each page is like a “slide” or snapshot of one of her memories.

Ask students what else they notice about the structure of the book. (*no linear story line as in most novels or biographies, the stories are fragments organized in seasonal groupings that form a loose story line*) As a class, analyze the effects of this structure. Questions that might guide the discussion include:

- What characteristics do the drawings have? (*Help students see that the drawings are highly detailed, but the people are not detailed and individually recognizable. For example, readers do not finish the book with a clear idea of what Litzgus’s mother and father looked like, even though many of the stories deal with her parents. They look like all the other people in the book.*) How does this technique affect the mood or tone of Litzgus’s work? To answer this question, students might need to consider how the mood would change if each drawing represented specific people. (*The people pictured are representative, not specific. Her stories seem to be of rituals and traditions—events that happened many times—not extraordinary “events” that happened once. Her memories become those that many people can relate to and that seem to capture the experience of a whole group of people.*) How do these characteristics help make Litzgus’s work “folk art” rather than straightforward autobiography? (*Her stories are that of a “folk” or community, not her as a separate individual.*)
- Have students read the introduction and find the spot where the artist states her purpose. (*to help her daughter see and love the farm life that helped make Litzgus who she is*) How did this purpose affect the work? (*the book’s memories are all positive*) Does this mean nothing negative ever happened to Litzgus? (*unlikely, but the artist’s purpose dictates the memories she chose to share with her daughter and in this book*) If the artist’s purpose had been to show her daughter how difficult life was on a farm during the Depression, how might the book be different?
- What would be different about the book if Litzgus had published a journal or autobiography? What if someone else had written her biography? Students might compare this book to other examples of life writing they may have read or viewed.
- Ask students to think about the organization of the book by season. Why is this appropriate for the community Litzgus describes? (*the change of seasons is important for farm life and reflects a lifestyle that is connected to the earth*) Why does the book start with spring? (*traditionally a time of beginning, birth*) If the artist were writing about her experiences as a schoolgirl, where might the book have started? (*possibly in the fall*) If she were writing about her life as a child growing up in an urban area, how might the book be organized?

Ask students to prepare a memory project of their own (*i.e.*, journal, drawing or series of drawings, photo essay, story, interview on tape or video, article, personal essay, biography). The memories can be their own or those of a friend or relative. When students hand in their projects or present them to the class, have them include a project statement that explains why the particular form of expression was chosen and how it best serves their purpose. Ask them to declare an audience for the project (*i.e.*, themselves, their parents or grandparents, siblings, the class) and to explain why the technique they chose works well for this audience.

3. Close to the Earth

Skills Focus

- *explore thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences*
- *enhance the clarity and artistry of communication]*
- *celebrate and build community*
- *manage ideas and information*

Litzgus says that being on a farm is important to people because it is a time when they are “privileged to be close to the earth.” The following questions might help you lead a class discussion about this idea:

- What does it mean to be “close to the earth”?
- Do students agree that people in rural areas are closer to the earth than people in urban areas? What keeps people in urban areas “away” from the earth? (*light pollution, underground subway systems, concrete, skyscrapers, etc.*)
- How is it a problem if people are *not* close to the earth? (*may lead to a lack of concern for the environment*)

Have students write in their journals about a time when they felt close to the earth. Did they feel “privileged”? Why or why not?

In small groups, have students plan an advertising campaign to promote “being close to the earth” to urban dwellers as a way to promote environmentalism and a concern for the natural world. Students should plan the kinds of advertising they will do (ads, television, radio, bus benches, billboards, flyers, etc.) and should justify how the advertising vehicles they have chosen are most appropriate for their audience. They should write appropriate text and suggest any images for their ad campaign. Give each group a budget of \$50,000 and have them get “quotations” from you for their proposed ads. Some prices are suggested below, but you will likely need to come up with other prices for the various student proposals:

Billboard \$5,000

Full page, black and white newspaper ad \$2,000

Quarter page, black and white newspaper ad \$700

Full page, full colour magazine ad \$3,000

Quarter page, black and white magazine ad \$800

Bus bench \$75.00 per month

Television commercial per prime time slot on a local television station \$10,000

Students should submit a detailed budget for their project, a schedule for when the campaign will run, how long it will last, the geographic area it will target (one city or several), a description of each type of ad (text and suggested visuals) and a rationale for why their campaign will work for the target audience. Have each group “pitch” their campaign to the class. To guide students and keep them on track, you might specify your criteria for grading the project before groups begin. These criteria could include:

- Budget (is there a wise use of money?)
- Schedule (is there a rationale for when the campaign will run?)
- Creative, catchy text and visuals

- Appropriateness for an urban audience
- Effectiveness of campaign at encouraging audience to get close to the earth
- Effectiveness of campaign at encouraging environmental consciousness
- Effectiveness of class “pitch” or presentation.

4. Art of the Folk

Skills Focus

- *explore thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences*
- *comprehend and respond personally and critically to texts*
- *enhance the clarity and artistry of communication*
- *celebrate and build community*
- *manage ideas and information*

Folk art offers a rich opportunity for students to explore Canadian history and creative expression. Activity suggestions include:

- Research and profile a Canadian folk artist or work of art for a poster or web page. Famous Canadian folk artists include Maude Lewis, Ann Harbutz, Collins Eisenhauer, William Kurelek, and Joe Norris. There are many others, including much work by “anonymous.”
- Compare folk art to intellectual, abstract, or “high art” expression. Students could hold a debate or write an opinion paper on which art form most appeals to them or they could work in groups to profile a series of Canadian artists.
- Explore other “folk” traditions such as folktales, folk dance, and folk music. Projects could include an exploration of the community that a particular folk tradition comes from.
- Explore similarities and differences between Canadian folk expressions and those of another country. What makes a folk artist’s work “Canadian”? What does it say about this country and its people?
- Students could visit a museum to explore folk art. The Canadian Museum of Civilization (www.civilization.ca) has an excellent virtual collection and museum tour.
- The anonymous nature of early folk art raises interesting discussion possibilities around individuality, the rights of creators, and copyright. Students could research the origins of copyright and could discuss the rise and fall of Napster, artists’ moral rights (such as the controversy over Toronto’s Eaton Centre putting Christmas bows on Michael Snow’s geese sculpture), photocopying legislation, taxes on blank CD-ROMs, and so on. Projects could include a debate, position paper, or group discussions and presentations.

5. Families and Communities

Skills Focus

- *explore thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences*
- *comprehend and respond personally and critically to texts*
- *celebrate and build community*
- *manage ideas and information*

Litzgus's work describes many traditions and rituals that shaped her early life. Some of these are centered around her family and others around her local and national community. As a class, you could have students visit the CBC website archives (www.cbc.ca) to read about and hear an excerpt from a Foster Hewitt Hockey Night in Canada radio broadcast as described by Litzgus on page 64. Discuss how these broadcasts were a touchstone for many people across the country and part of what made hockey so important to Canadians. What effect does placing this story as the last in the book have? (*leaves readers with a memory that many people across the country can relate to. Many of Litzgus's experiences represent Canadian "folk," not just those living in rural Alberta.*)

Have students work in small groups to identify family traditions and community traditions from the book. After listing their findings, they should organize their ideas in a chart or diagram. Hold a class discussion to identify the variety of communities in the book and how they are maintained. Some questions to consider: What communities are gathered by the Christmas pageant, dance, picnic, and wedding? What is the function of groups such as the Lions, Legion, and Women's Auxiliary? What effects do world historical events have on local and national communities?

Have students work in groups to identify the communities that they belong to and the traditions and rituals that support their communities. How are these the same and different from the communities described in Litzgus's book? As a class, identify general characteristics that define communities, past and present.

About the Author

Hazel Litzgus is a Canadian artist who paints from memory with a child's eye. Her first painting came about when she tried to explain to her daughter how her father used to hitch the team and decided to paint the image instead. A largely self-taught artist, she has now had a long and distinguished career as a watercolour painter. She is best known for a painting of herself and her mother walking down a country road that disappears over the hills into the horizon. Her art has been featured in many Canadian exhibitions.