

Exploring Biography through an Author Study: Jan Brett

Charlena Watson

S. Weir Mitchell Elementary School

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Overview

This curriculum unit will help students build critical thinking skills by having them analyze text and illustrations and make connections between an author's life and his/her work. This unit will revolve around Jan Brett books, many of which have a winter theme, and will be taught during the month of December, which is typically a time of year where students tend to "check out" in anticipation of the upcoming winter break. This interdisciplinary unit will focus on a variety of activities and strategies.

Author studies promote reading as a learning and thinking tool and provides models of good literature and writing. Students will make connections between texts that lead to analysis of theme, character, setting and point of view. By studying the works of a particular author, students will also be motivated to know more about the author and understand that biographies give an account of a person's life. Students will bring knowledge of the author's life to life by interpreting their stories.

Biographies are stories about real people. A biographer recounts an individual's life story and needs to attend to the literary elements of a narrative that comprise a compelling story such as plot, theme, character development, and setting. Biographies work well when readers can identify with these life stories. Christine Duthie (1996) discusses the important role biographies play in the literacy program in her first grade classroom. She indicates that "primary-age children are easily engaged by the life stories of real people" (p. 90), and further points out how reading biography fosters empathy in young children. "Biography encourages children to see that other people also have needs much like theirs and how others perceive, address, and resolve problems" (p. 95). By reading biographies, children can relate a person's life to the setting-the historical and

cultural time and place in which he/she lived. They can see how people made important decisions that impacted their own lives and the lives of others.

Rationale

An author study is actually a series of lessons that develop students as critical readers through the analysis of a specific author. Many of our students have limited experience with children's literature and need to become more sophisticated as readers by being provided several opportunities to practice.

Author Studies usually begin with the entire class reading and discussing the works of an author. Read Alouds will be incorporated daily to model fluent and strategic reading. Writing skills will be strongly developed by the time students are expected to complete a biography.

Like informational books, biographies have many unique characteristics that distinguish them from other genres of children literature. These books support content area and integrated theme study by fostering a spirit of inquiry as well as supplying facts, concepts, and ideas for children's own investigations. Through this author study, students are expected to develop a strong sense of author's craft. They will be able to demonstrate the ability to recognize literary elements as well as themes.

Biographies also serve as strong models for children's own expository writing. Students often make more meaning out of assignments when the learning is relevant to them. At the end of this unit, students will have researched various authors to conduct a study and ultimately a biography, using the Jan Brett Author Study as their model.

Objectives

This unit is being created for a second grade class in a high poverty, inner city K-8 school.

Students will learn about the author/illustrator craft and how Jan Brett's travel influences her writing.

Students will apply reading strategies and analyze text structure to interpret and understand each of Jan Brett's books.

Students will build their comprehension skills and strategies, scientific inquiry, and creative thinking by participating in activities that align with Jan Brett books.

Students will improve writing skills.

Students will demonstrate an understanding of story retelling and essential story elements, including character, setting, conflict, and resolution, through the completion of graphic organizers.

Students will be exposed to a type of informational text and boost their informational literacy skills.

Students will learn research skills in order to complete their own author biographies. Students will display small group communication skills by displaying appropriate turn-taking behaviors, responding appropriately.

Strategies

During the Read Aloud, the teacher will model fluent, expressive reading as well as teach a needed strategy.

Think Alouds will be vital to give students a thinking frame while processing comprehension strategies taught.

Interactive writing will occur in order to scaffold students writing to retell, summarize, and eventually record information.

Vocabulary words will be taught in context so deeper comprehension can occur.

During Independent Reading, there will be a wide range of reading materials available to students based on interest and ability.

Modeled Writing will be conducted in a whole group setting in order to compose text and demonstrate the way an effective writer works. Anchor charts will be used for classroom referral.

Guided Writing will be conducted during small group or one on one conferencing. This time will include specific, focused instruction based on the needs of the students.

Independent writing will occur and provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they have learned through the elements of the writing process.

Graphic Organizers will be used to create visuals for the reading strategies taught. When using these aids, it is easier for the students to recall and see the events in the story.

On day one of the Author Study, the teacher will heavily guide the lesson. As a class, an author display board will be created. On this board will be pictures and facts learned about Jan Brett, the author studied. The teacher will guide the students in using the information learned during the Author Study, to write a biography on Jan Brett.

The culminating activity will be for the students to create a biography on a notable person of their choice based on biographies that have been made available in the classroom as well as the school library.

Classroom Activities

Lesson One:

Read Aloud: *The Mitten*

Objectives:

- Students will be introduced to Jan Brett, the author
- Support comprehension by discussing and listing characters, setting, events, problem, and solution.

Materials: One teacher copy of *The Mitten*, Trifold Board, SMART Board, reader's notebook for each student

Vocabulary: hedgehog, badger, camouflage

Procedure

Independent Reading

Opening: (Teacher Led)

Students will complete a KWL chart on Jan Brett. Teacher will introduce to Jan Brett by watching a very short video as she explains how she came up with the writing idea.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_O1H-5X8sU

The teacher introduces the vocabulary words, then introduces students to story elements by asking what parts of stories do they like. Those “funny characters” or “cool things that happen” are the important parts that are called “story elements”. The teacher will read the story to the class, stopping at specific points to discuss story elements.

-After reading page 1, discuss the picture and note how cold it looks. Predict that that must be why Nicki wants mittens.

-Stop after Nicki drops his mitten. Highlight to students that this is a problem. “Think Aloud: I think Nicki might get into trouble because his grandmom, Baba, said not to let anything happen to the mittens.

-As new characters are introduced, point out to the students that they are making the story exciting because they are all getting into the mitten.

-Talk to the students about the problem being solved when the mitten flew into the sky.

-After reading, Use another Think Aloud: “I really enjoyed that story. I want to remember what happened to the characters. I’m going to use a tool that will help me.

Model how to complete a Plot Diagram graphic Organizer (See Appendices) on the SMART Board.

Work Period: (Student practice)

Students fill in the graphic organizers and have then stapled into their reader's notebooks for future reference.

Closing: (Lesson Closure)

Begin Author Center using the trifold. Class decides what type of information will go on the “Author Board”, such as items relating to the places she visited to write her books, pictures of a hedgehog and other animals featured in her stories. The teacher provides the first artifact, a picture of Jan Brett to go in the center of the board. The teacher shares with the students that Jan Brett lives in Massachusetts with her husband, who is a member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and Buffy, her pet hedgehog.

The students find out that Jan was inspired by three teachers to retell this story. They knew she loved animals and snow, so they wanted her to look at the story. She really wanted to get down to the roots of the story and researched Ukranian books and a Ukranian woman helped her translate different versions of the story. Each story had someone who loses something, animals crawl in, and then an explosion. Those are the three components she kept.

Lesson Two:**Read Aloud:** “*Town Mouse, Country Mouse*”**Objectives:**

- Students will be able to support their comprehension by discussing and listing characters, setting, events, problem, and solution.
- Students will learn about features of Jan Brett’s books

Vocabulary: morsel, hearth, scurried, crimson, lest**Materials:** One teacher copy of *Town Mouse, Country Mouse*, plot diagram graphic organizer, one laptop per group of four students**Procedure:****Independent Reading****Opening:**

Ask students to recall what was learned yesterday while reading *The Mitten*. Teacher reviews the Plot Diagram Graphic Organizer from the previous lesson, goes over vocabulary words, then begins the Read Aloud, using Think Alouds to model comprehension of the story elements.

-After the first two pages, teacher uses a think aloud: “The characters in this book are four mice. Two live in the city, and two live in the country. When and where the action is taking place is the setting. It doesn’t seem like the mice are happy in these places. I can’t wait to see what will happen next.”

-Teacher continues reading aloud until they get to the blackbird. The teacher brings identifies that the mice seem to be having problems in their new home. Students can share out examples of the problems using evidence from the text.

Work Period:

Students work with a partner to complete blank copies of the plot diagram graphic organizers they learned to use during the previous lesson. Students will work with their group and decide what will go on the Author Display Board today.

Closing: Students gather around the Author Display Board and discuss Jan Brett’s signature style of illustrating, is characterized by colorful story borders, which provide foreshadowing. There is often a totally different story being told within the borders of her books. Gather a collection of books with this feature and have students in groups of four note three observations from the borders only. Whole class updates the KWL Anchor Chart.

Lesson Three:**Read Aloud:** *Armadillo Rodeo***Objectives:**

- Students will be able to support their comprehension by discussing and listing characters, setting, events, problem, and solution.
- Students will learn about features of Jan Brett’s books

Materials: One teacher copy of *Armadillo Rodeo*, one copy of the plot diagram graphic organizer per student, one laptop per group of four students

Vocabulary: armadillo

Procedure:

Independent Reading

Opening: Teacher reviews the vocabulary then reads aloud the story to discuss the major story elements of the story.

- After reading the first page, discuss how the characters are a family of armadillos. Point out how Bo is probably the most important because he is the only one without a name.
- Once Harmony Jean is introduced, talk about this new character and the setting of the story. Describe how the setting can help readers to understand the story.
- Guide students in figuring out when the problem appears in the story.
- At the end of the story, ask students how the problem was solved. Introduce the term “resolution”.

Work Period:

Students use the plot diagram graphic organizer to record the beginning, middle, and ending of the story in their reader’s notebooks. Students will work with their group and decide what will go on the Author Display Board today.

Closing:

Students gather around the Author Display Board and the author’s inspiration for this story. Jan Brett was inspired during her first visit to Texas and she saw armadillos everywhere! She also enjoyed observing the various styles of cowboy boots, including their artistry and the work of the leather. Whole class updates the KWL Anchor Chart.

Lesson Four

Read Aloud: *Berlioz the Bear*

Objectives:

- Support comprehension by discussing and listing characters, setting, events, problem, and solution.
- Students will be able to use illustrations in order to enhance their predicting skills

Materials: One teacher copy of *Berlioz the Bear*, Author Display Board

Vocabulary: bandwagon, orchestra, bass, encore

Procedure:

Independent Reading

Opening: The teacher will read aloud *Berlioz the Bear* noting the side story told on the side story told on the page borders, a Jan Brett trademark. Guide students in making predictions based on the pictures in the book.

- Have students predict the problem and the solution of the story once they realize the bandwagon is stuck.
- Have students take note each time a new character is introduced to the story.

Work Period: Students work individually in their reader's notebooks answering the following response question: Choose a character from the story. How would the story have been different if that character not been introduced?

Closing: Students gather around the Author Display Board and discuss Jan Brett's inspiration for this story. They discover that the illustrations came from her husband, The character of Berlioz is based on Jan's husband, Joe, a double bass player with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. While she was watching an outdoor concert, she wondered what kind of animal might fit in the bass. After the concert when all the musicians were talking about their instruments, she asked Joe if his bass was ever affected by the weather. He told her that sometimes the wood dried out and made a buzzing sound. From that moment, Jan knew what creature would live in the bass in her story. To make Joe into Berlioz, she drew his face, lengthened his nose and added a bear nose tip. Then she moved his ears up and made them round. Last of all, she covered him with thick fur. To make the rest of Berlioz's band, she used five other members of the Boston Symphony as models. Jan and Joe traveled to Bavaria so she could research the setting, Berlioz's bandwagon, and the costumes for the story. Students view/listen to a clip of "Hungarian March", which is Jan Brett's favorite

www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuqu_eNO51M
Whole class updates the KWL Anchor Chart.

Lesson Five: Information Compilation

Objectives:

- Students will understand that biographies give an account of a person's life
- Students will compile facts to create a biography
- Students will learn how to complete a time line biography as modeled by the teacher
- Students will identify the difference between a fact and an opinion

Materials: Author Display Board, reader's notebooks, student laptops, "My Biography Notes" Graphic Organizer

Procedure

Independent Reading

Opening: The teacher will gather students around the completed Jan Brett Author Display Board and review facts learned about Jan Brett throughout the week long Author Study.

- Read aloud a nonfiction passage involving hedgehogs and guide students in highlighting the facts in the passage.
- Create an anchor chart explaining what a biography is. The teacher will also guide students in deciding what personal facts should be included in a biography. Students come up with questions they would ask Jan Brett.

Work Period: Students work in groups of four and using laptops (pre set up by teacher) and the Author Display board and to include on their biography planning sheets (see attached). Teacher is facilitating each group's progress. Students will also have access to laptops to conduct research on Jan Brett.

Closing: The teacher collects all information in order to make one set to display to the class. Whole class updates the KWL Anchor Chart.

Extension to lesson: If time permits, allow students to find three facts of their own about hedgehogs and list them in their notebooks.

Lesson Six:

Objectives:

- Students will understand that biographies give an account of a person's life
- Students will see a model biography on Jan Brett
- Students will explore different types of biographies to help determine their area of interest
- Students will choose one notable person they would like to learn more about

Materials: Jan Brett biography (formed using information compiled from yesterday's session), SMART Board, A large number of leveled biographies,

Vocabulary: notable

Procedure:

Independent Reading

Opening: The teacher will explain to the class that a biography has been written based on the facts collected. Students will read the Jan Brett biography displayed on the SMART Board and discuss the features of a biography.

- Model how to transfer information from the facts to an actual Biography.
- Show the My Biography Notes Graphic Organizer on the SMART and let students view how a biography is formed. Let them know that the Jan Brett Biography will serve as a model (example through out the research project).
- Tell students they have the opportunity to learn many facts they do not know about people when they explore biographies. Discuss with students any notable people they already know and may like to know more about. As a class, generate a list of names and categories of people on the SMART Board. Students will see they can choose from presidents, singers, actors, authors, athletes, and scientists. Ask students to think about famous people they know something about.

Work Period: Explain that the fun part really starts now. During Writer's Workshop, they will be creating their own biographies by working in **pairs** to become experts on one person and share about that person with the class.

- The teacher assigns the pairs based on similar ability levels, however, the pairs may choose their own notable person to research based on interest and availability.
- Students will begin explore a collection of biographies made available by the teacher from his/her library as well as books from the school library if applicable. Teachers can also borrow books from a nearby public library to widen the variety.
- Assist students is selecting reading level appropriate biographies.

Closing: Each student receives a copy of “My Biography Notes” graphic organizer (see Appendices). The teacher explains each section of the form so everyone knows what they are expected to do at the next session.

Lesson Seven:

Objective:

- Students will understand that biographies give an account of a person’s life.
- Students will be able to **determine importance**
- Students will demonstrate understanding of and apply the writing process.
- Write with a purpose to inform their audience.
- Students will write, conference, edit, revise biographies.

Materials: SMART Board, student laptops, chosen biographies, task cards, “My Biography Notes” graphic organizer

Procedure:

Independent Reading

Opening: The teacher will explain that they will be writing a short biography on their notable person of choice.

-Students will need to determine the most interesting and the most important information about their person. The biographies will be one page and should begin with a clear opening paragraph. Biography rubric will be displayed on the SMART Board.

-Explain to students that Writer’s Workshop is a great way to experiment with their writing with the teacher and with their peers. Biographies will be shared with other students and feedback will be given.

-Teacher will label a piece of chart paper and list the Biography requirements:

- Describe the life of a real person
- Use facts from a reliable source (biographies, approved websites)
- Identify the audience (peers)

Before students begin their assigned task, have them think about taking a short family trip. What are the important items they need to pack? Go through examples, toothpaste, toothbrush, etc. What are some “extras” that would be “nice” to take along? Go through examples, nail polish, basketball, etc. Explain that on a short trip with limited suitcase space, it is important to decide on the items that are truly needed. This is the same case with writing a biography. Review the Jan Brett Biography model, is there any information that is interesting, but not necessarily important. As a class, remove one “interesting”, yet not “important” fact.

Work Period: Students receive a short passage and highlight the important facts. Students work in their pairs completing their task cards and placing the information on the Graphic Organizer.

Closing: Volunteers share out one interesting fact about their notable person.

Lesson Eight:

Objectives:

- Students will understand that biographies give an account of a person's life
- Students will demonstrate understanding of and apply the writing process.
- Write with a purpose to inform their audience
- Students will write, conference, edit, revise biographies

Materials: student laptops, chosen biographies, task cards, "My Biography Notes" Graphic Organizer,

Procedure:

Independent Reading

Opening: Teacher will review the writing process and continue to establish the purpose of writer's workshop.

Work Period: Students work in their pairs and continue placing the information on the Graphic Organizer. Teacher supports students as needed.

Closing: Different volunteers may share out one interesting fact about their notable person.

Lesson Nine:

Objectives:

- Students will demonstrate understanding of and apply the writing process
- Students will write with a purpose to inform their audience
- Students will write, conference, edit, and revise biographies

Materials: SMART Board, student laptops, chosen biographies, task cards, "My Biography Notes" Graphic Organizer,

Procedure:

Independent Reading

Opening: Using the Jan Brett biography created in previous sessions, model the process of revising a first draft.

-Draft can be displayed on the SMART Board. Teachers reads aloud the draft, stopping to make any changes needed. Use a Think Aloud for students to hear the process. Show students how those revisions result in a new draft.

Work Period: Students begin their biography drafts incorporating feedback received during conferences with teacher. (They are to make sure Biography features are included.)

Closing: Gather students in a close group and model examples on how to give supportive feedback.

Lesson Ten:

Objectives:

- Students will understand that biographies give an account of a person's life
- Students will demonstrate understanding of and apply the writing process.
- Write with a purpose to inform their audience
- Students will write, conference, edit, revise biographies

Materials: student laptops, student biographies, notebooks, My Biography Notes graphic organizer

Procedure

Independent Reading

Opening: Remind students that they will be giving positive feedback to assigned classmates (teacher should have this worked out before class)

Work Period: Student pairs share their biographies drafts with assigned students. Each pair should share their work and the listeners should tell one thing he or she thought the pair did well, and one thing they would still like to know about their person.

Closing: Student volunteers share how they felt about today's process.

Lesson 11

Objectives:

- Students will understand that biographies give an account of a person's life
- Students will demonstrate understanding of and apply the writing process.
- Write with a purpose to inform their audience
- Students will write, conference, edit, revise biographies

Materials: student laptops, student biographies, notebooks, My Biography Notes graphic organizer

Procedure:

Opening: Teacher will instruct student pairs to reread their drafts and incorporate their peer feedback and complete their writing. Students should refer to the Biography Rubric and revise until they are sure all criteria is met (teacher will support this during the work period).

-Explain to students that their work should be neatly written (or typed depending on their skill set with computers). Inform them that published biographies will be displayed around the classroom.

Work Period: Students revise biographies. They should also begin the proofreading process. Students refer to the rubrics to ensure they have completed all steps.

Closing: Students continue to share comments and concerns about the process. Teacher should take note of the concerns and address during the next session's Opening.

NOTE

Students may need an additional session to complete the revision/publishing process.

Lesson 12-Author Readings and Celebrations

Objectives:

-Students present biographies in a formal speaking situation.

Opening: Teacher will announce the speakers for the day.

-Explain that they are authors and they would be sharing their published biographies with the class.

Work Period: Student pairs begin sharing. To make this even special, readers should be in front of the room, perhaps behind a podium.

Closing: Begin posting the published biographies

NOTE

This process may take more than one session.

Annotated Bibliography

Teacher References

Duthie, Christine. *True Stories: Nonfiction Literacy in the Primary Classroom*. York, ME: Stenhouse, 1996.

www.janbrett.com

Student Resources

Brett, Jan. *Armadillo Rodeo*. New York. G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Most armadillos are happy scratching sand and eating, but Bo longs for adventure. And adventure Bo gets, the day Harmony Jean breaks in her brand-new chili-pepper-red cowboy boots by the banks of Can Creek. Peering out across the creek bed, Bo is sure he's spotted a rip-roarin', rootin'-tootin', shiny red armadillo! Bo's off and running after his new friend--right down to the Curly H Rodeo. There Bo gets to do all the things he's dreamed of doing: he rides a bronc, eats red-hot chili peppers, and even tries the two-step. Bo is ready to follow his pal off into the sunset, but he is about to discover his new friend is no ordinary armadillo.

Brett, Jan. *Berlioz, the Bear*. New York. G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Berlioz has no time to investigate that strange buzz coming from the double bass because he and his bear orchestra are due at the gala ball in the village square at eight. But Berlioz is so worried about his buzzing bass that he steers the mule and his bandwagon full of magicians into a hole in the road and gets stuck. Time is running out, and if a rooster, a cat, a billy goat, a plow horse, and an ox can't rescue the bandwagon, who can?

Brett, Jan. *Gingerbread Baby*. New York. G.P. Putnam's Sons. 1999.

A play on the traditional story of the Gingerbread Man, he "run, run, runs as fast as he can" to get away from the other characters in this story only to find out that there is always somewhere to run to! Matti, the only one not chasing the Gingerbread Baby is at home making him a little Gingerbread house for him to run into after all of the commotion of the chase.

Brett, Jan. *The Mitten*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989.

This traditional folktale tells the story of a young boy who loses his mitten while wandering in the snow. It's found by a series of woodland animals, which, one by one, crawl inside the snug mitten. At the end of the story, a bear's big sneeze sends the animals crashing in all directions. The boy finally finds his mitten and wonders why it is stretched out and larger than its mate.

Brett, Jan. *Town Mouse, Country Mouse*. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Two engaging mice couples eager to get away from their everyday lives. But when they agree to swap homes, they are plunged into unexpected adventures around every corner. In an unusual twist to a familiar fable, Jan Brett introduces a bumbling kitchen cat and an inept country owl who stalk the unsuspecting mice from the borders, causing one disaster after another. Finally a dramatic climax sends the mice racing for their own homes, and brings the cat and the owl face-to-face in a surprise ending.

Content Standards

1.2 Reading Informational Text: Students read, understand, and respond to informational text-with an emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence.

CC.1.2.2.A: Identify the main idea of a multi-paragraph text as well as the focus specific paragraphs within the text.

CC.1.2.2.B: Ask and answer questions such as who, what, where, when, why and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.

1.3 Reading Literature: Students read and respond to works of literature-with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas between texts with a focus on textual evidence

CC.1.2.2.J: Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate conversational, general academic and domain specific words and phrases.

CC.1.3.2.C: Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.

CC.1.3.2.E: Describe the overall structure of a story, including how the beginning introduces the story and the ending concludes the action.

1.4 Writing: Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content.

CC.1.4.2.A: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey Ideas and information clearly.

CC.1.1.2.F: Demonstrate a grade appropriate command of the conventions of Standard English grammar, usage, capitalization, punctuation and spelling.

1.5 Speaking and Listening: Students present appropriately in formal speaking situations, listen critically, and respond intelligently as individuals or in a group discussion.

CC.1.5.2.A: Participate in collaborative conversations with peers and adults in small and large groups.

CC.1.5.2.B: Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or Information presented orally or through other media.