

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Master Puppeteer by Katherine Paterson

Book Information

Katherine Paterson, The Master Puppeteer

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Interest Level: MG

Set in feudal Japan, this is the story of a young boy who is drawn into the magical and mysterious world of the puppet-theater.

Award: National Book Award/ Honors; NCTE
Notable Children's Books in the Language
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Topics: Countries/Regions, Japan; Recommended
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Main Characters

Hanji Jiro's father who is a puppet maker and turns out to be one of Saburo's men

Isako Jiro's angry and bitter mother, who later becomes involved with the street rovers

Jiro the young son of a poor puppet maker

Kinshi the kind young son of a strict master puppeteer

Minoru, Teiji, and Wada young boys who are fellow apprentices at the Hanaza

Okada a blind former puppeteer who has become a chief reciter at the Hanaza

Saburo the anonymous thief who raids rice merchants and gives to the poor

Yoshida the strict master puppeteer and owner of the Hanaza, the puppet theater

Vocabulary

brigand a robber

daimyo the Japanese police force

ignominy a dishonorable action

ingratiate to manipulate others in order to gain favors

obsequious overly attentive or humble to a superior

samurai a Japanese aristocratic warrior

Synopsis

Jiro is a young boy living in desperate times. The people of the country are starving, and there appears to be no help in sight. People are so desperate they take to stealing from others. Jiro even hears of an infamous thief, Saburo, who seems very adept at stealing from the rice merchants. Saburo's identity is secret since he and his cohorts commit their crimes in disguise. Jiro's parents are slightly better off than other citizens because they make puppets for the local puppeteer, Yoshida. However, when Yoshida stops ordering puppets, Jiro's parents are not able to afford enough food for the entire family. Jiro decides he must go to Yoshida to be an apprentice in the theater. Jiro believes this will help his parents since they will not have to feed him, he can eventually earn money to send to them, and he will not be around to irritate them continually.

After working as a lowly apprentice in Yoshida's puppet theater, Jiro begins to understand the ways of the theater. He finds one good friend, Kinshi, a senior apprentice who often suffers the wrath of his father, Yoshida, yet remains kind-hearted and helpful to others. Jiro appreciates Kinshi's help in learning the scripts of the plays, but he is uncomfortable that Kinshi is risking punishment by stealing the scripts. One day Jiro decides he himself will steal the script, and he goes to Yoshida's house. While at Yoshida's he notices some unusual baskets. This attracts Jiro's curiosity because the baskets are usually only worn by priests and are like ones Saburo and his accomplices wore to disguise themselves during a rice theft. This realization causes Jiro to wonder about Yoshida's connection to Saburo.

Jiro gradually gains more experience at the theater and becomes more skilled at different roles. Eventually he is chosen for the difficult role of foot operator for a female puppet. Jiro performs his duties well and is proud of himself, but he has little

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free time to enjoy himself. A note arrives at the theater from Saburo announcing that the theater is to perform for him and as many poor people of the area who can fit in the theater. The police object and worry that the large number of people could cause trouble. Jiro overhears Yoshida's dealings with the police over the matter and feels Yoshida is putting on some sort of odd act for the police. Nevertheless, the performance takes place, and Jiro is surprised to see his mother in the audience. The performance is completed without trouble, but after the performance the lights are blown out and the people are asked to leave in an orderly fashion. After they leave the lights are raised again, revealing the police tied up and undressed in the middle of the room. The police then order that the play, which is about a renegade samurai thief, never be performed again.

Outside the theater tensions rise among the poor and starving. Jiro has learned that his mother is part of a band of night rovers. Kinshi mysteriously begins disappearing at night and Jiro suspects he is going out to help the rovers. On one occasion Kinshi does not return early enough, and Yoshida orders Jiro to take his place in a play. In an attempt to prepare himself quickly, Jiro enters the old puppet storehouse. While practicing, he discovers the fancy police sword and immediately suspects that Yoshida might be Saburo. Fearful for his mother and Kinshi, Jiro tries to persuade Kinshi not to go out at night again until he can arrange a meeting between him and Saburo. Jiro boldly goes to Okada, a blind chanter who has helped Jiro before, and asks for his help with the situation. Okada agrees to help but actually sets Jiro up to be caught in the storehouse. It is here in the dark that Jiro realizes Okada is Saburo. Frightened but quick-thinking, Jiro escapes. He then heads out to find Kinshi and his mother.

Once outside Jiro finds himself in the midst of a major riot. The night rovers have set the merchant district on fire. Frantically searching for Kinshi and his mother, Jiro encounters his father, Hanji. His father was supposed to be ill and living in the country with relatives but is actually one of Saburo's men. Jiro manages to get away from his father by promising to return to Okada once he finds who he

is looking for. Hanji gives Jiro a fireman's outfit to wear, saying it will protect him from authorities but Jiro quickly finds that it endangers him with the night rovers. Jiro wisely takes off the uniform, walks to the police station, puts the suit back on and pretends to be a fireman. Believing he is a fireman, the police release his mother and friend as a reward for his hard work. In a twist of circumstances though, Jiro is caught in a situation in which he must deliver a message to the fire chief. With a police escort, he heads for the fire station but escapes the situation just before a crowd attacks him. He catches up with Kinshi and his mother, only to find Kinshi's hand has been cut off by police who thought he was a thief.

The three return to the theater. Jiro faces Okada and Yoshida. Jiro pledges his loyalty to Kinshi and insinuates he will not reveal Saburo's identity, but only because he wishes to protect Kinshi's life. In the end Jiro is promoted to work under Yoshida, and Kinshi is assigned to work under Okada.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

In a fit of anger for Yoshida, Isako once cursed him saying, "May he spend eternity as a foot manipulator for the devil!" Why was this an awful curse to make against a person?

The job of foot operator is considered one of the most difficult jobs in the theater. The person in that position must crouch uncomfortably under the other operators and yet move smoothly in time with them. Being the foot operator for the devil would be even more terrible since one would have to be in hell to do it, the devil would be difficult to please, and the job would last eternally.

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Literary Analysis

Jiro's mother thinks Jiro is being selfish when he decides to run away to the Hanaza. Do you think it is selfish of Jiro to leave his starving parents behind and move to the Hanaza?

Some might believe Jiro is selfish since his parents need his help to make the puppets and because he owes them service for having raised him. Others might argue that he is not being selfish since he knows his parents cannot support him, and this is one way he can make money to support them. They might also argue that it is the role of the parents to care for the child, not the other way around.

Inferential Comprehension

How is Saburo like Robin Hood?

Both reportedly steal from the rich and give to the poor. Both elude authorities and sometimes harm others to succeed in the mission.

Constructing Meaning

In the beginning of the book, the author mentions that many people blame someone else for the troubles caused by the extended famine. Who do you feel is most at fault for the problems in Osaka? Why?

Some could say Saburo is most at fault because he deals with the problems by breaking the law rather than working with the authorities. The authorities could be to blame since they do not punish the rice merchants for overcharging for the rice. The rice merchants can be blamed since they have not shown compassion for the people by sharing or lowering the price of their rice. Some people might blame the citizens of Osaka for not finding positive ways to improve their situations.

traditions, and history. Have them reflect on what they learned and how the author made use of that information in her story.

Recognizing Details Operating the type of puppets that are used in this story is more difficult than many may assume. Have the students construct and operate puppets for a play of their choice. Have the students attempt to perform the play as if it were for Yoshida and he is directing them according to his standards. Some of the areas they need to practice include developing body steadiness, understanding emotion, and the importance of blending into the scenery.

Understanding Sequence The story *The Master Puppeteer* involves a great deal of action and many intertwined events. Comprehending the sequence of the events is crucial in understanding the story as a whole. Have the students construct a timeline of the story's events. Then discuss with them how changes in this sequence would have affected the outcome or plot.

Responding to Literature Saburo is said to have led a band of robbers around Osaka stealing from the rich rice merchants of the city. It is also said that he gives what he steals to the poor of Osaka. Have the students debate whether they believe Saburo shares with the poor the rice that he steals and whether he is right or wrong to steal it in the first place.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Japanese society is based on traditions and concepts that many Americans or Westerners are not familiar with. To better understand the story, have the students research Japanese culture, practices,