

Literature Circle Guide to BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA by Katherine Paterson

Book Summary

When Jess Aarons first meets Leslie Burke, he doesn't imagine that they could ever be friends. For one, Jess is already surrounded by females – his four sisters – and doesn't need any more girls in his life. Also, Jess's main ambition is to be the fastest runner in the fifth grade, and he is shocked when Leslie outruns him on the first day of school. But to his own surprise, Jess becomes best friends with Leslie, and together they imagine a magical kingdom in the woods called Terabithia. In Terabithia, imagination rules, and Jess and Leslie are king and queen of the land they have created. Then one morning, Leslie dies in a tragic accident while she is attempting to swing over the rain-engorged gully to enter Terabithia. Jess must accept the loss of his friend and recognize the courage, hope, and freedom that his friendship with Leslie had offered him.

Author Information

Katherine Paterson was born in China to missionary parents, and she moved eighteen times before she was eighteen years old. As a child, Paterson wanted to grow up to become either a movie star or a missionary to China. After college, Paterson spent a year teaching in a rural school in northern Virginia where her students later became the inspiration for the characters in *Bridge to Terabithia*. In preparation for her career as an overseas missionary, Paterson went to graduate school to study Bible and Christian education, and then in 1957 she traveled to Japan as a missionary, since China was closed to Americans. She spent four years in Japan and grew to love that country, intending to spend the rest of her life there. But when she returned to the United States for a year of study in New York, she met and fell in love with a Presbyterian pastor who became her husband. Paterson began her writing career by writing church curriculum for fifth and sixth graders. After deciding that she really wanted to write fiction, she took a night class in creative writing, and the product of that class became her first novel. Katherine Paterson has four grown children, and lives with her husband in Barre, Vermont. Her books have won numerous awards, including two Newbery Medals and one Newbery Honor.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Why has Jess gotten up early every morning during the summer?**Jess has gotten up early to run all summer long, hoping to be the fastest runner in the fifth grade when school starts in the fall (p. 2).**
2. What is Jess's favorite teacher Miss Edmunds like? How is she different from the other teachers at Lark Creek Elementary?
Miss Edmunds is Jess's music teacher and the only person in his life who encourages his drawing. To Jess's mom, she seems to be a "kinda hippie," because of her long hair and jeans (p. 13). She is different from the other teachers in that she is young and encourages the students to express themselves.

3. Why does Jess keep his drawing supplies hidden under his mattress? And why doesn't he dare show his drawings to his father?

Jess hides his drawing supplies because his father does not approve of his drawing. When Jess announced that he wanted to be an artist when he grows up, his father was disgusted with the idea (p. 12). Jess strongly desires to please rather than disappoint his father, and this is what motivates him to try to become the fastest runner in his class.

4. In the beginning of the story, why doesn't Jess have any friends? Why does he try to avoid Leslie when she first tries to be friendly with him?

At school, Jess has trouble being accepted by other children; he's considered to be "that crazy little kid that draws all the time" (p. 4). He is used to being marginalized by his peers, so he has given up putting effort into friendship. He first avoids Leslie because she is a girl, and he feels like he is already surrounded by girls, with four sisters. Also, Leslie is different from the other children, and since Jess is himself regarded as "different," he doesn't want to be associated with her.

5. During the first week of school, Jess begins to change his mind about getting to know Leslie. Why do you think he changes his mind?

Jess sees how Leslie is different from the other girls in his class, how she doesn't fit in easily, and how other students pick on her. He begins to feel a connection with her, because he has also had trouble being accepted by classmates. He feels sympathy when he witnesses Wanda Kay picking on Leslie (pp. 35-6). He is also intrigued by Leslie since her past is so different from his own – her experience in the large, suburban school and her wealthy parents with their innovative ideas.

6. A couple of months later, Jess comes to feel that "Leslie was more than his friend. She was his other, more exciting self—his way to Terabithia and all the worlds beyond" (p. 46). In your own words, what does this mean?

Leslie has offered Jess a new way to see the world. She is brave and imaginative, and her life experience has been much broader than Jess's. Through knowing Leslie, Jess has come in contact both with the world of imagination and with the larger world outside the rural Virginia community where they live.

7. Why do you think kids often make fun of others who are different? Do the students at your school have the same tendency as the students in Jess and Leslie's school?

Students will probably recognize that they and their classmates do have to some extent the same unkind tendencies as the students in Jess's school have. They will give different reasons for the problem of judging or mocking others, which may include ignorance, pride, misunderstanding, or even jealousy.

8. Imagine that Leslie was a student in your class. How do you think you would respond to her? Would you want to be her friend? Do you think she would be accepted by your classmates? Explain.

Students' answers to this question will vary. Many students will suggest that Leslie would fare better in their own school than she did at Lark Creek Elementary, where

the students seem especially small-minded. Students will recognize that Leslie has many qualities of a good friend: She is loyal, thoughtful, and generous.

9. How is Jess's father different from Leslie's father? Create a pair of columns to compare their personalities, lifestyles, and relationships with their children.

Mr. Aarons works long hours for little pay, loses his job, discourages his son from artistic endeavors, does not spend much time with his family because he has to work so much, does not show emotion, and does not communicate well with his son. Mr. Burke works as a writer and works when he wants to, is wealthy, provides his daughter with many opportunities and choices, is always available for his daughter since he works at home, treats his daughter as an equal, and spends a lot of time talking with his daughter.

10. Leslie says to Jess, "We need a place. . . just for us. . . It might be a whole secret country, and you and I would be the leaders of it" (p. 39). In your own words, what does Terabithia represent to Jess and Lisa? Why is it so important to them?

Terabithia is a place where Leslie and Jess can escape from the difficulties of their lives and use their imaginations. Both children feel like outsiders much of the time: Leslie is new at school and has a background that seems foreign to her fellow classmates, and Jess feels out of place in his own family and at school. Jess and Leslie feel out of control of most aspects of their lives, but Terabithia is the one place where they are sovereign.

11. At the end of the story, Jess uses wood planks to build a solid bridge to Terabithia. Why do you think he does this? Why does he decide to share Terabithia with May Belle? What does this show us about how he is changing?

Jess has decided that the gift of imagination, which Leslie shared with him, deserves to be shared with others in his life. After her death, he feels overwhelmed with the power of the gift: "It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him in beauty and strength" (p. 126). Sharing Terabithia with his sister is the first step toward this, showing that Jess is beginning to face the world with less fear and more courage.

12. After he learns that May Belle has discovered Terabithia, Jess feels that "his life was delicate as a dandelion. One little puff from any direction, and it was blown to bits." How does this simile help us understand Jess, his life, and his feelings about Terabithia? **The land of Terabithia and his friendship with Leslie gives Jess a feeling of security that he has never experienced before. Terabithia is the one place Jess feels truly comfortable and free to be himself, and Leslie's imagination inspires Jess to have hope for his future. Before Leslie, Jess felt only loneliness and rejection, trapped in a family that didn't understand him and going to a school where he didn't belong.**

13. When Jess is overwhelmed with his feelings after Leslie's death, who helps him cope with his loss? How do each of these characters try to help him? Do you think any of them do help Jess cope with Leslie's death?

Leslie's father tries to let Jess know how much he meant to Leslie. Jess's mother shows him sympathy in her own way, by making pancakes for him and guarding him from Brenda's ugly comments. Jess's father is kinder than ever before to his son, doing his son's chores without complaint and speaking gently to his son. When Jess is overcome with grief and runs away, his father chases after him, holds his son on his lap and speaks to him comfortingly. It is his father's surprising gentleness – so different from his typical behavior—that is most comforting to Jess.

14. In the past, some people have suggested that this book is inappropriate for children because it describes death, a topic that some children might not be able to handle. In your opinion, is *Bridge to Terabithia* an appropriate book for kids your age? How might reading about Jess's loss help students who have to face their own losses someday? **Many students may struggle with the sad ending of this story, and this question helps students explore the topic of death in this book. Students may suggest that those who have lost a loved one will relate to Jess's experience, and students who haven't will better understand what grief is like. Students may also focus on the ways that Leslie's life continues to affect Jess even after her death.**

15. What do you like most about Jess and Leslie's friendship? Does their friendship seem realistic to you? What can we learn from this book about friendship? **One of the most remarkable aspects of Jess and Leslie's friendship is that in spite of their differences in background, the two are able to accept each other unconditionally and form a strong friendship. In part, their "outsider" status draws them together, showing how individuals with great differences can be close friends.**

Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-11; Synthesis: 12-13; Evaluation: 14-15.

Activities

1. Jess struggles with many fears, especially his fear of swinging over the rain-engorged gully to Terabithia. Write about a time when you had to overcome a fear. What were you afraid of, and how did you face your fear? Did you use any of the same coping mechanisms as Jess? When is it important to overcome your fear, and what is the best way to accomplish this?

Students will have many responses to this question, but most will relate to Jess's fears and efforts to avoid his fears. Jess is deeply afraid of swinging over the eight-foot-wide rushing stream after the spring rains, and he is even more afraid of admitting this fear to Leslie, who seems to fear nothing. When Miss Edmunds asks him to accompany her to the Smithsonian, he is thrilled, in part because he will be able to avoid having to explain his fear of the gully to Leslie. Later, Jess overcomes his fear of the flooding gully when he must rescue May Belle, who has followed him to Terabithia.

2. Imagine that after some time has passed, Jess has decided to write a letter to the Burkes to let them know what their daughter meant to him and how his life has changed since he first met her. What would he say to them? How would he describe his friendship with Leslie and her effect on his life? Write a letter from Jess to the Burkes, imagining how Jess would describe his friendship with Leslie.

After Leslie's death, Jess realized more than ever what she brought to his life. He decided that "It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him in vision and strength" (p. 126). In writing a letter to the Burkes from Jess, students can imagine how Leslie's vision and courage shaped Jess's life, and how he does "pay back to the world" what she taught him.

3. What does Terabithia look like? Reread the descriptions in the novel and draw a color map of Terabithia based on details from the novel. Be sure to include its main features such as the entrance, the castle, and the pine forest.

This assignment gives students the opportunity to reread Paterson's rich descriptions and then re-create the land of Terabithia in a visual way. Students might be encouraged to label the map features using Jess's and Leslie's own words from the novel.

Author's Web Site: www.terabithia.com

Other Novels by This Author:

Come Sing, Jimmy Jo, Puffin, 1995

Flip-Flop Girl, Puffin 1996

The Great Gilly Hopkins, HarperTrophy, 1987

Jacob Have I Loved, HarperTrophy, 1990

Jip, His Story, Puffin, 1998

Lyddie, Puffin 1994

The Master Puppeteer, HarperTrophy, 1989

Of Nightingales That Weep, HarperTrophy, 1989

Park's Quest, Puffin, 1989

Preacher's Boy, Puffin, 1995

The Same Stuff as Stars, Clarion, 2002

The Sign of the Chrysanthemum, HarperTrophy, 1988

