
TAR BEACH

Author: Faith Ringgold

Publisher: Crown

THEME:

We all have or need a special place where we can think or fantasize and our daydreams can come true.

PROGRAM SUMMARY:

A young girl dreams of flying above her Harlem home, claiming all she sees for herself and her family.

Everyone has a need for a special place where they can think and daydream. LeVar takes viewers up on the roof to a “tar beach,” an urban oasis in the sky. A pigeon keeper and a rooftop gardener are interviewed and explain why they have chosen their respective hobbies. LeVar tells about the George Washington Bridge that was constructed in 1928. Viewers are taken to new heights as present day bridge workers explain their jobs.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

Discuss with students what the “tar beach” represents to the people in the story.

Invite students to tell about their own special places—where is it, who shares it with them, what does it look like, under what circumstances do they visit it, what do they do there, etc.?

Discuss the many ways that the people in the video used their tar beaches. Encourage students to be imaginative and think of other ways to use a tar beach.

There is a reference in the story to the exclusion of Cassie’s father from a union because of his ethnic background. Discuss the concept of “prejudice” with the students. Have them recall examples of prejudicial treatment of people from history and in present day. Discuss ways that we have overcome prejudice in the past and how we might continue to do so in the present and future.

Having a “tar beach” is a large city phenomenon. Compare and contrast the functions of such a space in a smaller city or town and in a rural area. Extend the discussion to other differences between city and country life.

CURRICULUM EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

Obtain a copy of the book and have students examine the photograph at the end of Faith Ringgold’s story quilt, “Tar Beach,” that is displayed in the Gug-

enheim Museum in New York City. Discuss details they notice about color, shape, and pattern in the quilt. Have them note the panels in which Ringgold wrote the story. Compare this quilt to other quilts with which they are familiar.

Have students (or parents) bring in some quilts. Invite students to share any stories that go along with the quilts themselves or the pieces of fabric used to make the quilts. Discuss the difference among applique, embroidered, and patchwork quilts. Notice color, shape, and symmetrical patterns. (If sufficient actual quilts are not available, pictures of quilts, such as those found in quilt calendars and books, are useful for showing an enormous variety of quilt patterns.) Invite a quiltmaker into the classroom to explain how a quilt is constructed and to demonstrate the stitching of a quilt.

Have the class make a story quilt, using either paper squares or cloth and fabric crayons. This can be done in different ways: an original story generated by the class, a published story that is a class favorite, or a composite of favorite stories. For the original story and the class favorite, students will need to decide which scenes will be depicted on the quilt and how they will be arranged (number of rows, number of squares in a row, etc.). For the composite quilt, they will need to choose a favorite story, think of what they will illustrate to represent it, and collectively decide on an arrangement of squares. For all types, they will need to choose a background paper or fabric for the border. Solicit adult volunteers to assist with assembling a fabric quilt.

Explain to students that flying away is a symbol of freedom from slavery that is often found in traditional African American literature. Locate other stories that make use of this symbol to read to the students. For each story, discuss the importance of freedom to the characters and how it was attained. Virginia Hamilton’s collection of stories, *The People Could Fly*, contains many good examples.

Have students locate New York state and New York City on a map of the United States. Then using a map of New York City (usually an insert on a map of the state), have them locate the George Washington Bridge (which connects New York and New Jersey).

When the George Washington Bridge opened in 1931 (have students figure how long ago that was), it was the longest suspension bridge in the world. Have students research basic information about the bridge: how long is it, how was it built, how much traffic does it carry, when was it expanded to include a second deck, etc.? Discuss suspension bridges students might have in their own area. Have them find out similar facts about those bridges.

In *Tar Beach*, Cassie describes all the places she flies over. Invite students to imagine they can fly. Where would they fly and why would they choose that place? Discuss the concept of “bird’s-eye view” and how it differs from other



perspectives. Have students draw a picture of a place they would fly over, using a bird's-eye view as their vantage point.

Have students design a space that would be a "tar beach" for their family. This place should have something special in it for everyone in the family. Have them sketch the space and label its features.

As a class, look at other books by Faith Ringgold and discuss her unique style of art. *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* tells of another flight for Cassie Louise Lightfoot, during which she meets Harriet Tubman. *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* is also based on one of Ringgold's story quilts, "The Dinner Quilt." *Bonjour, Lonnie* features a character from this book and quilt as well.

RELATED THEMES:

city life
fabric art
bridge construction

RELATED READING RAINBOW PROGRAMS:

Program #22 — The Patchwork Quilt
Program #96 — Follow The Drinking Gourd
Program #93 — Mrs. Katz And Tush

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

As a child growing up in Harlem, Faith Ringgold was enchanted by the lights of the George Washington Bridge. She was also an artist and studied art in school. During the years that she taught art, she explored her African American heritage and became interested in using fabric to create art. *Tar Beach* is based on a story quilt of the same name, one of five quilts in the "Woman on a Bridge Series." Ringgold is the recipient of a Caldecott Honor Book Award and a Coretta Scott King Award for Illustration, both for *Tar Beach*. She now lives in Englewood, New Jersey, across the George Washington Bridge from Harlem.

BOOKS REVIEWED BY CHILDREN:

I'M FLYING!
by Alan Wade, illus. by Petra Mathers (Random House)

ON GRANDMA'S ROOF
by Erica Silverman, illus. by Deborah Kogan Ray (Simon & Schuster)

TO SLEEP
by James Sage, illus. by Warwick Hutton (Simon & Schuster)

SUPPLEMENTARY BOOKLIST:

YOUR OWN BEST SECRET PLACE
by Byrd Baylor, illus. by Peter Parnall (Scribner)

ABUELA
by Arthur Dorros, illus. by Elisa Kleven (Dutton)

ISLA
by Arthur Dorros, illus. by Elisa Kleven (Dutton)

THE PEOPLE COULD FLY: AMERICAN BLACK FOLKTALES
by Virginia Hamilton, illus. by Leo and Diane Dillon (Alfred A. Knopf)

EVAN'S CORNER
by Elizabeth Starr Hill (Henry Holt)

SWEET CLARA AND THE FREEDOM QUILT
by Deborah Hopkinson, illus. by James Ransome (Knopf)

STITCHING STARS: THE STORY QUILTS OF HARRIET POWERS
by Mary E. Lyons (Scribners)

AUNT HARRIET'S UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN THE SKY
by Faith Ringgold ((Crown)

DINNER AT AUNT CONNIE'S HOUSE
by Faith Ringgold (Hyperion)

BONJOUR, LONNIE
by Faith Ringold (Hyperion)

FAITH RINGGOLD
by Robyn Montana Turner (Little, Brown)

