

Classroom Guide for **KEEPERS**

by **Jeri Hanel Watts**
illustrated by
Felicia Marshall

Reading Level

Interest Level: Grades 1-4

Reading Level: Grades 2-3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.0/.5

Lexile Measure®: 580 AD

Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 4.80

Themes

Family Traditions, Sharing/Giving, Sports, African Americans, Intergenerational Relationships, Sports

Synopsis

Kenyon loves listening to the stories told by his grandmother, Little Dolly. Kenyon's other passion is baseball, which sometimes conflicts with his homework. When Little Dolly mentions the Keeper, the one who holds onto the stories and legends of a family, Kenyon offers to take on this role for his family. However, Little Dolly says the Keeper must be a girl. "That's nice," Little Dolly says about Kenyon's offer, "but you a boy. I got to find me a girl Keeper. You cain't be a Keeper if you a boy."

In anticipation of Little Dolly's ninetieth birthday, Kenyon takes the neighborhood-chores money he has saved out of its box and walks through town looking for the perfect gift. He visits all the shops on Main Street, talking with the shopkeepers about ideas for a present for Little Dolly. But before he can decide on a gift, Kenyon sees a baseball glove on sale and impulsively spends his money on that. When Kenyon realizes what he has done, he is filled with remorse. How can he blame Little Dolly for not trusting him with the family stories when he can't even be trusted with his own money? Kenyon tells his father what he has done and asks for advice. "[You can try to] do better the next time," his father says. Finally, Kenyon thinks of a gift he can give Little Dolly. After a surprise party attended by people from all over town—all the friends Little Dolly has made during her many years living there—Little Dolly opens Kenyon's gift. It is a handmade book filled with her stories. Little Dolly is greatly touched and realizes that "a Keeper don't have to be a girl." It can also be a boy.

Background

People of all cultures have storytelling traditions that preserve the history of individuals, families, communities, and larger groups in which they are involved. These stories are often

passed down orally from one generation to the next. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in recording these stories in the form of oral histories. An oral history consists of stories and information obtained in interviews with people who have firsthand knowledge of an event or occurrence. It is the story of past events as remembered by the people who actually saw, experienced, or participated in the events.

As a teacher, the author tries to interest her students in the value of heritage and in writing down family stories that reflect their heritage. She also feels that certain people are viewed as good candidates for the role of telling and “keeping” stories because they are interested in what is being told, rather than because they are male or female, old or young.

Reviews & Comments

"Watts debut is an exceptionally tender crafting of an intergenerational bond. Kenyon's 90-year old grandmother, Little Dolly, is stern about homework but tells wonderful stories; she is the family 'Keeper' who 'holds onto the past until she can pass it on to the next.'... earns Little Dolly's trust by making her a book of all the stories she has told him over the years. This warmly peopled story is a "keeper."—*Publishers Weekly*

"The book's theme of the loving, giving, and sharing between grandparent and child is universal. A warm, touching story."—*School Library Journal*

"A salute to storytelling."—*The News Gazette (VA)*

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before reading the book, you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. What are some things you think are special enough to keep? Why?
2. What are some things about traditions or heritage you have learned from your family?
3. Have you ever saved money to buy something you really wanted? What was it? Did you get it? What happened?
4. Have you ever done something you later regretted? What was it? How did you resolve what happened?
5. What do you think makes a person a good storyteller? Why?

Teacher Tip

Keepers is an ideal book to use in anticipation for and when celebrating Grandparents Day. Traditionally, Grandparent's Day is observed on the first Sunday in September following Labor Day. Its purpose—"to honor grandparents . . . and to help children become aware of the strength, information, and guidance older people can offer"—reflects the theme of *Keepers*. This book is also ideal to use during Women's History Month (March) to inform students about the unique role a grandmother plays in passing on family history and traditions.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Display the book and discuss the front cover illustration with students. Prompt discussion by asking questions such as: What is the boy doing? Where is he? What do the boy's eyes say about him? Would you like to know this boy? Why ?

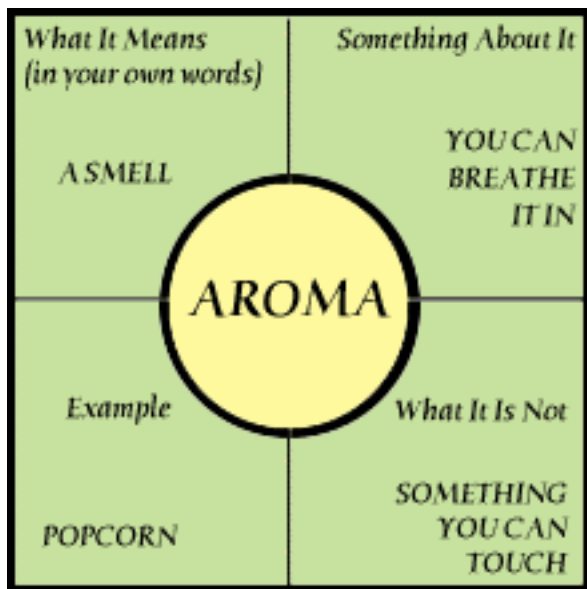
Invite students to tell what they think the title means. How might the title relate to the boy in the picture? List students' ideas on chart paper and plan to revisit it after students have read the book.

Vocabulary

To help students develop and reinforce vocabulary, select a few words from the book to focus on each day. Use the words listed below or choose others which may be more appropriate for your students.

Discuss the words and then present students with a graphic organizer similar to the one shown here. Model how to complete the organizer using the words in capital letters. Note that this organizer requires students to choose a word for the circle in the center and then really think about what the word means and how it is used. Encourage students to share and discuss their completed organizers.

interrupt(ed) knuckle antique grounder
taunt(ed) cemetery aroma stroll(ed)



READING AND RESPONDING

Discussion Questions

After reading the book, use these questions to generate discussion and expand students' understanding of the text. Encourage students to refer back to the text to support their responses.

1. What are Kenyon and Little Dolly doing at the beginning of the story and at the end? How have their views about family stories changed during the story?
2. How do you know that Kenyon cares for his grandmother? How do you know how she feels about him? Find parts of the story that support your ideas.
3. What does Little Dolly mean when she says, "A good storyteller can make you care [about something] with how she weaves the tale"?
4. Why does Little Dolly think that Keepers have to be girls? What makes her change her mind?
5. Why does everyone in town know about Little Dolly's birthday?
6. What is it that Kenyon does and wishes he could take back? Why did he do this in the first place?
7. Why doesn't Kenyon tell his father exactly what he has done?
8. What is his father's advice? How does Kenyon put it to use?
9. How does Kenyon's gift change Little Dolly's mind about Keepers?
10. What do you think a wallop-bat day is?

Literature Circles*

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing the roles of group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Question section of this guide to help students explore the story.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for phrases in the book that relate to being a Keeper.
- The **Illustrator** might draw pictures to show how Kenyon or Little Dolly are feeling at different points in the story.
- The **Connector** might find other books in which family stories or legends are important or in which grandparents are honored.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might find information about griots—storytellers in western Africa who perpetuate the oral tradition and history of a family or village.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Two such books you may wish to refer to are: *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 1994) and *Literature Circles Resource Guide* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

Help students personalize what they have read by encouraging them to respond to one or more of the following. Students may respond in sketchbooks, journals, or oral discussion.

1. Would you want Kenyon to be your friend? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever known someone like Mo Davis? How did you deal with him or her?
3. Do members of your family tell stories? Do you like them? Why? How can you help “keep” them?
4. Little Dolly in this story has a special role in her family. What special roles do your grandparents have in your family? What special things do they do that no one else does?
5. Little Dolly hides her birthday chocolates so she doesn't have to share them with anyone. How do you feel about this? Have you ever done anything similar? How did it make you feel? How did other people around you respond?
6. What in this book was surprising to you? Why?

Other Writing Activities

Ask students to respond to one or more of the following writing activities.

1. In the book, Kenyon has two “wallop-bat” days. Have students write about a wallop-bat day that they have had. What happened? Why? How did they feel?
2. Have students make a character map for Kenyon and include words that tell how he acts, thinks, feels, and solves problems. Then ask students to use their map to write a description of him.
3. Kenyon doesn't know why his grandmother is called Little Dolly. Invite students to write an explanation of how she got this name.
4. Point out that the author has chosen to write the words spoken by Little Dolly in a dialect. Ask students to try and rewrite this dialogue in a more standard way, adding the missing pronouns and verbs.
5. Tell students to pretend they are going to interview the author of *Keepers*. Have students write a list of five questions about the book they would like to ask her.
6. Remind students that someday Kenyon will become the Keeper of his family's stories. Ask students to write a story he might tell. It could be based on events in the book or be about baseball or about the community. Tell students to be ready to explain why they think Kenyon might tell this story.

ESL Teaching Strategies

The following activities may be used with students who speak English as a second language.

1. Model how to use the illustrations to gain meaning from the text. Read aloud a page and comment on how the illustrations support the words.

2. Pair strong English speakers with ESL students. Have the pairs take turns reading aloud to one another, stopping at intervals to talk about what they have just read.
3. Work with ESL students to read aloud sections of the story together to develop fluency.
4. Have English speakers read aloud and act out phrases from the story such as “Kenyon’s quiet, easy glide” or “he clenched his fists tightly.” Then invite ESL students to read and act out these phrases as well.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

To help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas, introduce some of the following activities.

Social Studies

1. Over a period of several weeks, have students work in small groups to carry out an oral history project. Remind them that an oral history is the spoken story or memories of past events that happen to a person or group of people. The story is recorded so people in the future will know what happened and how the people involved felt.

Have each group choose an adult they would like to interview and contact the person to set up a time for the interview. (You may wish to encourage students to contact older adults rather than contemporaries to help them gain an understanding of the knowledge and wonderful stories older adults have to share.) Then have each group develop a list of questions to ask the interviewee. Students may start by asking the person’s date and place of birth and what it was like where and when the person grew up, and then go on to ask about special stories or events the person would like to have recorded. Students may record the answers on paper or a tape recorder.

If a tape recorder is used, have students transcribe the responses onto paper. Students may then combine all their oral histories into a class book, complete with illustrated cover. (See Art activity below.)

2. Use Kenyon’s interest in baseball as a springboard for students to do Internet research on the history of baseball. Interested students might want to narrow their topic to the story of African Americans or Latinos in baseball over a specified period of time.

3. An important part of the story in *KEEPERS* is the small town setting of Lexington. Have students review the text and the illustrations to learn more about this community. Then have a discussion comparing Kenyon’s town to your local community. Encourage students to think about size, safety issues, kinds of stores, neighborliness, and other issues as they make their comparisons.

Art

Remind students that Kenyon learns how to make a handmade book in school. Then invite students to “take a leaf from Kenyon’s page” and make their own books to tell a family story or to create a class book of their oral histories (see first Social Studies activity above). Students might make simple shape books, mini-books, accordion folded books, origami books, window books, flap books, or books with pop-up pages. Have students plan the pages of their books and choose and gather their materials before they begin.

Mathematics

Use Kenyon's interest in baseball to launch a math activity involving baseball statistics. Have students begin with something specific, such as labeling a diagram showing the dimensions of a softball field or a professional baseball field. Students can also collect and compare statistics involving professional baseball teams and individual players.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

Jeri Hanel Watts is a reading specialist who teaches elementary reading in Lexington, Virginia. *Keepers* is her first picture book, and she was inspired to write it after her students observed that there were more stories written about African American girls than African American boys. She also felt the theme of this story would excite her students into wanting to write more of their own stories.

Watts gets her ideas for stories "from things that have happened in my life, from newspaper articles, from I-don't-know-where sometimes." She says that her stories always begin with a character because she likes people. Watts adds that although she is the Keeper in her own family, her husband considers her a poor one because she doesn't tell the stories the way he remembers them. However, says Watts, "I think I'm right . . . and mine are funnier, too!"

Watts was born in Lynchburg, Virginia. She and her husband and two daughters live in Lexington with their pet Labrador, Nimbus.

Felicia Marshall is a fine artist and art teacher who has illustrated several books for children, including *Molasses Man*, published by Holiday House. She is also a contributing artist to Lee & Low's *America: My Land, Your Land, Our Land*, now also available as a bilingual board book. What intrigued Marshall most about *Keepers* was the fact that the story closely related to her own experiences growing up in the South, and she used her grandmother's house as the setting for her illustrations. Marshall received her degree in fine arts from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. A native Texan, Marshall currently lives in Houston.

Resources on the Web

For reviews, awards and related web links for *Keepers* visit:
<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/keepers.html>

Learn more about *America: My Land, Your Land, Our Land* at:
<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/amer.html>

View other **Active Reader Classroom Guides** at: <http://www.leeandlow.com/teachers>

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