Literature Guide For:

My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother
Written and Illustrated by Patricia Polacco

Sarah Schrader
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Rationale

This Literature Guide is built around the book, *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother*, and is intended to be the first story of an ongoing author study of Patricia Polacco for 3rd graders. Many of Polacco’s books are based on childhood experiences of her Ukrainian descent, spending time with her ‘Babushka’ on her farm in Michigan and her struggles in school. The recurrent settings and relatable plots lend themselves to poignant investigations appropriate for the 3rd grade curriculum. Furthermore, the humor, fairness issues and competitive motifs in *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* speak to the particular interests and relevant social/emotional experiences of 8 and 9 year olds in a 3rd grade classroom.

The notion of competitiveness between Patricia and her big brother in *My Rotten Redheaded Brother* is a tension that 3rd graders can relate to. Nine year olds carry an anxious, competitive edge that this story addresses by providing a humorous, fun, light-hearted angle that may help relax that anxiety (Wood, 113). Also important to children at this age is a holding culture not too far from home. In *Beyond Ecophobia*, David Sobel (1996) honors the formative years of bonding with the earth between the ages of 4-11, where home and close to home are the focal points in their world (p. 14 & 15). The home and back-yard garden setting of *My Rotten Redheaded Brother* makes for a good kick-off book for this series because it is not too far from home but introduces just enough of the Ukrainian culture that subsequent books in this study can build upon and challenge children to reach further away.

In *Yardsticks*, Chip Wood (2007) acknowledges the interest that 8 and 9 year olds are beginning to take in ‘far away’ places and cultures beyond their own (p. 105 & 115). The elements of Ukrainian culture infused in these stories will naturally prompt a more in-depth cultural study. Polacco’s absolutely striking illustrations evoke an element of mood and invite a deeper exploration of the artistic representation of themes. Patricia Polacco’s dynamic pencil and watercolor illustrations, twirling with movement and interlaced with authentic passion and warmth impart timeless teachings of challenges, empathy and deep kindness and have dazzled me from when I was a child to this very day. Children and teacher alike can join in the vivid and wholehearted stories of Patricia Polacco while they experience rich cultural tradition, real human obstacles, fun-loving, bare-footed play, and the sincere love for family and friends.

*My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* is a good match for the literacy skills that 8 and 9 year olds are expected to learn in third grade according to the Common Core State Standards in the following ways:
- The rich aspects of the illustrations invite explanations of what they contribute to the story (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.7).

- The duality of the author and the narrator being one in the same, Patricia Pollaco as her childhood self, offers an interesting point of view that students can distinguish from their own or the other characters (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.6).

- The story has a central message, or moral that students can identify using key details in the text (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.2).

- The author study that incorporates various Patricia Polacco will allow students to compare and contrast themes, settings, plots, characters and morals across books written by the same author (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.9).

Patricia Polacco books recommended as part of this author study that represent a range of both relatable childhood struggles in school and other cultures are:

- *Thank you Mr. Falker*
- *Rotten Richie and the Ultimate Dare*
- *Junkyard Wonders*
- *Uncle Vova’s Tree*
- *Babushka Baba Yaga*
- *Just Plain Fancy*
Summary

This story takes place on Patricia’s grandparents farm in Union City, Michigan, where Patricia, her brother, mother and grandparents all lived together. ‘Bubbie,’ Patricia’s Babushka Grandmother made the best chocolate cake in Michigan and could tell magical stories about the most ordinary things. Patricia’s redhead older brother, Richard, was always really nice when Babushka was around, but when she would leave, he would be rotten and terrible and perfectly awful to Patricia.

Richard was constantly telling Patricia that he could do everything better than she could. He challenged her to blackberry picking, running, climbing, throwing, sitting, burping contests, and he would always beat her and rub it in with a sneering smirk and a reminder that he is four years older than her and always will be. Patricia would become so furious when Richard would beat her. Patricia was determined to find something that she could do better than Richard, so one hot summer day, she challenged him to a rhubarb eating contest without puckering. Richard said he didn’t like rhubarb and that it was the ‘sourest stuff on the planet.’ Patricia was sure she was going to win this challenge, but it turned out that Richard didn’t like rhubarb…he LOVED it! Patricia was so mad at Richard and went crying to her Babushka.

That night, Babushka comforted Patricia while they watched the night sky and showed her how to wish on a falling star. Patricia wished that one day she could do something, anything better than her brother. The next day, at the traveling carnival, Patricia headed straight for the merry-go-round and rode it, proudly, for longer than Richard did, but she ended up falling off into a pile of pop bottles and passing out. Richard carried her home and Patricia’s relationship with her big brother was forever changed. The whole family slept under the stars that night. Bubbie reminded Patricia and Richard to be careful what they wish for, and to ‘hold onto the grass so you don’t float up into the stars.’
Patricia Polacco’s Pictures are Worth One Thousand Words

Initiating Activities

I can’t imagine reading Patricia Polacco’s books with children without paying specific attention to her magnificent illustrations, for this is what has timelessly attracted me to her stories. Her drawings are active, sensory rich and emotionally stimulating and add so much detail and content to her stories. It would be a shame to overlook these artistic masterpieces so this author study has third graders diving into Polacco’s work pictures first! Students will explore Polacco’s books purely visually, without reading the text up until the mini-lesson described in this Literature guide, which will be the first image to text connection that students will make in this author study. This following series of visual, artistic activities can initiate this author study:

• Students choose a Polacco book that they would like to read independently at some point during this author study. Then choose one illustration from that book that is particularly interesting to them. They should identify what it is about the illustration that appeals to them and why, develop questions they have about the image and then recreate the illustration in their own hand using the same medium and stylistic elements that Patricia uses. This will become the cover of their independent portfolio that they will compile over the course of this greater author study. The cover of this Literature Guide is an example of this process that I created (see Appendix 1).

• Students use what they have learned about Polacco’s artistic style (eg. pencil and watercolor techniques, expressive line, action, details) to illustrate a story from their own life. They will then script a narration of this illustration from their point of view, as though it were a page in a fiction story.

• Begin to notice and explore the Ukrainian culture that was part of Polacco’s childhood that can be detected in the illustrations throughout most of her books. Notice the Babushka’s garb (eg. long skirts, head scarf’s), the flower patterns on clothing, the traditions, customs and crafts and different elements of lifestyle. Work artistically with these patterns and begin to piece together an understanding of the Ukranian context within which many of Polacco’s books are set. Different mediums could be introduced at this point to further experience traditional Ukrainian crafts (or at different points throughout the author study) such as silk scarf dying, egg painting, making a tree like Uncle Volva, etc.
Mini Lesson

Teaching point: In this lesson, students will explore Patricia Polacco’s compelling illustrations for the purpose of learning the comprehension strategy of making inferences. Students will thoroughly examine Polacco’s illustrations and make inferences about aspects of characters, settings, plot and mood of the story (addressing CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.7). Learning how to make inferences from images will not only enhance the reader’s enjoyment of Polacco’s stories but will draw attention to the vivid, expressive and valuable information that students are capable of gleaned from the illustrations in a book.

Connect and Teach: We have been studying some of Patricia Polacco’s illustrations recently, and we all agree that the pictures she draws are so much fun, right? We have been talking about and practicing the artistic techniques that she uses, like expressive, scratchy lines, and loose watery washes, and we even did some similar pencil and watercolor pieces of our own! (Show some student painting samples from the initiating activities, see Appendix 1). These are great, and you all did such a good job evoking emotions with your pictures just like Patricia Polacco does!

Let’s remember, together, why illustrations are so important? Great thinking!! That’s right, illustrations can give us a lot of information about the story before we even read the words! We can learn a lot about the characters, the setting, the plot, the background and the mood in a story by looking closely at the pictures, this is called making inferences, and we’re already doing a really good job of this! Today we are going to make inferences about what this story, called My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother, is all about. Then we’re going to actually READ it! (This is exciting because at this point, we have only looked Polacco’s illustrations; we have not actually READ one of her books. This will be the first picture-text connection that we students make).

Demonstrate: Use My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother to give examples. Cover up the text for this demonstration:

Let’s look at this illustration of Babushka’s home, together, and talk about all of the things this picture tells us about what Babushka life is like, what’s happening in the story at this moment. What do you see? Who are these people? What do you think they’re life is like? What do you think they’re feeling? What do you think is happening? Where do you think they are?
Have students, as a whole group, point out specific details that they notice in the sample illustration and what they can infer about story from these details (eg. I see yarn in a basket; this must mean that Babushka likes to knit, and she probably has lots of free time in her day to knit. Here I see that Patricia is putting her finger in the baking bowl; this must mean that Babushka is really nice and let’s the kids taste the batter before it’s cooked!).

Good! Remember that we talked about how Patricia Polacco is the narrator in a lot of her books, telling stories about herself as a little girl? Well, this is one of those books that Patricia is telling from her point of view. So now that you know Patricia is telling this story, which one do you think she is? (Make sure students know which character is narrating the story so that they collaborative story is from the same point of view). You noticed a lot of things! Now, based on the things that we noticed in this picture, I’m going to tell this story from Patricia’s point of view.

Teacher points to the elements in the picture as you refer to them:

“My Babushka loves to bake! She uses fresh strawberries from the fields and eggs from the chickens and she even sifts her own flour…she makes everything from scratch! She let’s us taste the batter before it’s cooked because she is so nice and never strict! My Babushka has the coziest house on earth! She keeps it clean with her straw broom, has colorful rugs and she wears a pretty scarf on her head every day. We love spending time with Babushka!” You can even use dialogue in your story! Flip to another page and give another example. This is what I think the dialogue here is, “‘Look Patricia,’ said Babushka, ‘it’s a shootings star! And you know what that means, you get to make a wish’ and so Patricia made a wish that she would beat her brother at something someday.”

Now did you notice how I told a story? As if I was this little girl, Patricia? I looked at all of the things I saw in the picture and noticed what the characters were doing, and paid attention to what the mood was and then told a story.

Active Engagement: We’re going to read another Patricia Polacco book aloud, but FIRST, I’m going to give each of you one of the illustrations from this book, My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother, without words! You are going to look closely at the picture I give you and think about what information you can gather about the story.
Teacher hands out text-free illustration from *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* to each pair of students, distribute them so that they whole story is covered.

*Try it out! Turn and talk with your neighbor to come up with a story about what is happening. What do you think Patricia Polacco will write on this page, based on the details in the picture that you notice. Be sure to think about what might have come before in the story and what might happen later! You and your partner will share this with the group in a few minutes.*

Student’s turn to their neighbors for 5 minutes to discuss what they see in the illustrations and what they think is happening.

*Alright, we’re going to start with page one and two and go around the circle telling the story of *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother*. Remember, you are the author, telling us this story. Listen to your classmates because we are about to make our very own version of this story and then see how it compares to what Patricia Polacco actually wrote. If you hear something from your classmates that makes you want to change your story on the spot, go ahead…but make sure your story fits with the illustration that you studied. Okay, go ahead!*

Partners work together to narrate their illustration out loud to the class.

**Assessment:** Teacher facilitates the chronological collaborative retelling of the story, and jots down main ideas and key details that the students touch on along the way (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.2). While students will make their thinking visible through their story telling the teacher will get an understanding for how students are grasping the concept of making inferences from pictures and to what extent they are attentive to the details.

*Wow! That was great! You were able to tell the whole story just from looking at the pictures. That’s because Patricia Polacco draws amazing pictures, and because you are getting really good at making inferences and predictions about a story from what you see in the pictures.*

Recap the main ideas of the story that the students accurately represented (referring to your notes) while you picture walk through parts of the book, acknowledge all of the details that the students saw and the moods that they picked up on.

*(ex. You noticed that the story takes place on a farm, where there were goats and chickens and pigs. And you noticed that Patricia’s brother wasn’t always very nice to her, right? And that made Patricia really upset. You noticed that Patricia’s family was around too, maybe that’s her mom and her grandpa…)*
The read aloud could happen right after the making-inferences mini lesson or could be saved until the next day for times sake and/or to allow for the enjoyment of the story they just created.

Now I’m going to read the story out loud, let’s see how much we were able to infer about the story!!

Teacher reads story out loud. Stopping at appropriate points to point out aspects of the story including setting, plot, character traits and mood, that students had made correct inferences about based on details of the illustrations.

The whole class will have a reflection and discussion about this story-telling process and how their personal narrations compared to Patricia Polacco’s narration. The main themes, setting and plot of My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother will be written down on chart paper so that it can be used later in the author study (see Appendix 2).

So Patricia Polacco tells us a lot with her illustrations, right? She uses her words AND her drawings to tell her stories, and you have gotten so good at paying attention to how the illustrations evoke mood, tell us about the setting, plot and characters. You understand so much more about this story now, and it was really fun to explore the pictures like we did, right? This is something that you can do whenever you read books with pictures, it will help us understand what the author is trying to communicate and will help us understand our own experience of the book.
Critical Thinking Questions

The following focus questions will invite students to examine and interpret the text in deeper ways; these questions can be asked while doing the read aloud, after the read aloud with the option of referring back to the text for answers, or as starting points for different topics that can extend from this literature study. Students should also have the opportunity to generate their own questions during and after the read aloud; their questions can be asked to the teacher, to partners, to the whole group or can become prompts for further research and investigation. These questions will elicit different levels of thinking and challenge students to think about the story in a variety of way: how it relates to their own lives, how it relates to the world, the sensory images it inspires, the emotional reactions it evokes. Focus questions will also challenge students to use comprehension skills that they’ve learned to construct meaning from the story: making inferences beyond the text, identifying main ideas and structural elements of the story, recognizing foreshadowing, turning points and literary themes.

Knowledge Questions:
• What are some ways that you can tell Bubba loves Patricia and Richard?
• Where does this story take place?

Comprehension Questions:
• What is a custom? And what is Patricia’s family’s custom?
• What are some clues that the author gives about the setting of this story?
• What was the moment that Patricia and Richard’s relationship changed?

Application Questions:
• Do Patricia and Richard have anything in common?

Analysis Questions:
• What did you feel when Patricia and Richard were eating that sour rhubarb? Did you get any sensations?
• What clues does the author give about the Ukrainian culture from this story? What can you infer, from the illustrations, about the lifestyle of people from this culture?
• What was Patricia feeling when her brother beat her at the challenges? Have you ever felt that way?

Synthesis Questions:
• Why do you think Richard wasn’t awful to Patricia when Bubbie was around?
• What did Bubbie mean when she said ‘Of course its true, but it may not have happened!”

Evaluation Questions:

• What is the central lesson/message of this story?
• Do you think what Richard was doing was fair? Why is it so fun to win over someone?
• How do you think Patricia and Richard will interact and play together now that their relationship has changed?

Student Questions: Students will ask their own questions throughout this author study. They will write their questions on sticky notes and post them on the Author Study Questions anchor chart, in random order. When there are plenty of questions posted on the Questions chart, we will revisit it and put them into categories (eg. can be answered in the text, needs further research, make an inference, already been answered) and make time to search for the answers.
Extension Activity

Extension activities for the book *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* will be linked back to the whole Patricia Polacco author study. The main ideas and supporting details that students inferred from working with the illustrations in *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* in their mini lesson will be the first components added to the working chart that will support the ongoing integration of knowledge and ideas across Polacco books as we read them. This chart (Appendix 2) will have columns labeled: Setting, theme, plot, main characters, narrator’s point of view, and moral/lesson, and all of the Polacco books that we read will be listed in the rows (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.9).

To determine the central message/lesson or moral of the story, explain how it is conveyed through key details in *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* and to communicate this moral creatively to the class (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.2). Students will already have an understanding of what the moral of a story is from previous lessons. Students will break up into partners with a copy of *My Rotten Redheaded Brother*. They will reexamine the story and discuss the central lesson using the following questions as prompts:

• What is the central lesson being taught in this story?
• What clues in the text and in the illustrations help deliver this lesson?
• Who is teaching this lesson?
• Who is learning this lesson?
• How did they learn it?
• What have YOU learned from this lesson?
• How will this change the way you think about or do things from now on?

Students will then come up with an original example to represent the central message that they found using any mode that they choose; a dramatic representation, a skit, a cartoon strip drawing, a simple puppet show, a narrative, a song, etc. They will perform/present their work to the class. After all of the central lessons have been heard, we will synthesize all of the interpretations and extract one, concise statement of the central message for *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother*. We will add this to our working anchor chart for the author study to facilitate a comparison across central lessons of Polacco books as we read them.
**Independent Student Portfolio:** Students will finalize, independently, their rendition of the central message in *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* that they created with their partner during the extension activity above. They will document this portrayal on paper (e.g. write out the lyrics of their song, elaborate on their cartoon strip, take photographs of their clay sculptures or puppet show) and will be encouraged to write a written statement of the central message as well. They will include this piece, along with one of the illustrations that they did in the initiating activities of this Literature Guide, in their Independent Student Portfolio.

**Links to Common Core State Standards**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.2 Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.9 Compare and contrast the themes, settings, and plots of stories written by the same author about the same or similar characters (e.g., in books from a series)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.7 Explain how specific aspects of a text’s illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.2 Determine the main ideas and supporting details of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.4 Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, speaking clearly at an understandable pace.
Appendix

Appendix 1: Sample of student’s recreation of a Patricia Polacco illustration

Appendix 2: Sample of anchor chart for making comparisons of main ideas across Patricia Polacco books.

References

