A Literature Guide For 4th Graders:

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Buffalo Bird Girl: A Hidatsa Story
Written and Illustrated by S.D. Nelson

Lisa Frost
Antioch University
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Introduction

This book is a first person account of life in a Hidatsa village in the mid-1800s. It is an abbreviated version of *Waheenee: An Indian Girl's Story*, which was told to an anthropologist by Waheenee (Buffalo Bird Woman) herself at the beginning of the 20th century. Throughout the book there are illustrations and photographs to help the reader imagine what life was like.

We learn about what daily life is like for the Hidatsa, and particularly for a young girl. After she explains that her mother and many others died from smallpox, she describes her home and the family that live with her.

The book begins in the spring and with each season we learn what the Hidatsa spent their time doing. In the spring, Buffalo Bird Girl helps prepare the fields and plant the gardens, and when the men return from hunting buffalo and other large animals everyone helps skin and process the meat.

In the summer, girls went berry picking and gathered wild tubers. For fun, they played with dolls and played games with other girls. In addition, Buffalo Bird Girl spent much of her time watching over the cornfields on a platform, protecting it from hungry animals. While standing guard, they sang to the corn, which they believed enjoyed listening to their songs.

In the fall it was harvest time, and many in the village helped harvest, process, and store corn, squash, beans, and sunflower seeds. The whole village celebrated the harvest with a feast and dancing.

For the winter, Buffalo Bird Girl and her village travel to a milder area where there was a greater supply of firewood. They chose a different spot each winter where they set up their tipis.
**Rationale**

This book is appropriate for nine and ten year olds for many reasons. It appeals to students in Kegan’s imperial phase, who are fascinated by learning to be self-sufficient. As a child, Buffalo Bird Girl has many opportunities to be useful and helpful to her family, whether its guarding the fields in the summer, gathering firewood, or picking berries. A classic example of an imperial child is one who dreams of running away and living on their own, and Buffalo Bird Girl talks of many of the skills needed for survival. Everyday life in her culture revolved around this knowledge, therefore this content is inherently alluring. Erikson, who writes about the struggle between industry and inferiority at this age, argues that these children need to feel productive and useful in order to overcome feelings of inadequacy.

According to Piaget’s theory of development, fourth graders are concrete operational thinkers. The subsistence way of life that Buffalo Bird Girl’s culture, the Hidatsa, led is very straightforward and concrete; every material item and food that is described can be easily traced to its origins. Food is grown, harvested, and cooked (or killed and cut up) by the people that eat it. Tipis, boats, and tools are made from start to finish by families, again demonstrating clear processes. A concrete operational child will thrive at conceptualizing these processes and understanding what life was like based on the daily tasks necessary to survive.

Throughout this literature guide you will find curriculum ideas and activities across disciplines, including Native American culture and history, and resource use. There are many opportunities to include community members and organizations both for the class as a whole and for individual students’ interest and research.

**Initiating Activity**

This guide was created with the intention of being part of a study of Native American life in Vermont. One project will be for each student to write and illustrate a book from the first person perspective about Abenaki life. *Buffalo Bird Girl* will be read and studied as an examplar of a first person story. Students will partake in meaningful, original work by creating books that are both engaging stories and informative. Students will learn about the culture through their research and learning for the books they author. *Buffalo Bird Girl* will help scaffold student writing, serving as a guide of what a first person account of life is like.

The first mini-lesson, on asking questions, can be used as the initial activity. The questions that students come up with should help to inform the teacher what student interest is and can influence the direction of the unit.
**Mini Lesson: Asking Questions**

1. **Introduction:**
   We’ve been using questions to delve deeper into our reading a lot recently. We know that asking questions while reading helps us for many different reasons. It could be we want to pay more attention and learn more about a certain thing that’s happening; we may be speculating about or predicting what we’re about to read; or we may want to clarify the meaning of what we’ve read. Today as we read this book we are going to voice all the questions we have and label them based on how we plan to find the answers. Can anyone think of a way we might answer questions we have? (Allow any suggestions, and combine them into the following three categories.) We could use the text to find the answer, we might infer, or we might look in an outside source.

2. **Model:**
   I’m going to begin reading, and let’s see if I come up with some questions. (Read) Page 3: One question I have after reading this page is: did BBG have any sisters or brothers that lived? (Write question on poster.) I think the text could answer this for me, so I’m going to write **T** next to this question. (Continue reading) P. 5 Hmm… I wonder how they got along with white people. I’m guessing I’m going to have to infer in order to come up with an answer, so next to this question I will write **I**. Now, what should we use to label questions that we’ll use an outside source to answer?

3. **Try Together:**
   “I’m going to start from the beginning again, and this time at the end of each page I’ll pause and we’ll ask some questions that come up from that page.” (Record questions on poster paper.) So let’s take a look at these questions. How might we answer this first one; will we need to look in an outside source, will we find out from the text, or will we infer using the story and illustrations and our own schema? (Repeat with a handful of questions, make sure to document on poster.)

4. **Try with partner:**
   Now that we’ve had some practice as a group, your challenge is to read with a partner, write down questions as you go on this sheet I’m passing out (Appendix A), and label the questions with an **I, T, or OS**, just like I did on this poster. Tomorrow as a class we will take a look at all the questions we come up with.
**Mini-Lesson: Schema**

1. **Introduction:**
We have been learning about schema and how we use it while we read all the time! We make connections from what we’re reading to our own lives, or to other books we’ve read, or to what we hear or know about the world. We are going to use *Buffalo Bird Girl*, and dig a little deeper into what life was like for her. We are going to practice using and writing about our schema to think about how our lives compare to Buffalo Bird Girl’s life. You’ll see I’ve made a giant Venn diagram labeled “Buffalo Bird Girl” and “Me.” I am going to start filling this out as I read.

2. **Model:**
I am going to start on page 11, where we begin reading about spring. (Read first few lines.) Let’s see...My family has a garden, so I’m going to write “plant garden” in the middle; but in my family everyone helps in the garden, so I’ll write “females help in garden” in Buffalo Bird Girl’s circle, and “everyone helps in garden” in my circle.

3. **Try together:**
As I read the rest of this page, I want all of you to be thinking about what you might write in your Venn diagram. A few people will have a chance to share these. (Read the rest of the page.) Raise your hand if you thought of something similar or different about Buffalo Bird Girl’s life and your own. (Call on students, record their thinking on the poster, note their name.) This is making me think about Buffalo Bird Girl’s life in a whole new way...I am noticing I have a lot more in common with her than I first realized.

4. **Try on own:**
Now it’s time for you all to give this a try. Each of you will fill out a Venn diagram, but you will partner up so that you can so that we have enough books to go around. Some people might already be thinking about things they’re going to write, and that’s great if you remember a lot.
**Critical Thinking Questions**

*The following questions serve to encourage deeper thinking about cultural differences and values, changes in cultures over time. They can be used as discussion or journal prompts, and can serve to launch miniature or additional social studies units.*

1. What are some ways your life is similar to Buffalo Bird Girl’s life? What do you have in common with her, and what is different?

2. What clues does the author give about what was important to the Hidatsa people? In other words, what did they value and how do you know?

3. Buffalo Bird Girl did not go to school. Why not? How did she learn? Was she missing out? Look in the book to find clues that support your answer.

4. Would you consider Buffalo Bird Girl poor or rich based on what you learned about her?

5. What do you think it was like on the reservation that Buffalo Bird Girl moved to?


7. What part of Buffalo Bird Girl’s life intrigues you the most? Is there something she got to do that you would like to try? What would you like to learn more about?
Related Activities:

Drying and Grinding Corn

Students will follow the process of making corn porridge that Buffalo Bird Girl describes. This sequence of activities will help students understand more deeply the lengthy, laborious process of creating a meal. Western culture, although becoming more cognizant of locally grown food, especially vegetables and fruit, is still largely disconnected from the processing of grains and flours, which make up a large amount of our diet.
Corn can be store-bought or harvested by students on a field trip. Next, corn is shucked and dried, of which there are a number of ways to do this with students. Traditionally shucks are pulled down below corn kernels, and then used to braid cobs together, into long bundles. Bundles were hung over post and left to cure in the sun. Next corn is threshed, which means kernels are separated from cob, traditionally done by beating piles of corn with sticks, in a contained area to prevent kernels from bouncing everywhere. One could use a camping or screen tent, or place corn in large burlap bags and hit the bags to remove kernels. Lastly, before cooking, the corn needs to be ground. A photograph on page 8 shows a woman with a wooden mortar and pestle, however there are many different forms of this tool which serve the same purpose. Once corn is ground, it is ready to be cooked into a porridge. Consider using an open fire outdoors, and even incorporating into a culminating activity around this book and the Native cultures study.

**Helpful Resources:**

Corn production in the Northeast:

http://voices.yahoo.com/all-corn-indian-corn-8565535.html

Corn grown and processed traditionally on the Tuscarora Reservation, northern New York:


**1st Person Book**

Students will write their own story about life as an Abenaki, the culture native to what is now Vermont. They may choose to write about the four seasons, modeled after Buffalo Bird Girl, or they may write about one day, in greater detail. Through writing this book, students will learn about the early history and landscape of their home. In addition, they will learn about another culture and compare it to their own. Students will research the Abenaki, meet with
Abenaki community members, experts, and historians.

Helpful Resources:

Curriculum Guide:

Compilation of Resources in VT (museums, books, Abenaki presenters):

E-book on Algonquian Villages:
http://www.scienceviews.com/ebooks/VillagesOfTheAlgonquian/index.html

Letters To The Author

Students will write letters to the author, S.D. Nelson. Students are encouraged to ask him about the process of writing and illustrating the book, and aspects of the story they want to learn more about. The teacher can send the letters to the author all at once, with an introductory note. This process can be repeated once students complete their own books. Each student can write a letter to a classmate, and perhaps carry on this correspondence.
Recommended Reading


*Waheenee: An Indian Girl’s Story.* By Gilbert L. Wilson. 1921.

Resources


Appendix A

Name: __________________________

Reading *Buffalo Bird Girl*

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