

A white paper airplane with blue horizontal stripes is flying towards the top right. The title 'FLYING LESSONS & other stories' is written on it in blue, with 'FLYING LESSONS' in a bold, sans-serif font and '& other stories' in a cursive font.

FLYING LESSONS & other stories

Kwame Alexander
Kelly J. Baptist Soman Chainani
Matt de la Peña Tim Federle
Grace Lin Meg Medina
Walter Dean
Myers Tim Tingle Jacqueline
Woodson

Edited by Ellen Oh, cofounder
of
**WE NEED DIVERSE
BOOKS**

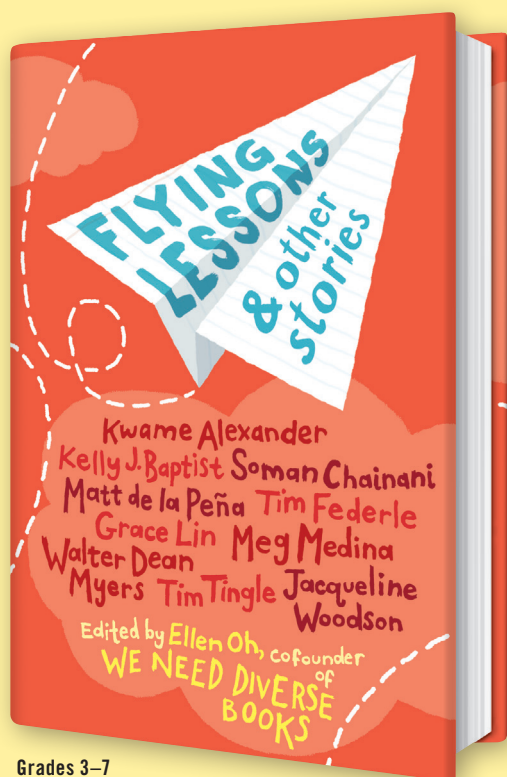
EDUCATORS' GUIDE

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WE ALL NEED DIVERSE STORIES

ABOUT THE BOOK



Grades 3–7

We Need Diverse Books strives to create a world in which every student can see themselves in the pages of a book. This short-story collection, written by popular and award-winning authors, provides exciting discussion opportunities for educators and students. K. H. Campbell explains the power of short stories: “Students can really dig deep if they have a manageable-sized text.”¹ English/language arts anthology textbooks often feature short stories by authors who are not exactly contemporary but have endured the test of time. *Flying Lessons & Other Stories* features characters, topics, and themes that not only will endure, but are also relevant to today’s young people and are written by known, contemporary authors.

Short stories are excellent for classroom use and read-alouds. Educators can introduce literary elements and can use these short stories as mentor texts for writing. All of these stories are exemplars of the craft of writing, allowing teachers and students alike to hold a magnifying glass to this art.

Each of these stories has a bold protagonist who, like all kids, wants to be seen and validated. The characters are authentic; young people will recognize themselves in them right away.

Contributors to this anthology include:

Kwame Alexander
Kelly J. Baptist
Soman Chainani
Tim Federle
Grace Lin
Meg Medina
Walter Dean Myers
Matt de la Peña
Tim Tingle
Jacqueline Woodson

Praise for *Flying Lessons & Other Stories*:

★ “A natural for middle school classrooms and libraries, this strong collection should find eager readers.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “There’s plenty of magic in this collection to go around.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

1. We Need Diverse Books, Mission Statement: How We Define Diversity. Retrieved from weneeddiversebooks.org/mission-statement.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

"How to Transform an Everyday, Ordinary Hoop Court into a Place of Higher Learning and You at the Podium"

MATT DE LA PEÑA

The story of a boy who, through the game of basketball, learns fundamental life lessons, on and off the court.

Before reading

- What have you sacrificed in order to get better at something?
- Who do you turn to for advice? How does this person help you? Describe them.
- The story is written in second person. In what ways is having readers assume the role of the narrator effective? Why do you think de la Peña wrote the story this way?

During reading

- Basketball and the court represent more than the game and a space to play. Readers learn early in the story that to "you" basketball is "more than just ball. It's a way out." (p. 2) What do you think the author means when he says that Balboa Park is the place "where you will learn the world." (p. 9)
- What does the narrator mean by this: "If you let it, [the lazy part] of your brain will hold you back from every dream you will ever have." (p. 5)
- The episode with the police officer in the parking lot alludes to complex issues between people of color and law enforcement. The narrator's father tells him, "Mexicans are allowed to sleep, too." (p. 8) Why does this make the narrator feels closer to his father?
- Describe the ways in which Dante and the narrator's father use silence to impart wisdom.

After reading

- Discuss the title of the story. Why is it appropriate? What could have been an alternative title?

"The Difficult Path"

GRACE LIN

The story of Lingsi, a resourceful girl who uses her ability to read to overcome the burdens of servitude and imprisonment by pirates.

Before reading

- In a journal, write about a time when you overcame a hardship or difficulty.

During reading

- Lingsi is sold to be a servant in the Li family household. What is the significance of the ancestral shrine refusing to light on her sixth birthday and of the arrival of the new tutor?
- The new tutor presents the poem "The Difficult Path" by Li Po to Lingsi and FuDing. What does this poem mean to you? What images does it evoke? How does the poem foreshadow Lingsi's "endless hardships . . . and valiant spirit"? (p. 27)
- The Li household travels to the Infinite Stream Temple to make a sacrifice in hopes of finding a bride for FuDing. Pirates arrive and the caravan is overtaken. Describe the pirates' captain, Tiang.
- Discuss the importance of Tiang's discovery that Lingsi can read. What does each person gain from this realization?

After reading

- Explore the role of reading (literacy) in this story. In what ways does learning expose the difficult, but eventually right, path?
- Explore the importance of gender roles in this story. How does getting an education and earning a position of power disrupt the traditional gender roles that existed in the story's setting?



"Sol Painting, Inc."

MEG MEDINA

A story that reminds readers of the sacrifices parents make so their children can have opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable.

Before reading

- What do you do during the summer? Do you go to summer school? Do you spend time with family?
- In a journal, write about a time when you were disappointed by a person you admired.

During reading

- Merci and Roli help their father with his painting business. Why is Roli apprehensive about painting at Seaward Pines the week before school starts?
- What are Merci's interests? How is she different from her older brother, Roli?
- Upon arriving at Seaward Pines for the painting job, Merci goes to the secretary in the office. She notices that the secretary, who unlocks the gym, does not acknowledge Roli. "You'd think she'd say hello to one of their A students, but maybe she doesn't recognize him in overalls." (p. 50) Why is this lack of acknowledgment important to Merci?
- Some girls burst into the gym where Merci, Roli, and Papi are painting. They ignore the "Wet Paint" signs, and they speak to them in condescending Spanish in mock apology. Compare and contrast Papi's, Roli's, and Merci's reactions to this episode.

After reading

- Roli tells Merci, "Try to let this idea into your thick cranium. Papi *chose* to be invisible today so you won't ever have to be." (p. 59) Discuss this moment between the siblings.
- What sacrifices would you make to allow your loved ones to prosper?

"Secret Samantha"

TIM FEDERLE

This story shows how the perfect gift for the new girl from the not-so-new girl creates a friendship.

Before reading

In a journal, respond to the following questions:

- Have you ever tried to find the perfect gift for someone? What was that process like?
- Do you have a nickname? What is the story behind it? If you don't have a nickname, what name would you want, and why?

During reading

- The story is written in the first person, from Sam's perspective. What does she reveal about herself?
- Describe Blade. Why is Sam fascinated by her?
- Blade and Sam's class is engaged in a secret gift exchange called Secret Sharers. Why did Sam have difficulty finding Blade the perfect gift? Why was Sam heartbroken when she received a purse from her secret sharer?
- How does Sam feel about school? On the day of the gift exchange, why is Mom surprised when Sam tells her she "want[s] to get to school"? (p.78)
- Describe the ways Sam and Henry are good friends to each other.

After reading

- Complete the story: Will Sam and Blade become best friends? Does Sam now have someone who "gets" her?
- Describe your best friend or someone you want to be your best friend.



"The Beans and Rice Chronicles of Isaiah Dunn"

KELLY J. BAPTIST

Readers meet Isaiah Dunn, a young boy who assumes responsibility for his family and discovers a story authored by his deceased father that opens up his world.

Before reading

- What do you do to escape from reality? Write in a journal? Draw? Read? Play video games? Explain why your chosen activity is effective for you.

During reading

- Read the first paragraph. Mama says, "This gonna be one of them years." (p. 87) What feelings do you have after you read this?
- Describe the relationship between Charlie and Isaiah.
- Since the death of Charlie and Isaiah's father, the Dunn family has had a hard time. Their mother has been despondent and has been drinking more alcohol. The family was evicted from their home and forced to move to a motel. How do these challenges manifest themselves in Isaiah's behavior at school?
- Isaiah discovers the story "The Beans and Rice Chronicles of Isaiah Dunn," which was written by his father. In the story, Isaiah gains superpowers whenever he eats his mom's rice and beans, travels around the world to help kids in danger, and is asked by the president to help with secret missions. How does reading this story bring Isaiah closer to his father?

After reading

- In times of difficulty, the library was a place of solace for Isaiah. The youth services librarian built upon that feeling of stability. Why is the library's remaining open significant?
- If you had a superpower, what would it be? Isaiah eats beans and rice to activate his superpowers—how would yours be activated?

"Choctaw Bigfoot, Midnight in the Mountains"

TIM TINGLE

A large, jovial family with an exuberant uncle and quick-witted nephew are celebrated in this story.

Before reading

- Discuss the traits of a good storyteller.
- Have a storytelling celebration. Invite students to share a story with peers.

During reading

- "We're Choctaws and we have our own ways, trust me." (p. 106) Describe the family. How would you characterize Uncle Kenneth?
- Why does Turtle Kid's mother say, "You know better than to listen to anything that man says"? (p.105) What does Uncle Kenneth think about Turtle Kid's mother?
- Uncle Kenneth tells the tall tale of Choctaw and Naloosha Chitto to the narrator (Turtle Kid) and the rest of the cousins. Sketch this tall tale as a comic strip or storyboard.
- How can you tell that Uncle Kenneth is a popular storyteller?
- How does Turtle Kid joke around with Uncle Kenneth?
- Turtle Kid joins the storytelling at the end of the story. Why is this passing of the storytelling tradition important?

After reading

- How is family celebrated in this story?
- What does family mean to you?

"Main Street"

JACQUELINE WOODSON

Two girls are at the center of this story which demonstrates the devastation of solitude, silence, and stereotypes.

Before reading

- Have you ever moved to another town and felt like an outsider? Describe that feeling, or another situation that may have evoked a similar emotion.
- As a class, brainstorm and create a Venn diagram to compare and contrast growing up in the city versus the country.

During reading

- The first paragraph describes Peterborough, New Hampshire. (p. 123) How do you think Celeste feels about living here? What are her apprehensions?
- How would you describe the narrator's feelings at the conclusion of the first paragraph? Explain your rationale.
- Celeste and the narrator share a quiet moment on her swings. The narrator misses her mother, who passed away. Celeste says, "I know me some missing." (p. 128) Why is this moment significant? What does it foreshadow?
- Why doesn't Celeste like living in Peterborough? Give examples from the story that highlight her difficulties.

After reading

- Continue the story. Imagine that Celeste and the narrator meet in New York City when they turn eighteen.
- Read Jacqueline Woodson's picture book *Each Kindness*. Compare and contrast the book and this short story. What is an enduring lesson of both narratives?

"Flying Lessons"

SOMAN CHAINANI

A boy and his grandmother take a memorable trip, during which he learns that there is more to life than winning school awards: it's about being with people who make us smile and expand our horizons.

Before reading

- Describe your favorite (real or imagined) trip. What made it extraordinary?

During reading

- The first part of the story introduces readers to Nani and her grandson Santosh. Describe each character's personality. What textual evidence supports your views?
- Why does Santosh have a difficult time making friends?
- Nani brings Santosh on this trip because he "[wins] too many awards at school." (p. 141) What does she mean by this statement? Why do you suppose Santosh felt worse when he thought about the academic recognition he'd earn at school after turning down the opportunity to hang out with Tomas and his friends?
- How are Santosh and Nani "two caged birds, searching for a way out"? (p.157)

After reading

- After reading "Flying Lessons," do you think about your own ambitions or goals differently? What about friendship?
- Write and perform a poem in two voices featuring Nani and Santosh or Santosh and Tomas. What conversation would they have after the conclusion of the story?
- In a journal, discuss why "Flying Lessons" is an appropriate title for this story.



"Seventy-Six Dollars and Forty-Nine Cents"

KWAME ALEXANDER

In his intricate and playful poetry, Kwame Alexander delights readers in answering the question "What if I could read people's minds?"

Before reading

- Read a collection of memoirs and explore the characteristics of the genre. What makes memoirs different from autobiographies?
- Write a poem that describes the origin of or inspiration for your name.

During reading

- Monk's life is self-described as "just the same ol' boring, / uncool life that I've been living / for the past 12 years." (p. 165) Then something amazing happens. Stop reading here and predict what will happen.
- The flashback to his first crush Lisa Castillo shows Monk's "complicated history / with girls." (p. 167) How do you think this complicated history foreshadows what his relationship could be with Angel Carter?
- The power of hearing people's inner thoughts came as a result of a bump on the head. How does Monk use this power to his advantage with his friends? His teacher?
- The ultimate test of Monk's powers comes when he bets Angel Carter a date to see *Star Wars*. Why is his not revealing how much the hair appointment cost (see the title) a revealing moment?

After reading

- Did the ending surprise you? What did Monk whisper in Angel's ear?
- What superpower would you want to have, and why?
- If you were writing a memoir, what would you choose to write about? How would you write it?

"Sometimes a Dream Needs a Push"

WALTER DEAN MYERS

Readers meet a boy who uses a wheelchair after an accident and a quiet father consumed by guilt who are brought together by the game of basketball.

Before reading

- Create a visual representation of guilt.
- Watch a video of wheelchair basketball.

During reading

- The imagery of Jim, Chris's father, mumbling as if "chewing up his words to see how they taste before he lets them out" (p. 208) is striking. Create a visual representation or a dramatic interpretation of this description.
- In what ways does Chris's father attempt to connect with Chris once he joins a wheelchair basketball team and league?
- Revisit the last paragraph of the story. Why does Chris's dad return to mumbling?

After reading

- The image of a dream is evoked in Langston Hughes's poems "Dream Variations" and "Harlem." In what ways could these poems be paired with this short story?
- The relationship between father and son, Jim and Chris, is a complicated one entwined with guilt. How does Jim work through the guilt?
- How does this story reflect the readers Walter Dean Myers was writing for?

This anthology is dedicated to Walter Dean Myers, who believed that young people need to see themselves reflected in the pages of the books they read.

LOOKING AT THE ENTIRE COLLECTION IN THE CLASSROOM

Photo © Susie James Photography



FOREWORD BY ELLEN OH

ELLEN OH is one of the founding members of *We Need Diverse Books*, the editor of the *WNDB* anthology *On The Block*, and the author of the YA novel *The Colliding Worlds of Mina Lee*.

➤ In the foreword, Ellen Oh shares a story about her pet. She is thrilled when she finds an abandoned kitten. What surprises her about the new pet? Find evidence in the text to support your response.

➤ Why does George's story come up at Ellen's family reunions?

➤ What does the story about George have to do with the *Flying Lessons* anthology?

Even though these stories are able to stand alone, they can also be read together. They are linked by common ideas that are important to young people, such as dealing with friends and family. In addition, the stories fundamentally support the notion that kids want to be seen and validated; they recognize the relief of having someone "get them." The yearning for this validation from peers, and from parents and other adults is real, and these short stories continue to advance the We Need Diverse Books vision of a "world in which all children can see themselves in the pages of a book." The following section gives examples of discussion questions and activities relating to the collection that enable young people to make their thoughts and experiences public.

➤ Select your favorite short story. Why is it your favorite? What about this particular story stands out to you?

➤ The anthology includes biographies for each contributor and information about We Need Diverse Books. (p.225)

- What did Walter Dean Myers mean when he said "Reading is not optional"?

- Christopher Myers, who collaborated with his father, Walter, on many projects, wrote, "[Kids] see books less as mirrors and more as maps." What do you think this means? Do you agree or disagree? State your reasons.

- What did Walter mean when he wrote "There is work to be done"? (p. 226) What does Ellen mean when she writes, "So our work continues"? (p. v)

➤ These stories are by popular authors who have written a vast array of books. Select an author and conduct an author study. For this formal project, you will read, research, and delve deeply into the work of one author. You are responsible for three components:

- a research/oral presentation about the author, their inspiration(s), and their books
- an exhibition of eight to ten artifacts/objects, with short explanations of why you included them
- a brochure or handout highlighting works by the author, key quotes, and other pertinent information that introduces your chosen author to the class

➤ Create a video trailer for an individual story or for the entire collection. Use the multi-step process of brainstorming, information gathering, drafting, and publishing. Invite peers to give feedback. Share the finished project with the class.

➤ Write a memoir or short story based on a moment in your life that still has "emotional heat." This moment, when thought about again, should generate feelings similar to those you felt when the moment happened. Why is the moment significant? Use the process of brainstorming, information gathering, drafting, and publishing. Invite peers to give feedback, and publish their responses in a collection similar to *Flying Lessons & Other Stories*.



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