



## Classroom Guide for **MAMA'S WINDOW**

by Lynn Rubright  
afterword by Patricia C. McKissack

### Reading Level

\*Reading Level: Grades 4 and up  
Interest Level: Grades 3–6  
Guided Reading Level: S  
Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 5.2/2.0

### Themes

Family, Belonging, Hope, Fulfilling Dreams, African American Interest

### Synopsis

When his mother dies, James Earle (“Sugar”) Martin goes to live with his uncle Free, a gruff crippled man who makes his living fishing in a swamp in the Mississippi Delta. At first Sugar and Uncle Free barely get along, and Sugar is afraid of the swamp and everything associated with it. He also dislikes the daily ordeal of fishing with his uncle and making deliveries to the folks in Cypress Grove. The only bright spot in Sugar’s life is the building of the new Sweet Kingdom Church, which will be adorned with a beautiful stained glass window that his mother scrimped and saved for while she was alive.

As time passes Sugar slowly acclimates to his surroundings, and a budding sense of family develops between him and Uncle Free. Then one day Sugar discovers that the money for Mama’s window is being used for the construction of the church itself. Devastated but unwilling to give up on his mother’s dream, Sugar finds affirmation and support where he least expects it. In a truly heartwarming yet unexpected ending, *Mama’s Window* shows us all the importance of hope, dreams, and finding a place to call home.

## Background

An Afterword by noted children's writer Patricia C. McKissack gives some historical background about Owen Whitfield, an African American sharecropper, minister, and labor leader in Arkansas in the 1930s. *Mama's Window* was inspired by episodes in the early life of Whitfield, and the character of Sugar is loosely based on Whitfield as a boy.

## CLASSROOM EXTENSIONS

This curriculum was designed by MAMA'S WINDOW author Lynn Rubright ([www.lynnrubright.com](http://www.lynnrubright.com)) for the Storytelling and Literacy Project for COCA (Contemporary Center for the Arts) as an Urban Arts Program for St. Louis Public Schools, 2005–2007. Rubright presents many of these activities (and more) during school residencies across the country. For information contact Lynn Rubright ([lynnrubright@aol.com](mailto:lynnrubright@aol.com)).

## GOALS

By reading MAMA'S WINDOW, and many of the related reader's theater scripts developed by the author, students practice word attack skills and glean meanings of unknown words from context clues to increase comprehension. The activities incorporate listening, thinking, speaking, writing, reading, and creative drama exercises to help students master a variety of national standards in language arts and social studies. Reading aloud helps students become more fluent and expressive oral interpreters of literature. Many of the activities connect art, music, physical education, science, and math across the curriculum, and include drama, movement, creative writing, and poetry.

## OBJECTIVES

### Language Arts

Students can:

1. write descriptions of characters within the various settings of the story
2. compose short summary paragraphs on each chapter using the small illustrations (spot art) before each chapter as clues to content
3. search a dictionary, a thesaurus, and language arts texts to develop vocabulary, correct grammar usage, and spelling
4. write short plays to use as reader's theater
5. bring events in each chapter to life through improvisational monologues and dialogues.
6. study poetry that reflects the mood of the swamp
7. write their own poetry inspired by various scenes in the book
8. create graphic (comic book) strips combining art and narrative of the characters

### Social Studies

Students can:

1. study maps of the Mississippi Delta region
2. research cultural diversity of the Delta region
3. discuss issues and topics such as bullying, feelings of loss, grieving, change, family values
4. explore positive and negative traits of the main characters

5. reflect on values and attitudes of various characters in the book, including the importance of sacrifice and self discipline
6. determine what makes heroes and heroines
7. study regional foods mentioned in the book
8. learn about traditional fishing techniques
9. plant a "kitchen garden" on school grounds
10. conduct oral histories of elder family members and friends that may include memories of living in rural settings, farm life, traditions, foods, recipes, games, and the importance of family and community. These oral histories may be collected in book form, illustrated, and/or performed by students.

### Art and Math

Students can:

1. design fabric or paper squares that depict scenes from *Mama's Window* and make them into a quilt
2. study Faith Ringgold's *Dinner At Aunt Connie's House* for ideas on how story and art can connect
3. research the heritage of African American quilters from Gees' Bend, Alabama
4. write about and illustrate their own dreams and wishes
5. create "stained glass" windows of tissue and construction paper to illustrate their dreams
6. display art and writing on the bulletin board
7. design a mural depicting scenes in *Mama's Window* to display in the hall
8. make graphic books using inventive and expanded dialogue among characters to create a prequel or sequel to the book.

### Music

Students can:

1. study the history of the spirituals on the internet
2. obtain music scores and sing the spirituals in the book: *Great Day! Great Day! The Righteous Marching, Great Day!; This Little Light of Mine; Glory Alleluia! A Great Day Is A-Coming*
3. combine a reader's theater presentation with music
4. write original songs exploring different musical styles: spirituals, pop, rap, rock

### Physical Education

Students can:

1. play the children's games Red Rover, King of the Mountain, Statues
2. make up jump rope rhymes from Sugar's point of view
3. ask older family members to tell them about and teach them games they played as children

### INTERDISCIPLINARY / INTERNET RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Students can:

1. research flora and fauna of the swamps and bayous of Mississippi Delta region
2. study of uses of leeches in medicine
3. study history of African American churches
4. study stained glass windows in African American churches
5. explore the importance of fishing in Mississippi Delta region "then and now"

6. learn about quilting as an African American art form and how during slavery quilters sewed hidden meanings and maps of escape routes to the Underground Railroad into their quilt patterns

### LITERATURE CONNECTIONS: USING MAMA'S WINDOW WITH PATRICIA C. MCKISSACK'S BOOKS

The author's long-time friend and colleague Patricia C. McKissack served as manuscript consultant during the writing of *Mama's Window* and also wrote the Afterword. Because many of McKissack's books deal with African American themes, several of her books can be used with the *Mama's Window* extension activities.

Students can:

1. compare and contrast situations and issues experienced by Sugar in *Mama's Window* with those of Tricia Ann in McKissack's, *Goin' Someplace Special*. Taking the roles of Sugar and Tricia Ann, students can improvise dialogue explaining to one another situations in their lives.
2. learn and tell scary stories from McKissack's books *The Dark Thirty* or *Porch Lies: Tales of Slicksters, Ticksters, and Other Wily Characters* while role playing Uncle Free, sitting on the porch of his shack in the swamp.
3. compare characters from McKissack's *Color Me Dark: The Diary of Nellie Lee Love, the Great Migration North* with Sugar's experience being sent to live in the swamp with Uncle Free. Students could write their comments in their journals.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Lynn Rubright** is a professional storyteller who has taught many storytelling courses over the past twenty years. She is the recipient of the Circle of Excellence Award from the National Storytelling Association and was awarded a regional EMMY for her work as a co-producer of the documentary *Oh Freedom After While: The Missouri Sharecropper Protest of 1939*. While researching the life of Owen Whitfield for that film, Rubright came across a few details about his childhood, which ultimately served as the inspiration for *Mama's Window*. Rubright and her husband live in St. Louis, Missouri. This is her first book for children. To find out more about Lynn Rubright, visit her Web site: [www.lynnrubright.com](http://www.lynnrubright.com)

### Resources on the Web

Learn more about *Mama's Window* at:

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/84/pb/mama\\_s\\_window](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/84/pb/mama_s_window)

### BookTalk with Lynn Rubright

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/rubright.mhtml>

### Active Reader Classroom Guides

[http://www.leeandlow.com/p/teachers-african\\_american.mhtml](http://www.leeandlow.com/p/teachers-african_american.mhtml)

### Book Information

\$8.95, PAPERBACK

978-1-60060-335-8

\$16.95, HARDCOVER

978-1-58430-160-8

5 1/2 x 8-1/4, 144 pages

Interest Level: Grades 4-8

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(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

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Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 5.2/20.

### **Order Information**

#### **On the Web:**

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ordering.mhtml> (general order information)

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/84/hc/mama\\_s\\_window](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/84/hc/mama_s_window) (secure on-line ordering)

#### **By Phone:**

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