



Classroom Guide for
BE WATER, MY FRIEND: THE
EARLY YEARS OF BRUCE LEE

Written by **Ken Mochizuki**

Illustrated by **Dom Lee**

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grades 3–4

Interest Level: Grades 1–6

Guided Reading Level: N

Lexile™ Level: 790L

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.5/0.5

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Sports and Sports History, Martial Arts, Overcoming Obstacles/Achieving Goals, Dreams and Aspirations, Persistence/Grit, Self-Control/Self-Regulation, Childhood Experiences and Memories, Biography/Narrative Nonfiction, Asian/Asian-American Interest

Synopsis

From the award-winning team of Ken Mochizuki and Dom Lee, *Be Water, My Friend* is an inspirational story showing the power of setting goals and achieving them through hard work and dedication, despite adversity.

Before Bruce Lee became an international film star he was a boy growing up in Hong Kong in the 1940s and 1950s. He had an active mind, boundless energy, and a knack for finding trouble. Although he loved to read, play practical jokes, and get into trouble on the street, Lee developed an interest in martial arts. In Hong Kong, martial arts were as popular as baseball was in the United States.

Bruce Lee studied martial arts under the watchful eye of Yip Man, the best martial arts master in Hong Kong. At first Lee's interest was motivated purely by his desire to win more fights in the street, and he thrived on the grueling training. However, Lee soon discovered that he was really being taught not to have to fight. He struggled to understand and apply the principles of gentleness and yielding that the master taught.

Only after he set sail for the United States at the age of eighteen did Bruce Lee begin to embrace the values of martial arts and discover his own path to inner calm. Lee eventually became a pioneer of martial arts cinema, and his legacy lives on in popular culture more than forty years after his death. Lee's films paved the way for today's popular martial artists, such as Jet Li and Jackie Chan, and influenced more recent martial arts films. But it is his boyhood journey toward self-discovery and his courage to

overcome obstacles that will inspire young readers who search for their ways in the world today.

BACKGROUND

From the author: This story is true to the facts of Bruce Lee's life. Due to limited information about Lee's earliest years, some events in the book are extensions of the facts based on the author's knowledge of the times and circumstances of Lee's life. The title *Be Water, My Friend* is a direct quote from Bruce Lee. The calligraphy on the back cover is the character for "dragon." Bruce Lee was often called Dragon because he was born during the hour and year of the dragon. Later the nickname was used in the titles of many of Lee's martial arts films, including his most famous, *Enter the Dragon*.

Biographies of Bruce Lee: This is one of only two fully illustrated books about Bruce Lee. All other books about Bruce Lee are photo-essays.

Yip Man: Also known as Ip Man, Bruce Lee's teacher was one of the most influential martial artists and masters. He mastered and taught the wing chun form of kung fu, a system of martial arts from southern China. According to [Black Belt](#), a martial arts magazine, Yip Man's instruction style was "by example and suggestion, rather than spoken word."¹ He encouraged his students to avoid the gangs and using their martial arts knowledge to bully or fight. He was born in southern China but settled and taught in Hong Kong late in life, where he met Bruce Lee. Bruce Lee's fame in the United States and on film contributed to Yip Man's recognition. Since his death in 1972, several films tell the story of his life and legacy on martial arts. For more information about Yip Man's life, check out [A&E's biography.com](#) study.²

Bruce Lee's adulthood and legacy: Bruce Lee's family created the [Bruce Lee Foundation](#)³ and built the [Bruce Lee Action Museum](#) in Seattle, Washington, to honor Lee's contributions to martial arts and film.⁴ Websites for these organizations offer a timeline and photographs of Bruce Lee as an adult. The following information is from the [timeline](#): In 1959, Bruce Lee immigrated to the United States and two years later enrolled at the University of Washington, where he majored in philosophy. He married Linda Emery, a student of his kung fu school, and encountered disapproval for their interracial marriage. Bruce Lee experienced much judgment along with fame throughout his life. In fact, he faced criticism from other martial artists and martial arts schools for teaching to non-Chinese students.

Bruce Lee was cast in the *Green Hornet* television series in 1966, which launched him to fame among American audiences. Lee developed the martial arts form called jeet kune do, which incorporated more strength training than other martial arts, and cardiovascular exercise. Lee starred in many movies, including *Enter the Dragon* and *Fist of Fury*. He refused to take roles that stereotyped Asians, and when parts were hard to come by in the United States, Lee acted in films in China, much to the delight of his Chinese fans. Lee passed away in 1973 leaving behind his wife, two children, and millions of martial arts admirers.

¹ <http://www.blackbeltmag.com/daily/traditional-martial-arts-training/wing-chun/yip-man-wing-chun-legend-and-bruce-lees-formal-teacher/>

² <http://www.biography.com/people/yip-man-21370115#synopsis&>

³ <http://www.bruceleefoundation.org/>

⁴ <http://www.bruceleeactionmuseum.org/>

BEFORE READING**Prereading Focus Questions**

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. Take a look at the front and back covers. Take a picture walk. Ask students to make a prediction. Do you think this book will be fiction or nonfiction? What makes you think so? What clues do the author and illustrator give to help you know whether this book will be fiction or nonfiction?
2. What do you know about texts that are biographies? What are some typical features of biographies? What are some things that will not happen in biographies? Why do authors write biographical stories? How do you think their reasons differ from authors who write fiction?
3. What are martial arts? What is the purpose of martial arts? Where do martial arts originate? Why might some people learn and practice martial arts? Why do you think martial arts are popular around the world?
4. What is *persistence*? Tell us about a time you demonstrated persistence. What was your goal? What challenges did you face? How did you stay motivated?
5. What do you know about Hong Kong? Where is it located? What language do the people speak there?
6. Why do you think I chose this book for us to read today?

Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Talk about the title. Ask students what they think the title means. Then ask them what they think this book most likely will be about and who the book might be about. What do you think might happen? What information do you think you might learn? What makes you think that?

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front and back covers, title page, illustrations, afterword (“The Rest of Bruce Lee’s Story”), dedications, sources, and author’s note.

Setting a Purpose of Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out:

- what and who inspire Bruce Lee to master martial arts
- about the obstacles he faces
- how he overcomes these obstacles
- to what the title, *Be Water, My Friend*, refers

Encourage students to consider why the author, Ken Mochizuki, would want to share this story with children.

VOCABULARY

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students’ prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below. Encourage a variety of strategies to support students’ vocabulary

acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

CONTENT SPECIFIC

Cantonese	practical jokes	ballroom dancing	madam
Hong Kong	Great Britain	martial arts	master
natural flow	interschool	championship	knockout
let loose	parried a jab	opera	defending champion
film sets	boxing ring		

ACADEMIC

acclaimed	performer	rearranging	myths	legends	obstacle
oppressed	possessed	abilities	warrior	rehearsals	uninterrupted
flow	roam	rarely	misbehavior	scolded	scoffed
glamorous	imagined	colony	heckled	picking on	well-known
dedicated	guarantee	opponent	technique	drilled in	intense
concentration	automatic	discipline	harmony	yielding	supplier
interfere	gentleness	hundredth	shatter	substance	resistance
apply/applied	expend	energy	concepts	recognized	athletic
confidently	flurry	spectator	frantically	contracted	temper
responsible	conduct	fresh start			

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and/or illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite evidence with their answers.**

Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1 and 3)

1. What is the reason Bruce's father is frequently away when Bruce is growing up?
2. What activities does Bruce Lee like as a young boy?
3. Why does Bruce Lee think he does not need to study and get an education at the beginning of the story?
4. What are the consequences Bruce Lee experiences for getting into fights and neglecting his education?
5. Who is Yip Man?
6. What does Yip Man mean by *yielding* and *gentleness*?
7. What causes Yip Man to decide to ignore Bruce Lee during training?
8. How does Bruce Lee feel and react to being ignored by Yip Man?
9. What does Bruce Lee learn when he punches the water?
10. What causes Bruce Lee *finally* to realize that he disappointed his parents?
11. Why is there a dragon on the cover of the book? Where does the author explain the connection of the dragon to Bruce Lee?

Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strand 4–6)

1. Although Bruce Lee loves to read, he does not take school seriously and does not perform well. Why do you think this happens? Why does his mother want him to get a good education?
2. Why do you think Bruce does not listen to his mother about staying out of trouble and focusing on his education?
3. What effect does Bruce Lee's father's absence have on Bruce Lee's childhood?
4. Bruce loves ballroom dancing with his mother before he discovers martial arts. What characteristics of ballroom dancing do you think appealed to Bruce Lee?
5. How does Bruce Lee cope with his poor eyesight? What effect, if any, does it have on his martial arts practice and how he handles bullies?
6. Bruce Lee's mother has a very active role in his life. Study Bruce Lee's relationship with his mother. Do you think Bruce Lee is respectful or disrespectful toward her? Why?
7. What do you think Yip Man thinks and feels when he learns that Bruce is using his martial arts training to fight other kids?
8. Do you think martial arts have a positive or negative impact on Bruce's life? Why?
9. Why do Bruce Lee's mother and father want him to have a fresh start? What opportunities might he have in the United States?
10. "Water, the softest substance on Earth, could never be hurt because it offered no resistance. But with enough force it could break through anything in the world." What lesson does this idea teach Bruce? What do these facts about water have to do with fighting in martial arts?
11. How do martial arts change Bruce Lee's life?
12. Why do you think the author, Ken Mochizuki, chose to end the story when Bruce's youth ended at the age of eighteen when he was sent to live in the United States?
13. Think about the additional information about Bruce Lee included at the end of the book. Why do you think the author chose to tell us about Bruce Lee after he arrived in the United States?
14. How does Bruce Lee change after he comes to the United States and lives without his parents?
15. Compare the story with the additional text at the end of the book. How is narrative nonfiction similar and different from informational nonfiction? Why might the author have chosen to tell Bruce Lee's early life as a narrative?

Literature Circles

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

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

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines or sentences in the story that suggest how Bruce Lee demonstrates persistence.
- The **Illustrator** might illustrate one of the events of Bruce Lee's life that occurs after the story of his boyhood ends. The illustrator may use the information in the section "The Rest of Bruce Lee's Story" for ideas.
- The **Connector** might find another biography of a sports figure who overcomes obstacles, such as [Marcenia Lyle](#), [Arthur Ashe](#), [Louis Sockalexis](#), [William Hoy](#), [Sammy Lee](#), [Jim Thorpe](#), [Jimmy Winkfield](#), or [Duke Kahanamoku](#).

- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting
- The **Investigator** might look for information about martial arts and some of its different origins and forms.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1 and 3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and make personal connections to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's response journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. Describe a time you felt you had let down your parents or guardians. Why do you think you disappointed them? How did your parents or guardians help you through the tough time? What did you do to regain their trust? What did you learn from that experience? What advice would you give someone who is engaged in behavior that might disappoint or worry adults?
2. Bruce Lee had a big dream to one day be a famous film star. What dream do you have? What will you need to do to achieve your dream? Why is it helpful to study people who have achieved their dreams?
3. In the story, Yip Man has a significant influence on Bruce Lee's success as a martial artist and film star. Do you think everyone needs someone who believes in or positively influences him or her? Why? Write about someone in your life who helps, encourages, or practices with you. How does that person help you overcome your fears or tough situations?
4. Bruce Lee's parents have a hard time getting him to focus on his education and stay out of trouble. Write a letter to his parents with ideas about how to help Bruce in school. What might make education interesting or important to him? What might help him stay out of trouble and use his energy in more positive ways?

ELL Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
 - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.

- Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about Bruce Lee, his mother, or Yip Man.
 5. The book contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Student who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

Social Studies

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writing Standards, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9)

1. Ask students to research the history of martial arts up through today. What qualifies as martial arts? Where did different martial arts originate? What sets martial arts apart from other sports? What are the major forms of martial arts? Who were/are other famous martial artists?
2. Have students compare and contrast the book about Bruce Lee with other sports biographies, such as those about [Marcenia Lyle](#),⁵ [Arthur Ashe](#),⁶ [Louis Sockalexis](#),⁷ [William Hoy](#),⁸ [Sammy Lee](#),⁹ [Jim Thorpe](#),¹⁰ [Jimmy Winkfield](#),¹¹ and [Duke Kahanamoku](#).¹² How were these athletes' experiences similar? What character traits did they share that allowed them to overcome obstacles? What legacies did they leave behind? Who were their role models or biggest believers in their success, if any?
3. Ask students to research the life of Yip Man. What is his legacy? Who were some of his famous students, besides Bruce Lee? What challenges did Yip Man face and overcome? What motivated him to study martial arts and become a master teacher?
4. Encourage students to research the history of Hong Kong and its status as a colony of Great Britain. For how long was Hong Kong a colony? What language(s) were taught during that time? Who controls Hong Kong now? What were the benefits and challenges for residents of Hong Kong during its colonial status?

Physical Education/Anatomy

⁵http://www.leeandlow.com/books/30/pb/catching_the_moon_the_story_of_a_young_girl_s_baseball_dream

⁶http://www.leeandlow.com/books/389/hc/game_set_match_champion_arthur_ashe

⁷http://www.leeandlow.com/books/80/pb/louis_sockalexis_native_american_baseball_pioneer

⁸http://www.leeandlow.com/books/436/hc/silent_star_the_story_of_deaf_major_leaguer_william_hoy

⁹http://www.leeandlow.com/books/109/pb/sixteen_years_in_sixteen_seconds_the_sammy_lee_story

¹⁰http://www.leeandlow.com/books/69/pb/jim_thorpe_s_bright_path

¹¹http://www.leeandlow.com/books/359/pb/the_last_black_king_of_the_kentucky_derby

¹²http://www.leeandlow.com/books/115/pb/surfer_of_the_century_the_life_of_duke_kahanamoku

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4 and 5)

(Writing Standards, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9)

1. Study human anatomy in relation to martial arts, particularly kung fu. What muscles and muscle groups are involved in the moves *sticking hands* and *kicking leaves off trees*? What exercises can an athlete perform to strengthen those muscles? Students can demonstrate understanding with 2-D pictures of the human form or reconstruction using modeling clay.
2. Help students research the martial arts Bruce Lee taught students: kung fu and jeet kune do. What is unique about wing chun, kung fu, and jeet kune do? How are they related to one another? Have students learn several basic moves to teach to their classmates.
3. Have students compare and contrast kung fu or jeet kune do with other types of martial arts, including taekwondo or karate. Have students explore two types of martial arts using a Venn diagram. Where did the two types of martial arts originate? What features qualify them as martial arts? What are their unique characteristics? Who were/are famous martial artists of these forms?

Science

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4 and 5)

(Writing Standards, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9)

1. “Water, the softest substance on Earth, could never be hurt because it offered no resistance. But with enough force it could break through anything in the world.” How are both descriptions of water true? Have student chart the properties of water. Then have them look for examples of water causing damage, including natural formations and disasters. Compare those to examples where water acts as a “soft” substance, such as when people swim or fish, or when objects drop into a body of water.
2. Have students investigate what it means to have poor eyesight or be visually impaired. What are some of the causes? What types of challenges do people who have poor eyesight or are visually impaired face on a daily basis? Who are other athletes or well-known people who have overcome limitations of poor eyesight or even blindness?

Art/Film

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 1)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. Talk about the fact that illustrations instead of photographs are used to depict Bruce Lee's childhood in the book. What are the limitations of using photographs? What are the benefits of illustrations for telling the story? Why do you think the illustrator, Dom Lee, chose to use only the reddish-brown color, sepia, for the images? What effect does this color choice have on the story's mood and setting? After the discussion, ask students to write their opinions, including evidence supporting their opinions.
2. Read “The Rest of Bruce Lee's Story” section at the end of the book. Have students pair this information with the information at the end of the book [Shining Star: The Anna May Wong Story](#).¹³ Discuss the challenges both Bruce Lee and Anna May Wong faced in the film industry. What legacy did they leave for future actors and performers of color? Why did they both resist taking just any role that was offered?

¹³ http://www.leeandlow.com/books/368/hc/shining_star_the_anna_may_wong_story

3. Show students several film clips of Bruce Lee from YouTube. Discuss how these scenes portray martial arts. Why do you think these performances made martial arts popular in the United States? What kinds of movies and roles does Bruce Lee take part in? *Note:* Most of the film clips are safe for young viewers. However, make sure to preview any clips beforehand because some have dramatized violence that may be unsuitable for sensitive viewers.

Home-School Connection

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2 and Production and Distribution of Writing, Strand 4)

1. Invite students to interview their parents, grandparents, or guardians about athletes or celebrities they have seen in their lifetimes who had to overcome obstacles. What challenges did each person face (discrimination, lack of support, low self-esteem, a temper, and so on)? How did each person persist? What character traits did each person need to succeed?
2. Encourage students to interview a local martial arts teacher. What type of martial art does this teacher practice? How did the teacher get to where he or she is today? Who believed in his or her ability to succeed? How has martial arts affected the person's life? What advice does the teacher have for someone following a dream?
3. Have students interview their parents, grandparents, or guardians about a teacher or coach who believed in them. How did this person encourage them? What advice did the person provide? What made this teacher or coach a meaningful role model?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Mochizuki is a journalist and the author of the award-winning picture books. In addition to *Be Water, My Friend*, his books include *Baseball Saved Us*, *Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story*, and *Heroes*, all published by Lee & Low Books. Mochizuki and his wife live in Seattle, Washington. His website is kenmochizuki.com.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Dom Lee has illustrated numerous award-winning books, including all four of Mochizuki's picture books. His unique style combines techniques of painting and scratching details in encaustic wax. Originally from Seoul, South Korea, Dom and his wife currently live in Sugar Hill, Georgia. To find out more about Dom Lee, visit domandk.com.

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Guided Reading Level: N

Lexile™ Level: 790L

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Childhood Experiences and Memories, Biography/Narrative Nonfiction, Asian/Asian-American Interest

RESOURCES ON THE WEB:

Learn more about *Be Water, My Friend* at: <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2360>

Book Talk with author Ken Mochizuki on *Be Water, My Friend*:

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

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