



**Classroom Guide for
KNOCKIN' ON WOOD:
Starring Peg Leg Bates**

by Lynne Barasch

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grade 3
Interest Level: Grades 1–5
Guided Reading Level: O
Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.4/.5
Lexile™ Measure: 880AD

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Overcoming Adversity, Self-reliance, Dance (tap), Disability, Discrimination, Dreams and Aspirations, African American History and Interest

Synopsis

Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates was a legendary tap dancer of the twentieth century. As a young boy, Clayton loved to dance, but when he lost his left leg in a factory accident at age twelve, no one thought he would ever walk again, let alone dance. But Clayton’s music spirit was still alive. Soon he was dancing using crutches, then a peg leg. Within a short time his peg leg matched the dancing ability of his other leg.

Peg Leg Bates performed throughout the United States and Europe, winning the hearts of audiences with his unique style of dancing. He was an amazing showstopper and an inspiration to everyone he met. With determination and a love of life, he turned misfortune into triumph. His most lasting achievement might just be the extraordinary example he set for us all.

Lynne Barasch’s initial inspiration for *Knockin’ on Wood* came many years ago when she learned about Peg Leg Bates from her daughter’s tap dance teacher.

Background

Clayton Bates, born in Fountain Inn, South Carolina, began dancing when he was five. Despite losing a leg in an accident while working in a cottonseed gin mill, Bates was determined to keep dancing. Using a wooden peg leg carved by his uncle, he resolves to become as talented as any two-legged dancer. He took the steps he saw performed by metal tap-shoed dancers and modified them for himself, adding his own flair and acrobatics. Over the years, he performed in minstrel shows, in carnivals, and finally in

vaudeville variety shows. By age fifteen, he had created a career for himself as a professional tap dancer. During his career, Peg Leg Bates performed on the same vaudeville bills as Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Gene Kelly, and Fred Astaire; he appeared on the Ed Sullivan television show; and he received several awards. In 1998, he died just a mile and a half from where he lost his leg in Fountain Inn, South Carolina.

Tap dancing is an American art form, born in the 1880s and still vibrant today, as evidenced by the popularity of shows and movies, tap dance festivals, current-day dancers such as Savion Glover, and more than 376,000 websites devoted to various aspects of tap. *Knockin' On Wood*, “taps” into this continued interest in tap dancing by focusing on one of the great tappers of the early-to-mid-20th century.

Teaching Tip

Narrative nonfiction texts are a great way to introduce younger readers to the biography genre. Identify and discuss both the fiction and nonfiction text features of the this story.

BEFORE READING**Prereading Focus Questions**

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

1. Do you like to dance? What kind of dancing do you like most? Why do you like it? How does dancing make you feel?
2. This book tells about a period of time (1912-1951) in the life of a performer named Peg Leg Bates. What do you know about this time period? How were African Americans treated in the United States during this time?
3. *Knockin' on Wood* is a true story, but the author wrote it in the same style as many fiction picture books. How is reading a nonfiction book different from reading a fiction story? What kinds of things do you have to pay attention to in each kind of book?

Exploring the Book

Examine the cover illustration with students. Ask students what they can tell about the main character. What is he doing?

Write the title *Knockin' on Wood* on the chalkboard. Lead a discussion about what the title might mean. Then add the second part of the title, “*Starring Peg Leg Bates,*” and talk about how this part of the title might relate to the first part.

Have volunteers identify different parts of the book including the title page, the copyright information, dedication, and quotes and photograph at the end. Plan to discuss the quotes with students when they finish reading the book.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to find out:

- who Peg Leg was.
- the most important events in Peg Leg Bates' life.
- why Peg Leg Bates is an important person in American history.

Vocabulary

Have students compile a list of new or unfamiliar words as they read the story.

Suggested words/phrases to highlight:

sharecropper	landowner	fieldwork	cottonseed
mill amputated	whittled	peg leg	Time Step
Cramp Roll turns	Maxifords	Pullbacks	riffs
vaudeville	blackface	resort hotel	country club
variety show	brought down the house		

Look up these words and phrases in a dictionary or the encyclopedia or online. Discuss their meanings and use the words/phrases in sentences. Then divide the words into categories, such as nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc. Ask students how understanding what each new word means helps them understand the story.

AFTER READING ACTIVITIES**Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, review comprehension, and deepen appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and illustrations in the book to support their responses.

1. What was Clayton Bates's childhood like? Where was he born? Where did he grow up? What was he passionate about as a child?
2. Why do you think Clayton goes to the barbershop to find an audience for his dancing? What does this tell you about him?
3. Why did Clayton's mother drag him home from the barbershop? How does she feel about Clayton dancing for the white men?
4. Why did Clayton want to work at the cottonseed mill? Would you have made the same decision? Why or why not?
5. If Clayton had his terrible accident today, how would his treatment have been different? How might the rest of his life been different if he lived today?
6. After the accident, how did Clayton behave? What does this tell you about the type of person he was?
7. How does Mama feel about Clayton's future after his amputation? How do her feelings change throughout the story?
8. How did Clayton feel about performing? How do you think it feels to perform on a stage in front of hundreds of people? Is that something you would enjoy? Why or why not?
9. What sacrifices did Clayton make to perform? Why did he make these sacrifices? How do you think he felt about having to make these sacrifices?

10. Notice the words that the author uses. Where are they precise and powerful? Pick one sentence that you think really painted a clear picture of Peg Leg Bates and explain how this sentence helped you picture the action in the book.
11. How do you think this story would have been different if it was told from Clayton's perspective? If it was told from his mother's perspective?

Literature Circles*

If you are using 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 if this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for sentences or passages that help tell about Peg Leg Bates's character
- The **Illustrator** might draw a map showing the places where Peg Leg Bates performed, and make a chart illustrating some of the different tap steps Bates would dance.
- The **Connector** might locate other books about tap dance, Peg Leg Bates, or discrimination during this period in United States history.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might find out about other African American performers who were successful in the face of discrimination and adversity.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Two such books you may wish to refer to are: *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 1994) and *Literature Circles Resource Guide* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

The following questions or similar ones will help students personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, in oral discussion, or in written form. Also encourage students to use details from the story to support their responses.

1. What did you like about this book? Why? Is there anything you didn't like? Why didn't you like that part?
2. What questions would you like to ask Peg Leg Bates about himself if you could meet him?
3. How do you think Peg Leg Bates felt when he was dancing? Would you like to try tap dancing? Why or why not?
4. Choose one word you think describes Peg Leg Bates. Explain why this word fits him.
5. Why do you think the author, Lynne Barasch, wrote this book? What did she want readers to learn from the story?

6. What would you tell someone who has not read *Knockin' on Wood* about this book? Why?

Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for students to share and discuss their work.

1. Retell part or all of the story of Peg Leg Bates from Clayton's perspective or from Mama's perspective.
2. Pretend you are in the audience attending one of Peg Leg Bates's performances. Write a critical review of the performance. Include details about the dancing, setting, costumes, reaction of the audience, and so on.
3. Make a list of questions you would ask Peg Leg Bates if you could interview him about his childhood and the beginning of his career while he was on the road performing in vaudeville shows.
4. Find out how Peg Leg Bates is honored in his hometown of Fountain Inn, South Carolina. Write a short report to share with the class.

ESL Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Read aloud a sentence from the book and have students read it aloud after you, pointing to each word as they speak.
2. Make a recording of the story for students to listen to. Have them follow along in the book as they listen.
3. Assign ELL students to read the book aloud with strong English speakers/readers.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Use some of these activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

Social Studies

1. Students may be interested in learning more about tap dance. Here are some aspects of tap students may want to research:
 - Where/how did tap dancing originate?
 - Who are/were some famous tap dancers?
 - What kind of training is necessary to become a professional tap dancer?
2. While reading the story, students will have noticed the discrimination that Clayton Bates encountered when he performed at vaudeville theaters. Have students research blackface and African American performers in the 1930s through 1950s. Let students report on what they learned about the history of and

challenges faced by African American performers in the United States during that time.

Language Arts

1. The author uses some powerful words in the story (for example: *endured, denied, despair, unfair, adversity*). Encourage students to select five juicy vocabulary words from the story, define them, and then write new sentences related to the content of the book.
2. Have students reread the quotes from Peg Leg Bates that appear on the last page of the book. If you have not already done so, discuss each quote with students and talk about what Peg Leg was trying to convey. After reading the last quote, discuss what the phrase “knockin’ on wood” means. Why is this phrase a good title for the book?

Art

Have students create an advertisement or poster (on poster board or on a computer) for the Peg Leg Bates Country Club. Encourage students to include specific information in the ad or poster that would entice travelers to make a reservation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

Lynne Barasch has written and illustrated several award-winning picture books for children, including *Knockin' on Wood*, *Hiromi's Hands*, and *First Come the Zebra*, all published by Lee & Low Books. About her inspiration for *Knockin' on Wood*, Barasch says, “I first heard him speak in a video interview and was overwhelmed by his humor. . . . His personality swept me along as I wrote.” Barasch and her husband live in New York City.

Awards and honors *Knockin' on Wood* has received include:

- Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People, National Council for the Social Studies/Children's Book Council
- Paterson Prize for Books for Young People
- “Starred Review,” *School Library Journal*
- South Carolina Children's Book Award Nominee, South Carolina Association of School Libraries

Resources on the Web

BookTalk with Lynne Barasch: <http://www.leeandlow.com/p/barasch.mhtml>

Book Information

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Order Information

On the Web:

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

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/77/hc/knockin_on_wood_starring_peg_leg_bates
(individual secure on-line ordering options)

By Phone:

212-779-4400 ext. 25

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