

BOOKNOTES

EDUCATORS GUIDE

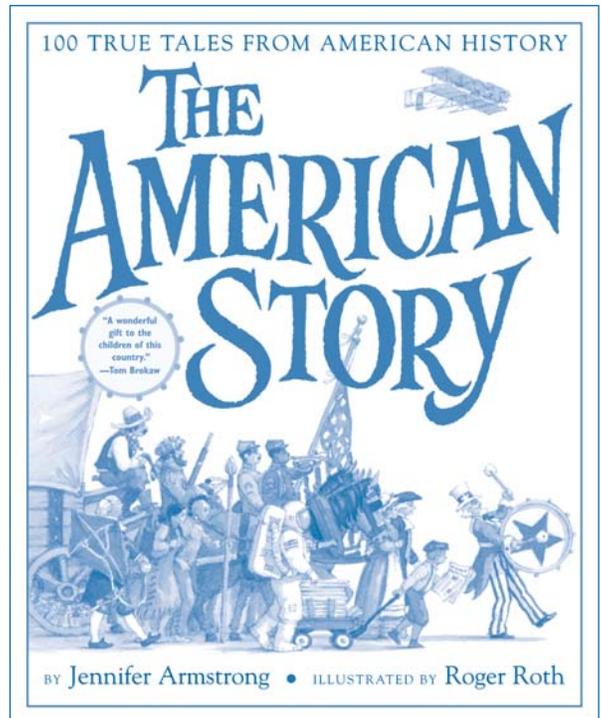
about the book

All history consists of stories about people and events. Jennifer Armstrong has pulled together a chronology of 100 uniquely American stories from our history, starting with the founding in 1565 of St. Augustine, the oldest continuously occupied city in the United States, and ending with the contested 2000 presidential election. Each sumptuously illustrated two- to five-page account is meant to inspire, beguile, and inform young readers about our diverse and dramatic history.

“What I hope readers will get from this book is a sense of connection,” says Armstrong. “I love history, seeing the connectedness of events. Students see history as a series of isolated incidents, but what I find exciting is to see how, say, Thoreau going to jail connects with Rosa Parks and the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, a century later. I love discerning those patterns. The most important part of the book to me is that kids might then look at events today with a more enlightened perspective.”



Art © 2006 by Roger Roth from *The American Story* by Jennifer Armstrong



Grades 1 up • Alfred A. Knopf hardcover • 0-375-81256-3
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how to use this book

How should a teacher read this book? It depends on the teacher and his or her students. Some of the stories review and reinforce what students already know, others foreshadow what's coming up in your curriculum, and still others provide the sheer pleasure of learning something new and surprising about our country, culture, and people.

You could read it aloud chronologically as an overview of the broad range of American history. If you share a chapter every other day, three days a week, you can complete the whole book over the course of a year. It will take you five to ten minutes to read each story aloud, but longer to discuss the events, concepts, vocabulary, and information presented.

You might pick and choose, sharing stories that fit in to your curriculum, or ones that students can use as “starter dough” for further research. Photocopy a different story for each group of students to read and ask them to come up with a creative way to present what they have learned from it to the rest of the class.

However you decide to share the book, what you'll find is that Jennifer Armstrong writes about history in a way that surprises, startles, and satisfies. No dry, dusty recitation of facts, these tales are told with verve, wit, and a sense of drama, just like the best fiction. As a model of exemplary expository writing, they will inspire students to approach their own report writing in a whole new way.

pre- and post- reading questions

Ask your group to examine closely the cover illustration, which depicts a diverse parade of people wearing period costumes, who are following a marching, drum-beating Uncle Sam. Who can you identify, and what parts of American history does each person represent?

Explain to your students that this compendium may look substantial, but it represents just a handful of the endless numbers of stories from U.S. history. Have them break into small groups to brainstorm a list of 10 famous people and 10 events that they might expect to find in an American history book. Come together as a group and make a chart of their collective responses.

As you share the book aloud, it will be interesting to note which stories Armstrong chose to include and discuss why she might have considered each one significant. Before reading, photocopy the table of contents, which includes the year and the title of each story. Ask each group to read it over and write notes in the margins identifying or deducing the subjects, events, or people they recognize.

What about the stories from your chart that didn't find their way into this book? Your class can start researching, writing, and compiling a scrapbook of the sequel: *More American Stories*.

factstorming

Factstorming is similar to brainstorming, but instead of coming up with ideas, you ask your students to come up with all the facts they know on a particular subject. Break your class into groups of four to six. Give them two to five minutes to discuss and jot down everything they know about it, no matter how seemingly insignificant. When you get back together, compile a chart or a transparency of all of their facts, putting question marks in front of any statements that are unverified. From this, you can ascertain what they know and what they think they know. Either one may surprise you, or at least let you in on how to proceed with the story you are planning to introduce.

Factstorming Subjects:

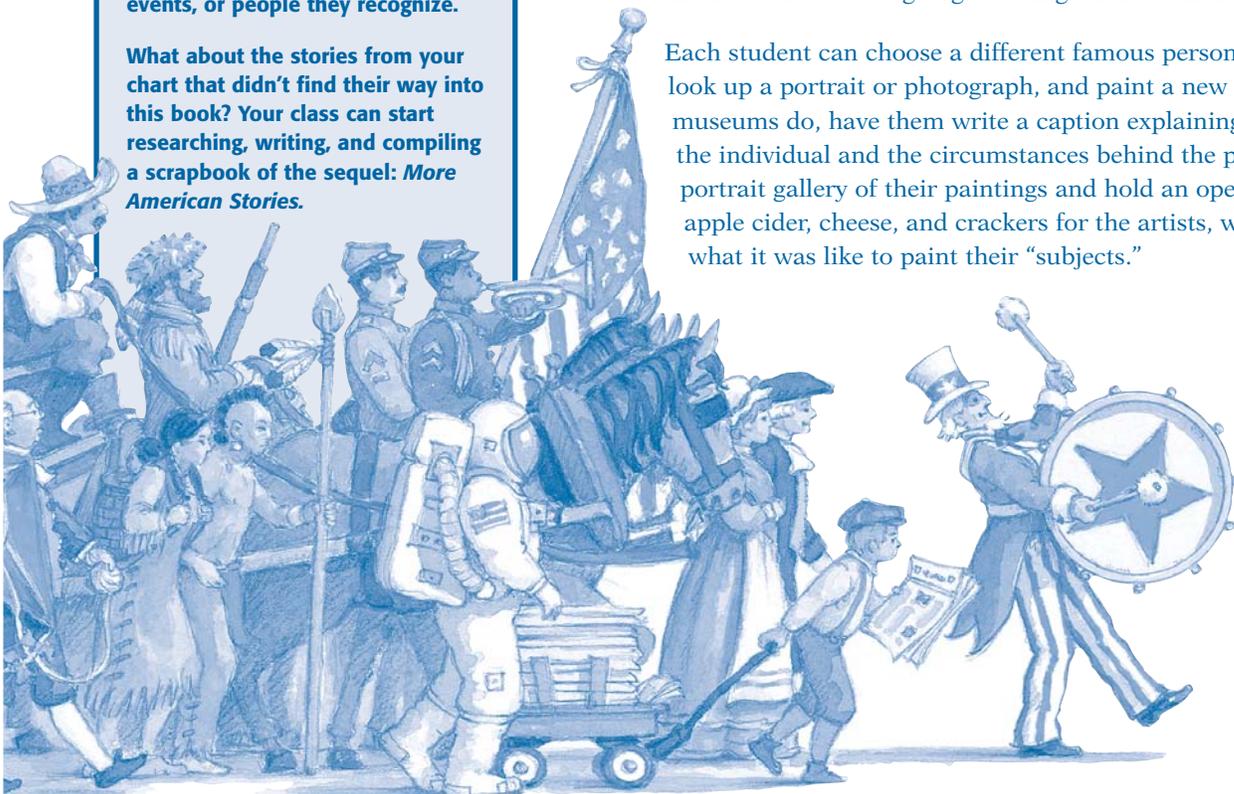
- What do you know about the Iditarod? ("1925: Mush!," p. 235)
- What do you know about the witchcraft trials in Salem, Massachusetts? ("1692: The Devil in Massachusetts," p. 27)

Follow up by reading the corresponding chapter from the book. Then ask: What new and interesting facts did you pick up from the story that you didn't know before? Make a list of five questions on things you would still like to know about the subject. (These five things can be the basis for subsequent reading and research.)

portrait gallery

As we learn from "1796: The Portrait" (p. 60), on the day Gilbert Stuart was to paint a new portrait of the first president, Washington had just been fitted with new false teeth. The portrait Stuart painted is the face on the dollar bill. Examine both the bill and a reproduction of the famous painting that you can find either in a Washington biography, a book of American paintings, the encyclopedia, or on the Internet. (For example, learn more about the portrait and the man at: www.georgewashington.si.edu/kids/familyguide.html)

Each student can choose a different famous person from history, look up a portrait or photograph, and paint a new likeness. Just as museums do, have them write a caption explaining the identity of the individual and the circumstances behind the portrait. Set up a portrait gallery of their paintings and hold an opening with sparkling apple cider, cheese, and crackers for the artists, who can discuss what it was like to paint their "subjects."

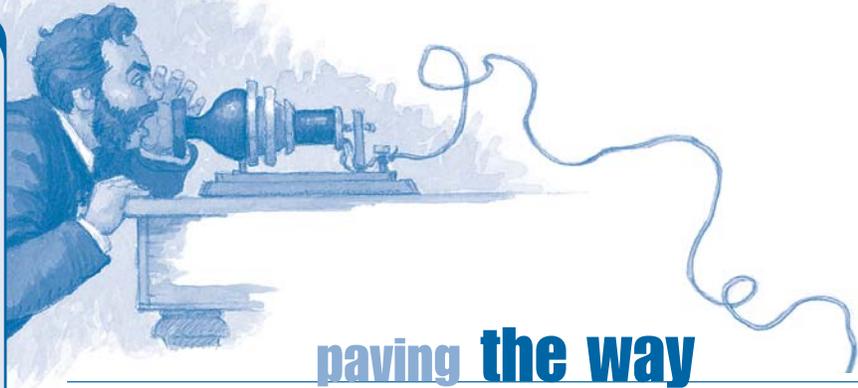


about the people

Some of the stories mention people who are not as well known as others yet helped shape our country. Use these stories as an opportunity for students to research and write up biographical sketches of these people.

- “1791: Plan for a Capital” (p. 57) introduces Benjamin Banneker, the free black man who drew up the plans for the capital city, Washington, after President Washington fired the architect, Pierre Charles L’Enfant. What happened to both of these men?
- “1819: Birdbrain” (p. 71) presents the painter John James Audubon, a failure as a frontiersman and businessman who was even thrown into jail for debt. Why do we remember him now?
- “1907: The Woeful Plight of Mary Mallon” (p. 208) is about the Irish American woman who became known as Typhoid Mary. What did we learn about disease from her and how has the treatment of sick people (and the Irish) changed in the last century?

When talking about point of view and the use of personal narratives, you can have students assume the identities of their subjects and write their stories as memoirs or autobiographies. To model this style of writing, read aloud “1805: The Great Divide” (p. 65), about the teenage girl with a newborn baby who was the translator for the Lewis and Clarke Expedition as they traveled westward through Shoshone territory. How Sacagawea, who was kidnapped as a child by a rival tribe, met up again with her best friend and her brother is a poignant story indeed. Ask students to imagine how Sacagawea must have felt that day, and have them write an account of her experience from her point of view.



paving the way

Many of the people profiled in the book paved the way for someone else. Elvis (“1956: All Shook Up,” p. 288) paved the way for future rock ‘n’ rollers. Rosa Parks (“1955: The Walking City,” p. 284) paved the way for many in the Civil Rights Movement. Benjamin Franklin’s kite experiment (“1752: Go Fly a Kite!,” p. 38) led to Thomas Edison’s electrical inventions, including the light bulb and even the electric chair (“1898: Edison’s Conquest of Mars,” p. 184).

Contemplate, discuss, and research the differences each trailblazer made in his or her field. Whose lives might each person have changed and how might they have been affected?

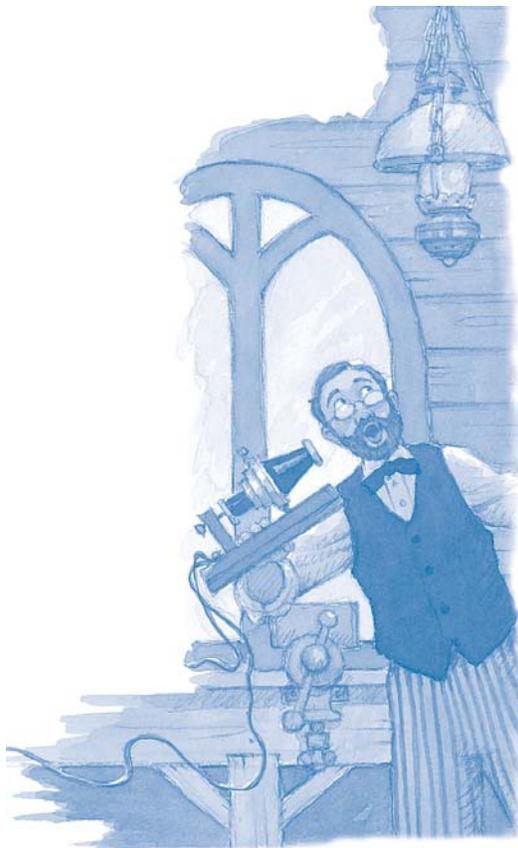
story arcs: making connections

At the back of the book is an index of Story Arcs. Armstrong has listed like subjects thematically, including “Disease and Medicine,” “Immigrants,” and “Disasters.”

What other connections can you make between two stories? For instance, there’s the description of the giant whale that sank the whaleboat, *Essex*, in “1820: The Whale’s Fury” (p. 74), and then, in “1856: Big Bones” (p. 117), there’s an account of the discovery of another gargantuan creature, the Hadrosaurus in Haddonfield, New Jersey.

What’s the most popular fruit in America? “1804: Going Bananas” (p. 63) describes the first time bananas were brought from Cuba into New York harbor, where they rotted, uneaten, because no one knew what to do with them. Then read “1821: The Lord’s Been Good to Me” (p. 78) about John Chapman, who spent 50 years roaming through Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, Illinois, and Indiana planting apple trees. We know him as a tall-tale hero, Johnny Appleseed. That will also lead you to “1870: He Laid Down His Hammer and He Died” (p. 138) about another tall-tale hero, John Henry.

There are two stories about hoaxes, which should send students to the library and the Internet to research others. “1835: Astonishing Discoveries on the Moon” (p. 84) concerns the bogus story run in *The New York Sun* about the little furry winged moon people supposedly sighted by an astronomer with his powerful new telescope (which will also lead you to the story of the Apollo 11 moon landing in “1969: The Eagle Has Landed,” p. 295). One hundred years later, Orson Welles started a near panic across the U.S. with his theatrical radio broadcast about a Martian invasion (“1938: The War of the Worlds,” p. 257).



Art © 2006 by Roger Roth from *The American Story* by Jennifer Armstrong

predicting the future

What will the stories of the 21st century be? What stories from our past will be continued in our future? Jennifer Armstrong says, “We don’t know the whole story because stories don’t always really end. Sometimes we don’t know where we are in a story until we look back on it, years later.”

Read “1923: The Curse of the Bambino” (p. 232). In his baseball career, Babe Ruth set the home run record, but it was broken by Hank Aaron, in 1974. Boston fans believed their team was cursed after Ruth was sold to the Yankees, but in 2004, the Red Sox won the World Series. What other amazing events will happen next in the world of sports?

The Scopes Monkey Trial (“1925: Evolution,” p. 239) took place a long time ago, but evolution and the separation of church and state is still an issue that is fomenting passionate debate today.

Students can ask their parents how their lives were different, and predict what their own children’s and grandchildren’s lives will be like in the 21st century.

maps and time lines

Put up a large U.S. map on your bulletin board. As you share each chapter aloud, students can plot the location of each incident or event on the map, marking it with a pin and writing up a card with a brief synopsis of what happened there.

What are the milestones in American history? Attach a long stretch of white paper across one whole wall. Construct an illustrated time line across the paper, from 1565 to now. Students can fill in dates from the book and others from their own research. Have them glue illustrations and portraits by each date.

What have the milestones been in your students’ lives? Using 6-foot sheets of paper, students can draw and design time lines of their own decade or so, researching and filling in famous events, but also personal milestones. They can illustrate their personal time lines with photographs or postcards, documents, and mementos. If you scan each personal item on a scanner, students can take the originals back home and still have the image to glue to the time line.

what if? personal connections

Trace how events from history have shaped or changed your own life. How would your life be different if:

- Alexander Graham Bell had not invented the telephone? (“1876: Hard of Hearing—East,” p. 148)
- Theodore Roosevelt didn’t go on a bear hunt? (“1902: Don’t Shoot!,” p. 198)
- Harry Burn, state legislator from Tennessee, didn’t listen to his mother? (“1920: Votes for Women,” p. 228)
- Scientists and engineers at the University of Pennsylvania couldn’t get ENIAC to work? (“1946: The Electronic Brain,” p. 271)



For more ideas on teaching *The American Story*, visit us online at www.randomhouse.com/teachers

about the author and illustrator

Jennifer Armstrong is the author of more than 50 books for young readers. She is especially known for her works of history and historical fiction. She lives in Saratoga Springs, New York. www.jennifer-armstrong.com

Roger Roth has illustrated about a dozen children’s books (two of which he also wrote). In addition, Roth serves as senior lecturer at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and is a frequent presenter at area schools. He lives in Springfield, Pennsylvania. www.rogerroth.com