



# BLACK GOLD

THE STORY OF OIL  
IN OUR LIVES

READERS GUIDE



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## ABOUT THE BOOK

The history of oil is as dark and impure as the crude itself. From the Stone Age, when hunters used asphalt to “glue” hand-worked stone points to the shafts of their spears and arrows, to our contemporary society that literally runs on oil, *Black Gold: The Story of Oil in Our Lives* takes readers on a comprehensive, fascinating, and sometimes frightening odyssey of the rapidly diminishing natural resource that has shaped the modern world. Oil touches nearly every aspect of life as it is lived today: the paved roads on which we drive, the plastic water bottle from which we drink, the fertilizers that help grow our food, and of course, the gasoline that fills our cars, all use oil. So valuable is black gold to our very way of life that wars have been waged for it, and to this day, governments are vying for control of this dwindling “freak of geology.” This book is an excellent resource for any teachers and students interested in learning about how this natural resource continues to influence every aspect of society, and ultimately how human beings will be forced to develop alternative sources of energy when the oil eventually dries up.

Illustration of oil rig © 2012 by Shutterstock  
Grades 7 up  
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## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

The quote by John D. Rockefeller that leads chapter two reads, “What a blessing the oil has been to mankind.” Start a discussion with the class about the pros and cons of oil in our world. Present students with the following scenario: In exactly one year’s time, the last of the world’s oil reserves will be spent. Direct students to write a one-page essay, poem, or story expressing how their lives would be if this scenario were to come true. Give students an opportunity to share their writing aloud.



## CHAPTER IV: AUTOMOBILE AGE

### FOR DISCUSSION

Read and discuss the quote at the beginning of this chapter. Challenge students to debate the statement. Discuss current conflicts in the Middle East, each conflict's connection to oil, and how "western blood" is being shed as a result. How was Henry Ford's assembly line method of producing automobiles directly related to the increase in oil demand and consumption? Talk about the statements from posters the British put up throughout Baghdad referring to the British army as "liberators." How are western armies viewed in the Middle East today? Discuss the author's point, "For, in reality, mandates gave legal cover to foreign domination." How is oil "the blood of victory"?

### CURRICULUM CONNECTION

Have students do research to compare the urban experience before and after the emergence of the automobile as the primary source of transportation. Give students time in class to search a variety of world newspapers for articles pertaining to Middle Eastern oil production and how the politics and economics of its production affect countries outside of the region.



## CHAPTER V: HOPELESS MONSTERS

### FOR DISCUSSION

Lead a discussion on how "black gold helped cause the World War II, then governed its course and decided its outcome." What was the German *Blitzkrieg*, and how did it depend on oil? Review and discuss the events of Pearl Harbor. How could the outcome of the war have been different if the Japanese bombers had not dropped bombs on Pearl Harbor's tank farms?

### CURRICULUM CONNECTION

Research the history of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Petroleum Administration for War (PAW). Discuss what would happen to contemporary life if all Americans could only use four gallons of gasoline a week and highway speeds were reduced to 35 miles per hour. Challenge students to offer examples how their own lives would be affected, and similarly how the U.S. economy would change.



## CHAPTER VI: RICHEST PRIZE, GREATEST PROBLEM

### FOR DISCUSSION

Display the two quotes that begin this chapter. Lead students in a debate on the two differing perspectives: oil as "one of greatest material prizes in world history" versus "the greatest problem of all time." Discuss the prevalence of plastic in contemporary daily life. Gamal Abdel Nasser once suggested that without oil the machines of the world are "mere pieces of iron, rusty motionless, and lifeless." Discuss with students how many machines they use on a daily basis that are dependent on oil to run, and have them imagine and discuss how their lives would be different without these machines.

### CURRICULUM CONNECTION

Challenge students to create a "Plastics Day in the Life" list. Instruct students to note all of the objects that they use or interact with over the course of a day that have plastic as a component part. (For example, most students will list their cell phones, computer, or MP3 player). Give students time in class to create a master list. Scan the newspaper headlines for articles about or referring to OPEC. After reading each article, place a tack on a world map relating to the location of the news story. After a period of one month, connect the tacks to provide students with a visual metaphor of how the oil cartel affects the entire world.



## CHAPTER VII: A DAY OF RECKONING

### FOR DISCUSSION

What is the meaning of the word *reckoning*? How will humanity ultimately have to reckon with a world without oil? Discuss the following quote from business leader Fred Tennant: “In the U.S., we get fired up about doing something when oil prices are high; then when prices drop, we forget about it.” Do you agree? How is forgetting about high oil prices an easy way to keep people dependent on oil consumption? Do you agree with the modern doomsday scenario described in this chapter? How can humanity avoid such a disaster? Middle Eastern countries will still have 83 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves by the year 2020. How is this the “energy equivalent of nuclear weapons”?

### CURRICULUM CONNECTION

In this chapter, the author describes the process of deep-water drilling. Research the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, reviewing what caused the explosion that blew out the well, the economic and environmental effects of millions of gallons of oil in the gulf, and what BP has done in the aftermath to make amends. Students can also research government legislation or regulations that have been adopted since the BP disaster.



## CHAPTER VIII: FOSSIL FUELS AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

### FOR DISCUSSION

Discuss the issue of global warming and climate change, focusing on what scientists predict will be the effects of steadily rising temperatures. Discuss why the United States refused to participate in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Discuss China and India’s growing economies and the effects they will have on oil consumption, the burning of fossil fuels, and climate change. Why does “continued dependence on fossil fuels threaten our economic, political, and physical well-being”?

### CURRICULUM CONNECTION

Give the class time to research one environmental and/or human consequence of climate change, such as changing rainfall patterns, increasing severe weather, spreading of tropical disease, and melting of the polar ice caps and glaciers. Give students the option of doing a written or visually based report to share their findings.



## CHAPTER IX: TOWARD A NEW ENERGY ORDER

### FOR DISCUSSION

What is meant by *energy independence*? Where should the United States be focusing its efforts in order to end its dependence on foreign oil? Some people feel that the United States needs to drill more on its own land and in its waters to capture the oil that still exists in this country. Debate the issue of drilling in currently protected areas, such as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. (For viewpoints from both sides of the debate, visit [ArcticCircle.uconn.edu/ANWR/anwrdebateindex.html](http://ArcticCircle.uconn.edu/ANWR/anwrdebateindex.html)). Reread the section “Oil Shale and Oil Sands”, and discuss/debate the positive outcomes of this process versus the negative consequences.

### CURRICULUM CONNECTION

To begin the following project, display this passage from the text: “The triple threat of peak oil, high prices, and global warming has forced people to think about meeting their energy needs with renewables fuels instead of fossil fuels.” Place students in small groups and assign each a renewable source of energy to research, including experimental technologies, such as wave energy ([OceanEnergyCouncil.com/index.php/Wave-Energy/Wave-Energy.html](http://OceanEnergyCouncil.com/index.php/Wave-Energy/Wave-Energy.html)). Research and present findings to class.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

### Climate Change

[EPA.gov/climatechange/index.html](http://EPA.gov/climatechange/index.html) **Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries**

[OPEC.org/opec\\_web/en/](http://OPEC.org/opec_web/en/)

### Extreme Oil

[PBS.org/wnet/extremeoil/history](http://PBS.org/wnet/extremeoil/history)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**ALBERT MARRIN** is the author of numerous highly regarded nonfiction books for young readers, including *Flesh and Blood So Cheap: The Triangle Fire and Its Legacy*, *Years of Dust*, and *Sitting Bull and His World*. His many honors include the Washington Children's Book Guild and *Washington Post* Non-fiction Award for an "outstanding lifetime contribution that has enriched the field of children's literature," the James Madison Book Award for lifetime achievement, and the National Endowment for Humanities Medal awarded to him by President George W. Bush.



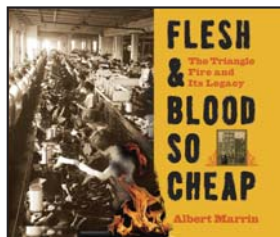
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## READ THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST BY ALBERT MARRIN!

★ "The writing is compelling and detailed. . . . A useful and thoughtful addition to any American history collection."—*School Library Journal*, Starred

★ "Highly readable. . . . Sure to spark discussion."  
—*Booklist*, Starred

★ "[A] powerful chronicle . . . Marrin's message that protecting human dignity is our shared responsibility is vitally resonant."  
—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred



Grades 5 up

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## CHAPTER I: A FREAK OF GEOLOGY

### FOR DISCUSSION

The author claims that “[oil] helps shape the history, society, politics, and economy of every nation in earth.” Discuss this statement and challenge students to offer concrete examples of oil’s power to shape world events. The author concludes this chapter with the statement, “For without oil and natural gas, our lives would be very different and very poor.” Challenge students to describe how their lives are rich as a result of oil. Ask students to think of countries in the world that do not have a ready supply of oil, and how the people of those countries are poor as a result. After students complete reading this chapter, have them explain why oil as a major source of the world’s energy is a “freak of geology.”

### CURRICULUM CONNECTION

This chapter has a variety of science connections, such as geology, fossils and fossil fuels, and sedimentation. Work with the science teacher to plan a field trip to a rock quarry or other natural area to see examples of sedimentation. Work with the school art teacher to make leaf impressions or a mural of the flora and fauna from the carboniferous period.



## CHAPTER II: BLACK GOLD

### FOR DISCUSSION

What qualities did the men described in this chapter have that led them to their discoveries and fortunes in the oil business? John D. Rockefeller believed that “everything good that came to him was a gift from God,” and based on this belief he bestowed millions of dollars to charity. What is the negative side of this belief? Why did people eventually come to “see Rockefeller as two people—one with an angel’s halo, the other with devil’s horns”?

### CURRICULUM CONNECTION

The author touches on a few examples of how oil has been used throughout history. Give students time to research more examples of oil’s role from antiquity through the start of the Industrial Revolution. Take students to the library or media center and direct them to search newspaper archives from the early 1880s, when John D. Rockefeller “controlled 90 percent of the oil refined in the United States.” Ask students to note how Rockefeller was depicted in the news, via articles, editorials, and political cartoons. Give students time to share their findings with the class. Have them research contemporary oil leaders and oil news to create political cartoons. In math class, follow and graph the daily price per barrel over a two week period. During this time, have students carefully follow the news for stories that help explain the price fluctuations.



## CHAPTER III: THE DESTINY OF NATIONS

### FOR DISCUSSION

In this chapter, it becomes clear that oil will become a key issue in modern warfare. Discuss why those countries that control oil are at a greater advantage than those that lack the resource. Discuss how the following statement by Walter Long is relevant in the wars that are being fought today: “You may have men, munitions, and money, but if you do not have oil . . . all your other advantages would be of . . . little value.” Discuss the meaning of the statement, “The Allied cause had floated to victory upon a wave of oil.”

### CURRICULUM CONNECTION

After reading this chapter, build a history of oil time line covering the period 1900 through 1918. Students can expand the time line after reading each chapter.