

# Deborah Hopkinson Author Study



Photo credit: Andrew Thomas

## Meet the Author

Deborah Hopkinson loves to explore history through her books, many of which draw on real people and events. Her readers learn about the past as they enjoy stories told in vivid language and a variety of narrative voices, with a different illustrator for each

book. Hopkinson's novels are perfect for students practicing the analytical skill of comparing and contrasting.

With your students, set up an Author Study Center in the classroom using the author's photograph and books. Students can later add facts about the author and display work they do for the author study. Have your students watch part of this video interview with Hopkinson: [readingrockets.org/books/interviews/Hopkinson](http://readingrockets.org/books/interviews/Hopkinson). They might especially enjoy segment ten, which is a clip of Hopkinson reading from *Abe Lincoln Crosses a Creek*.

Hopkinson is the author of almost fifty books for young readers, which have won awards and received praise. She has lived in Massachusetts and Hawaii and now lives in Oregon with her family. Students can find out more about her at [deborahhopkinson.com](http://deborahhopkinson.com).

Since the selection of books in this guide includes contemporary fiction, historical fiction, and nonfiction, review these types of writing with your class. Show them the author's notes in some of the books, where she discusses which parts of the historical fiction are factual, which are uncertain, and which are imagined.

# Classroom Activities

## Compare and Contrast Chart

Have the students create a large chart for the classroom on which to compare the eight books. It should have spaces for different elements such as title, illustrator, style of illustration, subject, historical period/year, fiction/nonfiction, structure, and narrative voice. As the students read the books, have them fill in the chart. Small groups can focus on different elements to compare in two or more books and report back to the class on what they found.

🕒 Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Anchor Standards for Reading 1, 5, 6, and 7.

## Timeline: What Happened Then?

Using the chart, have the class create a timeline that shows the books in chronological order. Then have small groups do research to find five interesting facts about those years in history to add to the timeline.

🕒 Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Anchor Standards for Reading 1 and 7 and for Writing 7.

## The Voice That Tells the Story

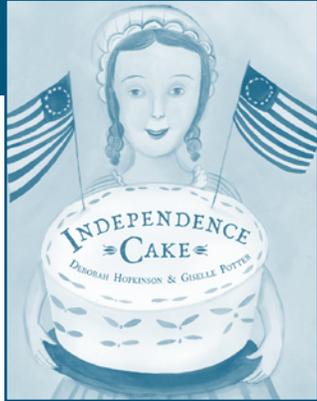
Discuss the range of narrative voices that Hopkinson uses. For example, the narrator of *Abe Lincoln Crosses a Creek* directly addresses the reader—and the illustrator. As a class, convert part of one of the stories into a different narrative point of view. Discuss how the narrative voice affects the story.

🕒 Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Anchor Standards for Reading 6 and for Writing 3.

## Communicating Through Quilts

Two of the books, *A Letter to My Teacher* and *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*, feature quilts. Have students work in small groups to create quilts about the other books or their own memory quilts, by combining colored paper and drawings and using math skills to lay out the squares and patterns.

🕒 Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Anchor Standards for Reading 1 and 7.



## Independence Cake

**WHAT kind of book did Amelia Simmons write?**

HC: 978-0-385-39017-0  
GLB: 978-0-385-39018-7  
EL: 978-0-385-39019-4

- Find all the chores Amelia does in the book. Then discuss which of them you or someone in your household does. Are the chores, such as washing dishes, done in the same way today? What has taken the place of chores that most people rarely do now, such as weaving?

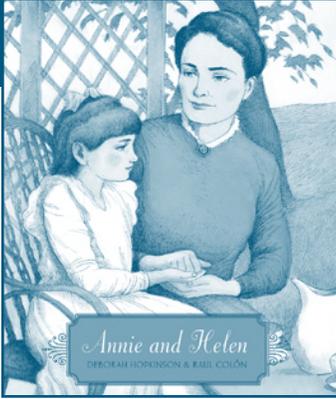
## Discussion Questions

- What kind of person is Amelia Simmons in this story? Give examples of Amelia's actions that show her character. Why does Mrs. Bean like having Amelia work for her?
- Identify similes and metaphors in the text, and talk about the comparisons being made. What does the figurative language add to the story? From where does the author draw inspiration for the figures of speech?

## Activity: Inspired by Amelia

Talk about recipes and cookbooks and how they are used. Ask students to bring in a simple recipe they've cooked or one they've collected from a family member or friend. Compile the recipes, printed and decorated by the students, into a class cookbook. Prepare one or two of the recipes as a class, emphasizing the math skills needed in cooking and baking.

🕒 Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Anchor Standards for Reading 1.



# Annie and Helen

**WHEN did Helen Keller lose her senses of sight and hearing?**

HC: 978-0-375-85706-5  
GLB: 978-0-375-95706-2  
EL: 978-0-375-98763-2

- Why is language so important to Helen? What does understanding language do for her? Once Helen learned to finger spell, she “hardly ever lost her temper.” Why do you think this is?

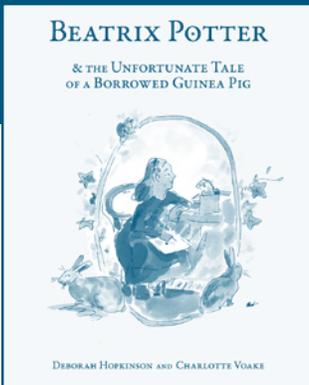
## Discussion Questions

- Discuss the obstacles that Annie had to overcome in teaching Helen. What obstacles did Helen have to overcome, beyond her deafness and blindness? Think about Helen’s relationship with her parents. Can certain aspects of that relationship be considered obstacles?
- Annie wrote to a friend that Helen “has tyrannized over everybody.” What actions show that Helen is tyrannical? How did Annie deal with the problem?

## Activity: A Message in Braille

Give every student a printed copy of the Braille alphabet. Have them write a short message and, on a large sheet of paper, translate the message into Braille by drawing the corresponding dots. To make the Braille message easily felt, have the students use glue to make raised dots over the drawn ones. When the glue dries, students should trade messages with each other and try to read them with their fingers.

 Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Anchor Standards for Reading 7.



# Beatrix Potter and the Unfortunate Tale of a Borrowed Guinea Pig

**WHY did Beatrix Potter borrow a guinea pig?**

HC: 978-0-385-37325-8  
GLB: 978-0-385-37326-5  
EL: 978-0-385-37327-2

- Miss Paget was “indeed displeased” when Beatrix brought over the dead guinea pig in a box. How did she show her displeasure? Discuss other reactions that a person might have to the situation. How would you have felt? If you were Miss Paget, do you think you would have saved the watercolor Beatrix made? Why or why not?

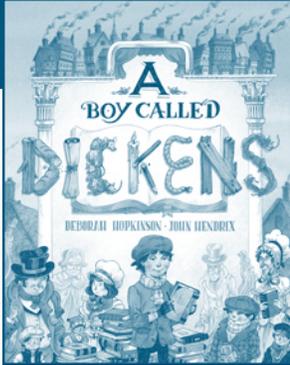
## Discussion Questions

- This book is in large part about a dead guinea pig, yet it has a lot of humor. Pick passages and illustrations in the book that lighten the tone, especially those that made you and your classmates laugh. How does the humor in the book function? Is it possible to see humor in serious subjects?
- The author uses language to convey the setting of the story. Go through the book and find phrases that indicate an earlier time. Talk about what the phrases mean and what words you would use today to convey the same thing.

## Activity: All the Pets

Create a graph of all the pets class members have had. Create other graphs related to pets, such as favorite pets, pets students would like to have, and pet sizes. Then have students collect data from other classrooms to add to the graphs.

 Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Anchor Standards for Speaking & Listening 2.



## A Boy Called Dickens

**WHERE did Charles Dickens work?**

HC: 978-0-375-86732-3  
EL: 978-0-375-98740-3

### Discussion Questions

- Point to actions and thoughts that show what kind of boy Charles Dickens was. What was his relationship with his family like? How about with his fellow workers? What qualities made him a good writer?
- Why does twelve-year-old Charles work every day? What kind of work does he do, and for how many hours a day? What problems does this present in his life? Talk about why we have laws against child labor.

- What do the illustrations show about London in the 1800s? Give details about buildings, furniture, lighting, clothing, and so on. Describe the rooms where Charles lived, worked, and went to school.

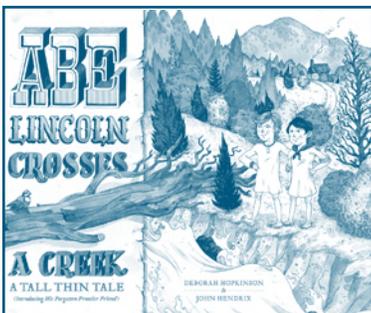
### Activity: Dickens's Diary

Have students write diary entries as if they are Charles Dickens in the situations below.

- Working at Warren's while his father is in debtor's prison.
- Working at Warren's after his father is out of prison.
- Going back to school, how he feels about it, and why it matters to him.

 Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Anchor Standards for Writing.

## Abe Lincoln Crosses a Creek: A Tall Thin Tale



**WHO saved Abe Lincoln from a roaring creek?**

PB: 978-1-5247-0158-1  
HC: 978-0-375-83768-5  
GLB: 978-0-375-93768-2

### Discussion Questions

- How many versions of the rescue does the story give, and what are they? The narrator says at one point, "For that's the thing about history—if you weren't there, you can't know for sure." How does that relate to having several versions of the rescue? Read the author's note and discuss which parts of the story we know for certain and which we don't.
- Analyze the narrator's voice. Find examples of the narrator speaking directly to the reader, some of which are questions. Discuss the effect of this technique on you as the reader, including the impact of the

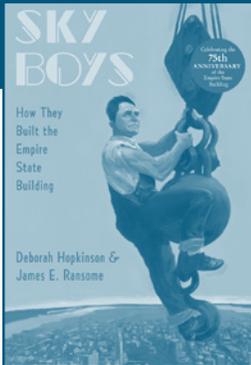
questions. When does the narrator speak to the illustrator, and why?

- One way the narrative voice and the illustrations work together is by using large, colorful typefaces for certain phrases and exclamations. Find these in the story, discuss the differences among them, and talk about how they function to add emotions, humor, and more.

### Activity: Your Own Tall Tale

After discussing the use of exaggeration and a folksy narrative voice in tall tales, have students each write a tall tale modeled on the book. It should be about one friend rescuing another from danger. As in the book, the story's narrator should interrupt the action and offer at least two possible versions of the rescue.

 Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Anchor Standards for Writing 3.



## Sky Boys: How They Built the Empire State Building

### WHEN was the Empire State Building built?

PB: 978-0-375-86541-1  
EL: 978-0-307-98321-3

- At the back of the book, read “A Note About the Story.” What do you learn from it that isn’t in the story? Read “Acknowledgments and Sources,” and discuss what you can tell about the author’s research. Talk about why the author added these two sections and the photographs on the endpapers.

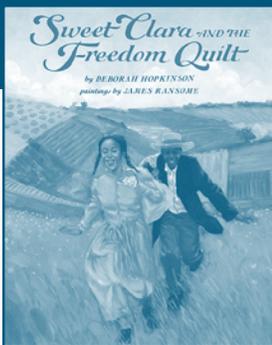
### Discussion Questions

- Find words that show the story is written in the second person. Who is the author speaking to? Why do you think she chose this way to tell the story? What is your reaction to the second-person narrative?
- When the boy and his father go up to the top of the building, the father says, “If we can do this, we can do anything.” What does he mean? Talk about what made the Empire State Building so special, particularly to New Yorkers at that time. Why is it important to the father and other New Yorkers to have a sense of hope?

### Activity: Working Words

As a class, make a list of the building terms used in the text, such as *derrick*, *beam*, *pier*, *rivet*, *mason*, and others. Have students share their knowledge about the different terms. Assign a term to individual students or pairs to look up, define, and draw. Create a class book of the words and add it to the Author Study Center.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Anchor Standards for Reading 4.



## Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt

### HOW did a freedom quilt help a girl escape slavery?

PB: 978-0-679-87472-0  
EL: 978-0-307-79341-6

- Explain how Clara makes the quilt. What materials does she use, and where does she get them? How does she show different places on the quilt? Why does the quilt take so long to make? Talk about who helps Clara and how. How does Clara’s quilt help others?

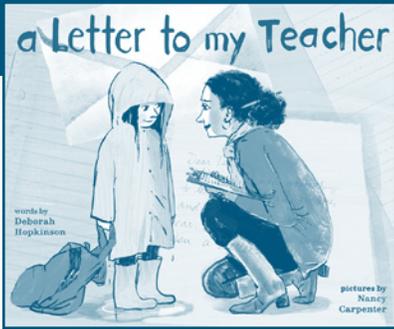
### Discussion Questions

- Describe Clara’s life as a slave, including her work and where she lives. Discuss the hard parts of Clara’s life. Explain who Aunt Rachel is and her role in Clara’s life. Why doesn’t Aunt Rachel go with Clara at the end?
- Clara has great strength of character. Think of some adjectives that describe the aspects of Clara’s character that helped her escape.

### Activity: Act It Out

Have small groups rewrite different scenes from the book as Reader’s Theater scripts and perform them for the rest of the class. The scripts should be mostly dialogue, plus parts for a narrator, who sets the scene and supplies transitions. Have students read from the script rather than memorize it; props and costumes are optional. (For Reader’s Theater tips, visit [aaronshelp.com/rt/Tips.html](http://aaronshelp.com/rt/Tips.html).)

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Anchor Standards for Speaking & Listening 6.



HC: 978-0-375-86845-0  
GLB: 978-0-375-96845-7  
EL: 978-0-375-98776-2

# A Letter to My Teacher

**WHY** would a teacher tell someone to read to a cat?

- Talk about what the illustrations add in terms of personalities, emotions, and information. Discuss the way the illustrator uses color, including black, gray, and white. Choose a two-page spread you like, and talk about the pictures in detail and how they relate to the text.

## Discussion Questions

- Why is the narrator writing a letter to her teacher? What was the teacher like? How did she help the narrator? Give evidence to back up your answers.
- Why doesn't the narrator want to read aloud in class? How does she try to avoid it? Why do you think the teacher suggested reading to the cat? The teacher compares learning to read to planting a garden. How are the two activities alike?

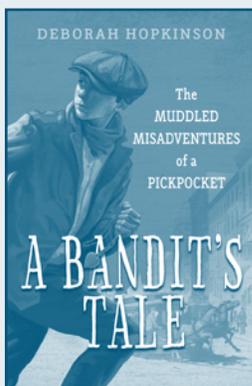
## Activity: Thank You So Much!

Have students write a letter to someone who has helped them or been kind to them. It could be a relative or friend, or someone they met briefly. The letter should be specific, using details to describe conversations or incidents that mattered. Give them the option of mailing the letter.

- Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Anchor Standards for Writing 2.

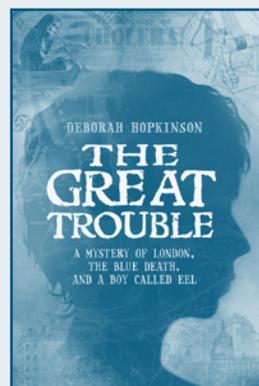
## Have Older Readers?

Check out these middle-grade titles from Deborah Hopkinson.



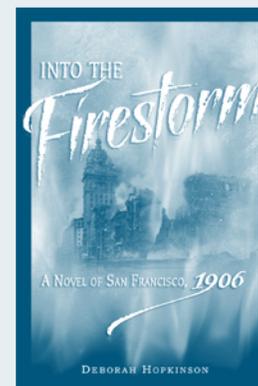
**A Bandit's Tale:  
The Muddled  
Misadventures of  
a Pickpocket**

HC: 978-0-385-75499-6  
GLB: 978-0-385-75500-9  
CD: 978-0-14-752146-0  
EL: 978-0-385-75501-6



**The Great Trouble:  
A Mystery of London,  
the Blue Death, and  
a Boy Called Eel**

PB: 978-0-375-84308-2  
HC: 978-0-375-84818-6  
EL: 978-0-449-81819-0



**Into the Firestorm:  
A Novel of San Francisco,  
1906**

PB: 978-0-440-42129-0  
EL: 978-0-375-84916-9