



TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 6-8

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Each Little Bird That Sings

Deborah Wiles

READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

Each Little Bird That Sings

Deborah Wiles

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Table of Contents

Summary	3
About the Author.....	3
Characters	4
Initiating Activities.....	4
Vocabulary Activities.....	5
Nine Sections	6
Each section contains: Summary, Vocabulary, Discussion Questions, and Supplementary Activities	
Post-reading Discussion Questions	19
Post-reading Extension Activities	22
Assessment.....	23
Scoring Rubric.....	32

Skills and Strategies

Thinking

Brainstorming, critical thinking,
decision-making, creative
thinking, cause/effect

Comprehension

Predicting, evaluating decisions,
sequencing, compare/contrast

Writing

Poetry, letter, character sketch,
song, Life Notice, recipe, short
story

Listening/Speaking

Oral presentation, discussion

Vocabulary

Definitions, parts of speech,
context clues, synonyms/
antonyms, glossary

Literary Elements

Setting, conflict, characterization,
point of view, theme, symbolism,
figurative language, climax

Across the Curriculum

Art—painting, sketch, caricature;
Geography—map skills,
topography; Drama—screenplay,
casting; Science—rock
identification

Genre: young-adult fiction

Setting: fictional small town of Snapfinger, Mississippi

Point of View: first person

Themes: grief, courage, service, friendship, family, life, death, forgiveness, self-awareness

Conflict: person vs. person, person vs. self, person vs. nature

Tone: conversational, informal, humorous at times

Date of First Publication: 2005

Summary

Snowberger's Funeral Home handles all of the funeral arrangements for the recently deceased in Snapfinger, Mississippi. Ten-year-old Comfort Snowberger and her family own and manage the funeral home, always abiding by the motto, "We live to serve..." (p. 95). In less than a year, two older members of Comfort's family pass away and her best friend, Declaration, grows distant. Worse, Comfort must tolerate her annoying eight-year-old cousin, Peach Shuggars, at every family event. When Declaration taunts Peach on a rainy funeral day, Peach, Comfort, and Funeral Dog Extraordinaire Dismay find themselves caught in a dangerous flood at Snapfinger Creek. Emerging from the storm, Comfort must accept what she has lost, appreciate what she has gained, and decide whom to forgive in order to truly embrace life.

About the Author

Personal: Deborah Wiles was born on May 7, 1953. She is the eldest of three children. Her father was in the Air Force, so Wiles traveled a great deal but spent her summers with family members in Mississippi. As a child, Wiles wanted to be a mother and a writer and admired Nancy Drew. Wiles raised her family in Frederick, Maryland, where she lived for 25 years. She taught writing at three universities, including Vermont College, where she also earned her Master of Fine Arts degree. She now resides in Atlanta, Georgia, where she writes, gardens, and teaches in the Writing for Children & Young Adults program at Vermont College. She claims that versions of her extended family members are often portrayed in her stories.

Career: Wiles has written two picture books, *One Wide Sky* and *Freedom Summer*. *Freedom Summer* depicts how life changed in the South after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. She also wrote the Aurora County Trilogy for middle-school readers, which includes *Love, Ruby Lavender*; *Each Little Bird That Sings*; and *The Aurora County All-Stars*. *Countdown* is her fourth novel and the first in a trilogy about the 1960s. Wiles has received numerous awards, including the 2002 Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award and the 2005 E. B. White Read-Aloud Award. *Each Little Bird That Sings* was also a Golden Kite Honor Book and a National Book Award Finalist.

Characters

Comfort Snowberger: ten-year-old girl whose family owns and manages the local funeral home

Declaration Johnson: formerly Comfort's best friend; lost her mother at age four

Peach Shuggars: Comfort's eight-year-old cousin; exuberant but prone to emotional outbursts; adores and annoys Comfort

Edisto Snowberger: Comfort's great-uncle; one of the founders of Snowberger's Funeral Home; an optimist

Florentine Snowberger: Comfort's great-great-aunt; married one of the founders of Snowberger's Funeral Home; lived to a very old age

Bunch Snowberger: Comfort's father; embalmer at the funeral home

Joy Snowberger: Comfort's mother; florist at the funeral home; former beauty queen

Tidings Snowberger: Comfort's 15-year-old brother; likes to pretend he is a military officer

Merry Snowberger: Comfort's younger sister; toddler who enjoys playing dress-up

Goldie Shuggars: Bunch's sister; Peach's mother; Comfort's aunt; loves to cook

Plas Johnson: Declaration's father; owns the local newspaper

Dismay: Comfort's dog; helps console people who are grieving

Initiating Activities

Use one or more of the following to introduce the novel.

1. **Predictions:** Have students look at the map at the beginning of the novel. Have them use the map to make predictions about the novel's characters and plot.
2. **Literature/Theme:** Ask students to read Song #72 at the beginning of the novel. As a class, discuss the message the song conveys and why the author might have chosen to place this song at the beginning of the novel.
3. **Brainstorming:** Using the Attribute Web on page 24 of this guide, have students brainstorm about the word "life." Ask: What does it mean to truly live?
4. **Discussion:** Hold a class discussion about the evolution of friendships. Ask: Do friendships stay the same or change? Is this good, bad, or both? Explain.
5. **Literature/Prediction:** Ask students if they have read the novel *Love, Ruby Lavender*. If so, have students use their knowledge of that novel to make predictions about *Each Little Bird That Sings*. If not, have students read a review of *Love, Ruby Lavender* and then make predictions about *Each Little Bird That Sings*.
6. **Discussion:** Ask students if they have any pets. Discuss with students the kind of affection pets have for their owners (and vice versa).

7. **Prediction:** Will Declaration attend Aunt Florentine’s funeral?

Supplementary Activities

1. **Figurative Language:** Begin keeping a chart of similes, metaphors, and examples of personification you find in the novel. Add to the chart as you read. Examples: **Similes**—“...rain sheared down like curtains” (p. 3); “...Dismay was glued to me like Elmer’s” (pp. 4–5); “...the sun was shining like a bright new penny” (p. 14); “...her garden dress poofed around her like a big, soft cloud...” (p. 15); “she dropped down...like a leaf tumbling off the oak tree of life...” (p. 23).
2. **Critical Thinking:** Compare and contrast Comfort and Declaration using the Venn Diagram on page 25 of this guide.
3. **Illustration:** Find a colorful simile, metaphor, or example of personification from the novel. Draw a picture that literally interprets the literary device. For example, if choosing “...the sun was shining like a bright new penny” (p. 14), substitute a penny for the sun in the picture.

Chapters 4–5

Comfort meets Declaration at Listening Rock, and Declaration explains how she has changed since spending the summer with her mother’s family. Comfort eventually persuades Declaration to attend Aunt Florentine’s funeral. Comfort writes an article about proper funeral behavior for the local newspaper to publish on a slow news day.

Vocabulary
canopy
sentries
regally
crevasse
lofty
fortified
scandalized
pursed
composing
vigil
impolite
gustatory

Discussion Questions

1. Describe Comfort’s attitude as she and Dismay climb Purgatory Hill to Listening Rock. Discuss how the author uses vivid details to describe the scene and Comfort’s disposition. (*Comfort is happy and content in her natural surroundings. Comfort sees beauty all around her and enjoys her time outside with “living things.” Answers will vary.*)
2. What conflict emerges in Chapter 5? What is the source of the conflict, and how do you think it will be resolved? (*Comfort and Declaration confront the changes in their friendship. Declaration has changed in many ways since spending the summer with her mother’s family. She wants to act more ladylike and have friends her mother would approve of. Comfort disagrees with Declaration’s new mindset and wants their friendship to continue unchanged. Declaration doesn’t want to attend Aunt Florentine’s funeral, but Comfort implores her to. Declaration eventually agrees to attend the funeral but leaves Listening Rock before eating lunch with Comfort. Answers will vary.*)
3. Compare and contrast the way Comfort and Declaration view funerals. (*Answers will vary. Comfort and Declaration both see funerals as a way of saying goodbye to a loved one. They recognize it as a significant event that allows people to grieve and honor the deceased. Comfort enjoys funerals because she sees them as a celebration of a person’s life. She recognizes their value to the mourners, and funerals are familiar to her since her family manages the town’s funeral home.*)

Although Declaration attended her mother's funeral at a young age, she is not as familiar with death and associates funerals only with loss. She has attended only two funerals and does not understand Comfort's fascination with them.)

4. Upon what conditions will Declaration attend Aunt Florentine's funeral? Do you think setting conditions is fair? Why or why not? *(Declaration says she will come to the funeral but not the viewing. She also refuses to spend time with Peach. Answers will vary. Some students may think Declaration is justified in refusing to associate with Peach, considering the scenes he causes [not to mention what he did to Declaration at Uncle Edisto's funeral]. Others may think that Declaration has an obligation to support her friend, even if it means putting up with Peach, because Comfort is suffering.)*
5. Why do you think the author includes Comfort's "Top Ten Tips for First-rate Funeral Behavior" (pp. 47–53)? Critically evaluate her list. What questions does the author leave unanswered? *(The author uses the article to further showcase Comfort's personality—her sense of humor, her understanding of the world, and her self-awareness as an explorer, recipe tester, and reporter. Also, the types of behavior that are acceptable/unacceptable portray the culture of Snapfinger. The embedded humor adds lightheartedness to an otherwise dark subject. The last item on the list draws readers' attention to the character Peach Shuggars. Evaluations will vary. Encourage students to brainstorm additional points for or counterarguments to Comfort's list.)*
6. **Prediction:** Who is Peach Shuggars, and why does he have a bad reputation?

Supplementary Activities

1. Figurative Language: Continue adding to your figurative language chart. Examples: **Similes**— "[The towel] floated like a magic carpet..." (p. 36); "[The large green tarp] looked like a circus tent..." (p. 46); **Personification**—"The oak grove waved its leafy green flags at us, shouting, 'Hail, Dismay!'" (p. 33); "My heart listened..." (p. 35).
2. Science: While climbing Listening Rock, Comfort remembers how Uncle Edisto used to identify different types of rocks embedded there. Create your own rock collection, identifying different types of rocks such as slate, granite, limestone, etc.
3. Writing: Write a poem describing life in geometric terms (e.g., line, circle, etc.). Explain why you chose this geometric term.

Character Web

Directions: Write the name of a character from the novel in the center rectangle. In each oval, write an adjective that describes the character's personality. Then, fill in each dotted rectangle with a detail about the character that illustrates that part of the character's personality.

