



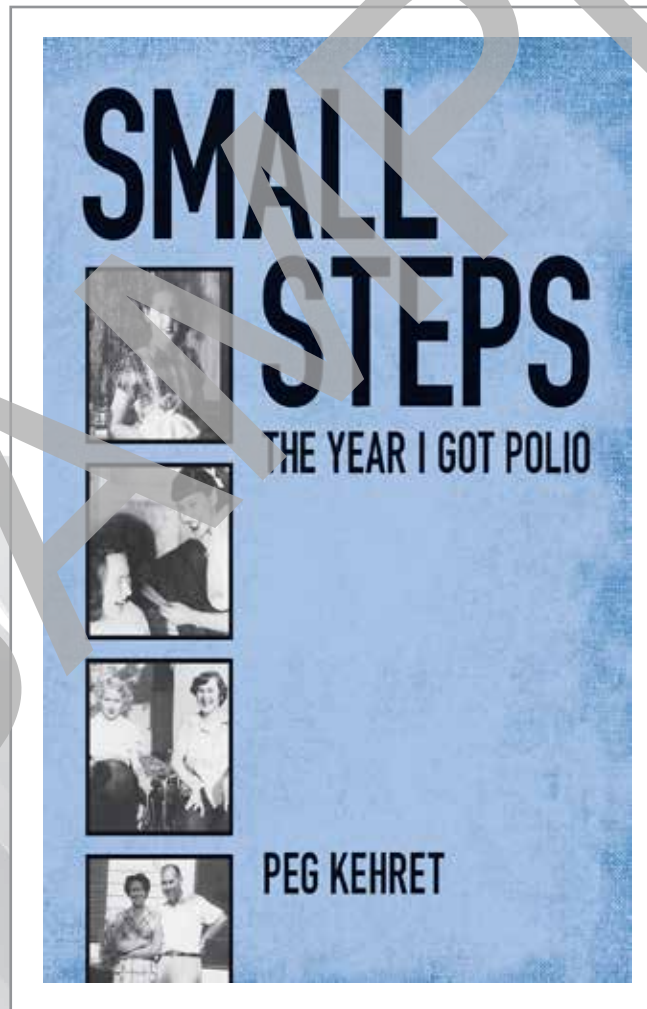
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 6-8**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# **Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio**

Peg Kehret



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio

Peg Kehret

## 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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## Skills and Strategies

### Critical Thinking

Identifying main ideas,  
sequencing, recalling,  
summarizing, deduction

### Comprehension

Identifying attributes,  
compare/contrast,  
predicting, poetry analysis,  
evaluating and supporting  
judgments, researching

### Writing

Creative, expository, poetry

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, debate

### Vocabulary

Context clues, antonyms,  
synonyms, definitions

### Literary Elements

Similes, metaphors, climax,  
nonfiction/fiction, point of  
view, narration, imagery,  
identifying character traits  
and motivation, suspense,  
idioms, alliteration, puns,  
foreshadowing

### Across the Curriculum

Social Studies—geography,  
history of the disease,  
historical figures with polio,  
historical figures who have  
demonstrated perseverance;  
Science—viruses, muscles,  
contamination, lungs and  
voice; Music—harmony,  
singing parts

**Genre:** biography

**Setting:** 1949–1950, Minnesota

**Point of view:** first person

**Themes:** overcoming adversity, courage, perseverance, friendship, family, compassion, loneliness

**Conflict:** person vs. person, person vs. self, person vs. disease

**Style:** narrative

**Tone:** straight-forward, optimistic

**Date of First Publication:** 1996

## Summary

In *Small Steps*, Peg Kehret narrates the story of her childhood experience with polio. As the story begins, 12-year-old Peg is in school anticipating the day's homecoming parade. Suddenly, in music class, Peg's legs begin to twitch. Other mysterious symptoms soon follow. By the next day, the doctor has delivered the dreaded diagnosis of polio. Peg's long, seven-month battle against the disease begins. Most of her story takes place in two institutions for polio victims. We meet the doctors and nurses who treat Peg as well as a young boy and four girls who become Peg's support network and good friends. Peg's interaction with the other characters teaches the reader much about such values as kindness, compassion, and perseverance. Peg returns home at the end of the story, a changed person, both physically and mentally.

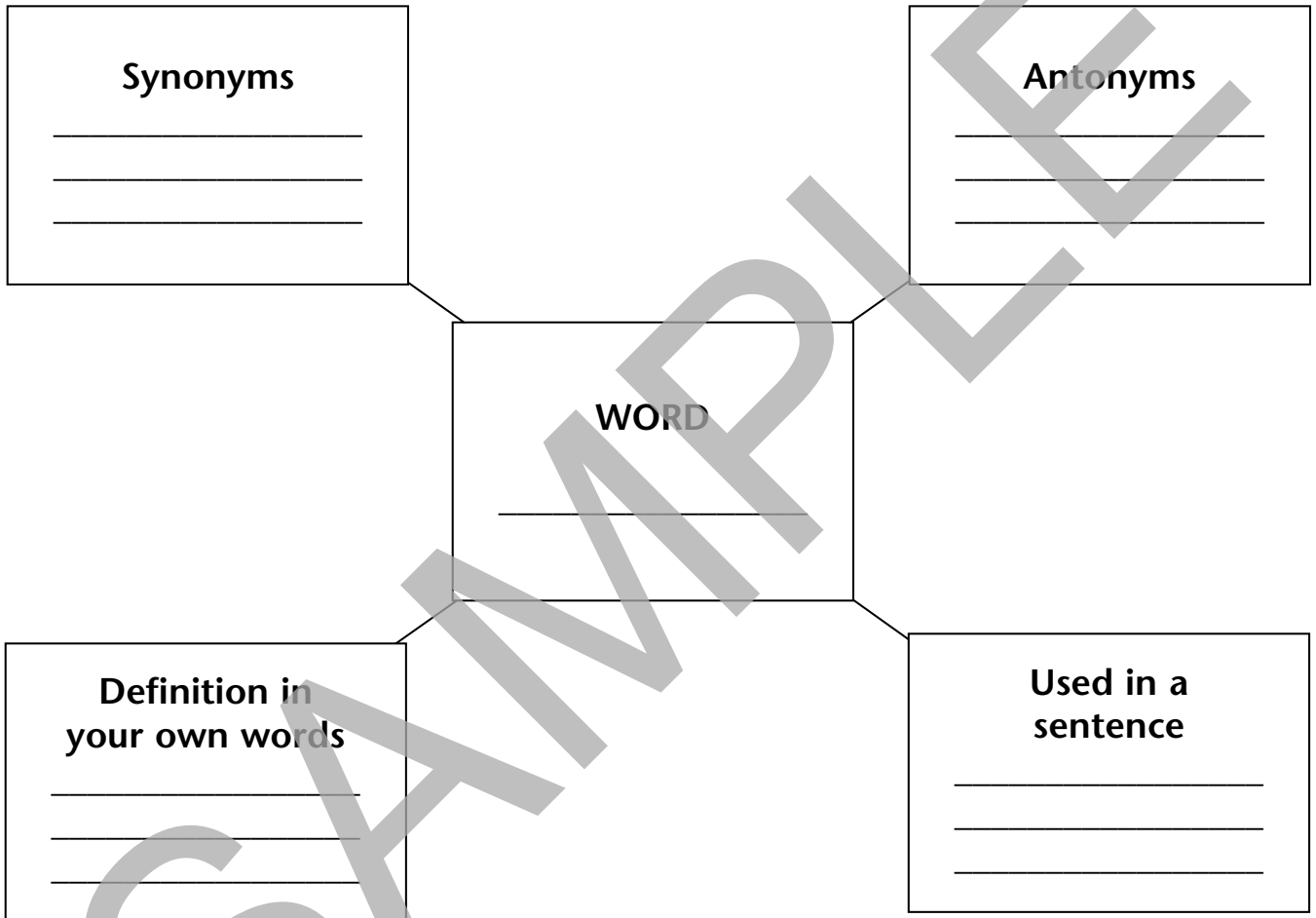
## About the Author

Peg Schulze Kehret (pronounced "carrot") was born in Wisconsin on November 11, 1936, and grew up in Minnesota. At age 12, Peg contracted polio, and her triumphant struggle to overcome the disease became a strong influence in her writing. The author of many plays, short stories, articles, and books, she has in more recent years devoted her talents to writing for children, placing ordinary children in unusual predicaments. Peg and her husband have two grown children. They live in a log house in the forest near Mount Rainier National Park in Washington, surrounded by deer, elk, rabbits, and scores of birds. Peg's love for animals is evident in many of her books. Forty years after her childhood bout with polio, Peg is now struggling with post-polio syndrome. While the symptoms have curtailed many of her activities, she continues to enjoy writing, family, and the beauty of her surroundings.

## Background Information

There is no cure for poliomyelitis and no way to repair the debilitating effects of the disease. Scientists identified the polio virus in 1908, but it wasn't until the early 1950s that researchers developed the Salk vaccine as a means of preventing the disease. In 1955 the United States initiated a nation-wide vaccination program to combat polio, and there has been a significant drop in polio cases since that time. In 1949 doctors treated the symptoms of the disease, often with a painful yet sometimes effective approach invented by an Australian nurse, Sister Elizabeth Kenny. Peg Kehret describes the treatment in great depth in *Small Steps*.

# Vocabulary Word Map



## Chapters 17–Epilogue, pp. 156–174

Peg learns to walk without her walking sticks. After daily practice sessions over the course of a month, Miss Ballard tells Peg she may go home. The prospect of saying goodbye to her friends at the Sheltering Arms somewhat diminishes her excitement, but Peg has the reassurance that she will continue to see the girls during regular check-ups. On their way home, Peg and her mother stop to see Dr. Bevis. True to her promise, Peg walks for him.

Peg settles into a routine at home: exercise, study, visits. She returns to the Sheltering Arms for check-ups where she discovers, somewhat to her consternation, that life has continued fine without her. Peg and Dorothy, who has also returned home, admit that in some ways, they miss life at the hospital. In April Peg returns to school. She is pleased to discover she has not fallen behind the other students. Peg acknowledges just how much she has changed over the course of seven months.

Peg fills us in on the present day lives of her roommates at the Sheltering Arms as well as some of the other key characters. She also describes her own adult life as a wife, mother, and writer. She informs us that she is currently struggling with post-polio syndrome, not uncommon among polio survivors. However, she clearly maintains her upbeat, positive attitude.

### Vocabulary

hunch (156)  
exquisite (157)  
memorable (157)  
sprint (158)  
gait (160)  
frigid (160)  
linger (162)  
nostalgia (162)  
maneuver (165)  
secure (166)  
determination (174)

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the climactic moment in Chapter 17? (*Peg walks without the walking sticks for the first time. p. 159*)
2. How do you feel when you learn that Peg is going home? (*Answers will vary. pp. 160–161*)
3. How does Peg feel about going home? (*She is conflicted: happy to be going home, sorry to be leaving her friends. p. 161*)
4. Peg wonders if a “necktie and two minutes of watching a young girl walk” (p. 164) are adequate payment for all Dr. Bevis has given her. What do you think Dr. Bevis has given Peg, aside from routine medical care, that she considers so valuable? (*self-confidence, kindness and compassion at a time when she was not receiving it from many others, encouragement, the belief she could get better*)
5. When Peg is home, one friend a day is allowed to visit. However, Peg describes the visits as “strained” (p. 166). Why? (*Their conversations aren’t about the same kinds of things they once talked about. Now the other children just want to hear about the polio. Peg feels like a freak in a sideshow.*)
6. How does Peg feel when she first returns to the Sheltering Arms? (*She is happy to see everyone but feels a little “disappointed and slightly resentful that life at the Sheltering Arms was rolling smoothly along” without her. p. 167*)
7. Why does Peg say both she and Dorothy sometimes wished they could be back at the Sheltering Arms? (*They felt safe there. They all had something in common. They didn’t feel like “freaks.” It was also physically easier. p. 168*)
8. Peg is nervous on her first day back at school. She wonders how the other children will respond to her. What could you do to make someone like Peg feel more comfortable? (*Answers will vary.*)

9. At the end of the book, Peg writes, “I had been gone seven months. I had been gone a lifetime” (p. 170). What do you think she means? (*She has gone through a lifetime of experiences in just seven months. She is a changed person.*)
10. When Peg describes her adult life as a wife, mother, and author in the Epilogue, is there anything that surprises you? Did you expect her life to sound so normal? (*Answers will vary.*)
11. What do you think happened to Tommy? (*Answers will vary.*)
12. What does Peg’s attitude towards her post-polio syndrome seem to be? (*She seems to have the same sense of determination she had as a child. She doesn’t feel sorry for herself. She accepts it in a matter-of-fact way. pp. 173–174*)

### Supplementary Activities

1. Science: Practice walking with a big book on your head. Call out “heel, toe” as you walk. If you have a set of crutches, try walking with the book and the crutches.
2. Drama: There is a dramatic moment in *Small Steps* when Peg walks for Dr. Bevis. In groups of three, dramatize the events on pages 163–164 of the novel.
3. Literary Analysis: Complete the Story Map on page 15 of this guide.

SAMPLE