

Birney, Betty. The Seven Wonders of Sassafras Springs.

Reading Level: 4.8

Interest Level: 3-6

**Genre**

Realistic fiction

**Annotation**

Eben McAllister reads about the Seven Wonders of the World and laments that there is nothing wonderful in his small town of Sassafras Springs, Missouri. His father challenges him to find seven wonders in their corner of the world and he will send his son on a train to visit relatives in Colorado. With the help of friends and relatives Eben searches for marvels and wonders throughout his rural community and discovers some hidden treasures. Each wonder is revealed in a gem of a story. Mrs. Pritchard, his Sunday school teacher drags out an applehead doll that saved her life. Cully Pone describes the events that make a lopsided bookshelf holding up his roof a marvel. Calvin Smiley tells how his saw playing rescued their farm from locusts. Eulie Rowan tells about a cemetery that was haunted by a table. Coogie Jackson fabricates a tale about an outhouse. Rae Ellen tells of a phantom ship. Mayor Peevey tells of a loom with special powers and Uncle Alf has a special talent that is revealed in his story.

The stories weave a spell over the reader and you are eager to see what the next discovery will be. Eben learns a lot about the people he thought he knew. Secrets are revealed and Eben learns that some wonders are small. Everything is not what it seems. Most people think they have a wonder. But most of all Eben finds that while he longs to see the world, there is no place like home. We learn to open our eyes and appreciate what is around us! This story is set in 1923 and every once in a while you are reminded of the time period but this story speaks to present day audiences and should inspire us all to open the presents lying around us.

**Booktalk**

Have you ever been bored with nothing to do? So bored that you maybe started reading a book! That's what wrong with Eben McAllister as he sits on his front porch at the beginning of the summer in 1923. His teacher gave him a book for getting the best marks in geography. Inside the book he can see the Seven Wonders of the World and he longs to see something other than his small farm town of Sassafras Springs, Missouri.

Complaining to his Aunt Pretty and to his Pa gets him teased until his Pa challenges him to locate seven wonders right there in their town. If he finds seven wonders, his Pa will send him by train to visit relatives in Colorado. For the next seven days, Eben and his dog Sal traipse up and down the dusty roads to find wonders and marvels. Miracles, wonders and haunted graveyards are discovered with the help of the entire town. Friends, relatives and classmates help Eben uncover the seven wonders of Sassafras Springs.

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## About the Author

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Betty Birney describes herself as a storyteller. She has created stories in many mediums including the television movie, *Mary Christmas*. Married to actor, Frank Birney, she has written over 25 books as well as cartoons for the Disney Channel. If you've watched *Fraggle Rock*, *Where's Waldo* or *Madeline* (she won an Emmy for this show) then you have seen her work. [The World According To Humphrey](#) won the Nebraska Golden Sower Award for 2008. Some of her other awards include:

Christopher Award

"Friendship According to Humphrey" 2006

Children's Crown Award

Rhode Island Children's Book Award

Pennsylvania Keystone to Reading Award

Maryland Black-Eyed Susan Award

Iowa Children's Choice Award

Washington State Sasquatch Award

Oklahoma Sequoyah Award

"World According to Humphrey" - 2006-2007

Visit her website to explore Humphreyville!

The Birneys live in Studio City, California where Betty Birney keeps several items for inspiration on her desk. Visit her website to see her desk.

### Author Website

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### Summary

Eben McAllister lives in Sassafras Springs, Missouri with his Pa and Aunt Pretty. His little farming town doesn't even rate a speck on the map. He longs to see the world. After reading about the Seven Wonders of the World, Eben complains that there's nothing worth seeing in Sassafras Springs. Pa challenges him to find seven wonders right there in Celestine Bloomfield

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Sassafras. If he does, then his Pa will send him by train, clear out to Colorado to visit Cousin Molly and her husband Eli.

For seven days in 1923, Eben searches for seven wonders. He canvases the entire town. At the end of seven days, Eben has discovered a doll that saved a little girl's life, a table that haunted a graveyard, a bookshelf that saved a rainmaker, a phantom ship, a singing saw and a magical loom. Throughout his journey, Eben discovers many wonders in Sassafras Springs. While he still wants to see the world beyond, he knows there are still more wonders to discover in his own back yard.

### **Point of View**

First person narrative mainly from Eben's viewpoint

### **Theme**

People need to look around them and discover the wonders right in front of them.

The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

Everyone has a story to tell.

### **Conflict**

The story centers on Eben's internal conflict not appreciating what is around him. You don't have to wander the world to find what you're looking for because sometimes it is right under your nose.

### **Conflict Resolution**

Eben's Pa challenges him to find seven wonders in Sassafras Springs. He bets him a trip to Colorado if he can find them. Collecting wonders around his community gets Eben to look at things and people he took for granted.

### **Main Characters**

**Eben McAllister** – a schoolboy who hankers to see the world beyond Sassafras Springs

**Pa** – Eben's Daddy, widowed

**Aunt Pretty** – Eben's aunt who raised him since his mother died

**Mrs. Pritchard** – Sunday school teacher

**Cully Pone** – town handyman

**Jeb** - Eben's best friend

**Calvin Smiley** – guest musician, who plays a saw

**Eulie Rowan** – neighbor woman

**Coogie Jackson** – schoolmate of Eben's

**Rae Ellen Hubbell** – a pest to Eben

**Mayor Peevey** – his honor the mayor was not always

"**Uncle Alf**" **Dee** – neighbor and carver

### **Setting**

The story takes place in 1923 in a small farm community in Missouri.

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## Discussion Questions

### Pre reading

Have you ever had the feeling that nothing exciting ever happens around here?

If you could go anywhere in the world where would it be and why would you want to go there?

### How It Started

Why is Eben out of sorts?

Have you ever seen what you would consider a marvel? What was it and why would you describe it as a marvel?

### Day One

What was Eben's strategy to get the search completed?

Do you think he has enough time to complete the task?

What does Eben mean when he says, "It was about as hard to get invited into the Pritchard's house as to be admitted through the Pearly Gates"?

What is the Parable of the Mustard Seed?

Who knows what an applehead doll is?

### Mrs. Pritchard's Story

Do you think a doll saved Mrs. Pritchard's life?

What does Eben mean when he says, "by jiggers"?

### Day Two

What is a hedge apple?

Why is the Saylor house so large?

Compare and contrast the Saylor home to Cully Pone's home.

Why would Cully greet the tax collector with an axe?

### Cully Pone's Story

What did the rainmaker do to make rain?

Should the town of Garner pay Upton?

Why or why not?

### Day Three

Why was Aunt Pretty against Eben looking for wonders?

What did Jeb say that disappointed Eben?

Why does everyone ask Eben why he is not working with his Pa?

Why does Eben want to avoid Rae Ellen?

### Calvin Smiley's Story

Find an example of an exaggeration in Calvin Smiley's story.

Could this event have occurred? Why or why not?

### Day Four

Why was Junior whispering?

What would a boy do with a rotten egg?

Why did Aunt Pretty pack a basket for the Rowan family?

### Eulie Rowan's Story

Why was Eben glad he did not have to walk through the graveyard on the way home?

What caused Eben's nightmares?

What couldn't Eben ask his aunt and why?

### Day Five

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Why did one tombstone have purple and pink flowers around it?  
Have you ever done anything stupid on a dare? What was it and what were the consequences?  
What made Coogie stop eating things for money?  
Coogie Jackson's Story  
What does "as the crow flies" mean?  
What clues did Eben have that Coogie's story was not true?  
Why did Eben feel sorry for himself on the way home?  
Why won't Uncle Dutch take another bath?  
Days Six and Seven  
Why didn't Eben talk to the Mayor?  
How could Old Emma weave when she was blind?  
Why did Old Emma give Buddy the cloth?  
Why did Mayor Peevey hang the cloth on the wall?  
Why weren't the boys willing to go to Rooster Hollow?  
Why did Mayor Peevey's question catch Eben off guard?  
Day Eight  
What is the Sassafras Springs uniform?  
How did Uncle Alf learn to carve?  
How does Uncle Alf know what to carve?  
What was unsettling about Uncle Alf's carvings?  
What is so special about the wood that Uncle Alf uses?  
Day Nine  
Why did Aunt Pretty have to go to the general store to call St. Louis?  
Why did Aunt Pretty visit Uncle Alf?  
Why did Eben begin to look at things in a new light?  
Why is the end of the book called the beginning?  
Post Reading  
Do you think Eben grew up and left Sassafras Springs?  
Why or why not?  
What do you think Jeb did when he grew up?

## Anticipation Statements

Agree	Disagree		Agree	Disagree
		<b>There's no place like home.</b>		
		<b>Everyone has a story to tell.</b>		
		<b>One man's trash is another man's treasure.</b>		
		<b>More exciting things happen in the big cities rather than little towns.</b>		
		<b>There's no such thing as a miracle.</b>		

### Vocabulary Page

Extraordinary	1	very unusual
Peculiar	6	strange
Foreign	7	distant, located in a country other than your own
Pondering	10	to think about something carefully
Awe-inspiring	14	overwhelming, so impressive that it makes a person feel humble
Metallurgy	15	the study of the properties of metal
Sassafras	16	a North American tree with aromatic bark
Cockleburs	18	a coarse plant with prickly seed husks that attach to clothes or Animals
Ornery	18	irritable and uncooperative
Parable	23	a short simple story that teaches a moral or religious lesson
Dawdle	24	to move slowly
Shriveled-up	25	wrinkled from drying out or aging
Turpentine	28	a colorless strong smelling essential oil from a terebinth tree
Camphor	28	a strong-smelling compound used in medicinal creams
Doodads	35	a thing whose name you cannot remember
Curlicues	38	a curly ornamental twist
Guaranteed	47	certain
Concoctions	54	mixtures
Revenge	55	something done to get even with somebody
Bedraggled	58	messy, wet dirty and unkempt
Unperturbed	64	not worried
Claptrap	80	nonsense
Hardscrabble	84	not earning a return for hard effort
Plague	87	the appearance of something harmful in abnormally large numbers
Superstitious	107	believing that certain actions bring good or bad luck
Suspicious	107	feeling mistrust or doubt
Flattery	120	excessive complimentary remarks

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Nuisance	122	annoying or irritating person or thing
Reputation	124	a high opinion that people hold about somebody
Calamity	128	a disaster
Scalawags	130	someone who behaves in a disruptive way
Roughshod	131	displaying great forcefulness and a lack of consideration
Culprits	131	somebody guilty of an offense or misdeed
Cyclone	133	a tropical storm
Foxfire	147	a glow produced by fungi when in contact with rotting wood
Monsoon	153	torrential rain
Wistful	159	deep in sad thoughts
Moonshine	160	whiskey or other strong liquor produced and sold illegally
Rambunctious	164	noisy, active and hard to control
Scythe	167	tool with a long handle and a long curved blade
Lunatic	167	crazy person
Privy	169	outhouse
Gibberish	170	nonsense
Smart aleck	175	joker

### **Read Alikes**

Curiosities and Wonders

The Weird Club the Search for the Jersey Devil by Randy Fairbanks

The 10 Most Fascinating Phenomena by Sunniva Buskermolen

Go Go America by Dan Yaccarino

KidChat Oh the Places to Go! by Bret Nicholaus

They Did What?! Your Guide to Weird & Wacky Things People Do by Jeff Szpirglas

### **Read Aloud**

Pages 1-11

This section sets up the premise of the story. You learn how the challenge began.

Pages 106-113

This passage highlights one of the stories that Eben collects. I choose it because it's a ghost story but Rae Ellen's story of the phantom ship is just as good a tale on pages 144-149. I also like Calvin Smiley's story on pages 87-92. The stories are captivating.

### **Book Activity 1**

*Seven Wonders of Indiana*

Materials:

Pencils

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Encyclopedias

Access to online resources

Media Clip

Read aloud passage, chapter 1, *How It Started*, of The Seven Wonders Of Sassafras Springs

Read chapter one aloud to the class.

Show students the National Geographic website with pictures and information about the ancient wonders of the world. Discuss the new Seven Wonders of the World and the requirements. Show students the seven wonders of the natural world. Discuss the requirements. Ask the class to brainstorm and create the seven wonders of Indiana. List the requirements for the Indiana wonders.

Divide the class into teams. Each team is to suggest an Indiana wonder. They are to prepare a slide of the proposed wonder with a photo or drawing and five facts. The oral part of their presentation should be why they have selected it as a wonder.

The New Seven Wonders

<http://www.new7wonders.com/classic/en/n7w/results/>

The New Seven Wonders Media Clip

<http://www.webkwestie.nl/new7wonders/index.htm>

National Geographic

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/07/photogalleries/seven-wonders/index.html>

Book Activity 2

*Readers Theater Scripts*

Materials:

Copies of the novel

Pencil and paper

Word processing

Aaron Shepherds Readers Theater Tips

<http://aaronsherp.com/rt/Tips.html>

Practice and perform a reader's theater piece.

I use Frantic Frogs and Other Frankly Fractured Folktales for Readers Theatre by Anthony Fredericks or his Tadpole Tales and Other Totally Terrific Treats for Readers Theatre. Prepare a demonstration of what the final production will be.

Tell students that they will create their own scripts from the stories in our novel. Students will reread the stories and create scripts to perform. While all of the stories should make a good script, I think the following choices are easier for students to pick out the dialogue to use in their scripts.

Use *Cully Pone's Story*, *Calvin Smiley's Story* and *Rae Ellen's Story* to create reader's theater scripts. Divide the class into teams. Each team should have a copy of the story. They will read the story first to determine how many characters they will have. Next they will read and select the dialogue to keep in the script. They will read the story and select the words for the narration. There can be many narrators. Students should use the author's words first but they will have to add transitions and fill in detail by adding their

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own words. Each team should type their scripts and practice their scripts before performing for other classes.

## Indiana Academic Standards

Social Studies/ Language Arts/Research Applications/Speaking

4.1.6 Explain how key individuals and events influenced the early growth of and changes in Indiana.

4.1.17 Using primary and secondary sources\* and online source materials, construct a brief narrative about an event in Indiana history.

4.1.18 Research and describe the contributions of important Indiana artists and writers to the state's cultural landscape. (Individuals, Society and Culture)

4.2.2 Use appropriate strategies when reading for different purposes.

4.3.1 Use latitude\* and longitude\* to identify physical and human features of Indiana.

4.3.4 Map and describe the physical regions of Indiana and identify major natural resources and crop regions.

4.4.5 Quote or paraphrase information sources, citing them appropriately.

4.4.6 Locate information in reference texts by using organizational features, such as prefaces and appendixes.

4.4.7 Use multiple reference materials and online information (the Internet) as aids to writing.

4.4.8 Understand the organization of almanacs, newspapers, and periodicals and how to use those print materials.

4.4.9 Use a computer to draft, revise, and publish writing, demonstrating basic keyboarding skills and familiarity with common computer terminology.

4.4.7 Identify entrepreneurs\* who have influenced Indiana and the local community.

4.4.7 Use multiple reference materials and online information (the Internet) as aids to writing.

4.5.3 Write or deliver a research report that has been developed using a systematic research process (defines the topic, gathers information, determines credibility, reports findings) and that:

- includes information from a variety of sources (books, technology, multimedia) and documents sources (titles and authors).

- demonstrates that information that has been gathered has been summarized.

- organizes information by categorizing it into multiple categories (such as solid, liquid, and gas or reduce, reuse, and recycle) or includes information gained through observation.

4.6.3 Create interesting sentences by using words that describe, explain, or provide additional details and connections, such as verbs, adjectives, adverbs, appositives, participial phrases, prepositional phrases, and conjunctions.

5.2.3 Recognize main ideas presented in texts, identifying and assessing evidence that supports those ideas.

5.4.4 Use organizational features of printed text, such as citations, endnotes, and bibliographic references, to locate relevant information.

5.4.5 Use note-taking skills when completing research for writing.

5.4.6 Create simple documents using a computer and employing organizational features, such as passwords, entry and pull-down menus, word searches, the thesaurus, and spell checks.

5.5.3 Write or deliver a research report that has been developed using a systematic research process (defines

the topic, gathers information, determines credibility, reports findings) and that:

- uses information from a variety of sources (books, technology, multimedia) and documents sources (titles and authors).

- demonstrates that information that has been gathered has been summarized.

- organizes information by categorizing and sequencing.

6.4.5 Use note-taking skills when completing research for writing.

6.4.6 Use organizational features of electronic text (on computers), such as bulletin boards, databases, keyword searches, and e-mail addresses, to locate information.

6.4.7 Use a computer to compose documents with appropriate formatting by using word-processing skills and principles of design, including margins, tabs, spacing, columns, and page orientation.

6.5.7 Write for different purposes (information, persuasion, description) and to a specific audience or person, adjusting tone and style as necessary.

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- 6.5.3 Write or deliver a research report that has been developed using a systematic research process (defines the topic, gathers information, determines credibility, reports findings) and that:
- uses information from a variety of sources (books, technology, multimedia) and documents sources independently by using a consistent format for citations.
  - demonstrates that information that has been gathered has been summarized.
  - demonstrates that sources have been evaluated for accuracy, bias, and credibility.
  - organizes information by categorizing and sequencing, and demonstrates the distinction between one's own ideas from the ideas of others, and includes a bibliography (Works Cited).
- 6.7.11 Deliver informative presentations that:
- pose relevant questions sufficiently limited in scope to be completely and thoroughly answered.
  - develop the topic with facts, details, examples, and explanations from multiple authoritative sources, including speakers, periodicals, and online information.

### **Across the Curriculum Connections**

#### **Subject**

#### **Activities**

Social Studies Research the time period of the novel, compare and contrast life then and now

Social Studies Do a Biography Dig and search for contemporaries in the arts, sciences, government and literature. Create a timeline of the era

Social Studies&

Science Research the St. Louis World Fair. Make a chart of the new inventions and innovations

Music Research the music of the period.

Listen to it and sing some of the popular music

Art Research the clothing of this era. Imagine the characters and draw them in the clothing of the period.

### **Indiana Academic Standards Met by the Hoosier Book Award Program**

4.3.2 Identify the main events of the plot, including their causes and the effects of each event on future actions, and the major theme from the story action.

4.3.3 Use knowledge of the situation, setting, and a character's traits, motivations, and feelings to determine the causes for that character's actions.

4.3.5 Define figurative language, such as similes, metaphors, hyperbole, or personification, and identify its use in literary works.

- Simile: a comparison that uses like or as

- Metaphor: an implied comparison

- Hyperbole: an exaggeration for effect

- Personification: a description that represents a thing as a person

5.3.2 Identify the main problem or conflict of the plot and explain how it is resolved.

5.3.3 Contrast the actions, motives, and appearances of characters in a work of fiction and discuss the importance of the contrasts to the plot or theme.

5.3.8 Identify the speaker or narrator in a selection and tell whether the speaker or narrator is a character involved in the story.

6.1.2 Identify and interpret figurative language (including similes, comparisons that use like or as, and metaphors, implied comparisons) and words with multiple meanings.

6.1.4 Understand unknown words in informational texts by using word, sentence, and paragraph clues to determine meaning.

6.2.1 Identify the structural features of popular media (newspapers, magazines, online information) and use

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the features to obtain information.

6.2.3 Connect and clarify main ideas by identifying their relationships to multiple sources and related topics.

6.3.2 Analyze the effect of the qualities of the character on the plot and the resolution of the conflict.

6.3.9 Identify the main problem or conflict of the plot and explain how it is resolved.

### **Bibliography**

Aaron Sheperd's Readers Theater Tips

<http://aaronsherp.com/rt/Tips.html>

Frantic Frogs and Other Frankly Fractured Folktales for Readers Theatre by Anthony Fredericks

Tadpole Tales and Other Totally Terrific Treats for Readers Theatre by Anthony Fredericks

Indiana Academic Standards

<http://www.doe.state.in.us/standards/welcome2.html>

National Geographic

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/07/photogalleries/seven-wonders/index.html>

The New Seven Wonders

<http://www.new7wonders.com/classic/en/n7w/results/>

The New Seven Wonders Media Clip

<http://www.webkwestie.nl/new7wonders/index.htm>

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