

YHBA Novel Resource

The Mailbox
Audrey Shafer
Random House Children's Books,
2006

Audrey Shafer

<http://www.ashafer.com/home.html>

Audrey Shafer was born in Philadelphia. She attended Harvard University for Undergraduate work and received her medical degree from the Stanford University School of Medicine. She currently serves as an associate professor of anesthesia at Stanford University, and she does clinical work at the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System. She lives with her two children, Thomas and Rebecca, and two large dogs.



The Mailbox is her first novel. Always intrigued with writing and already an author of poems, Shafer was moved to recount the mood and stories of many of the veterans for whom she cares at the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System. The idea of The Mailbox came to her as she was particularly hearing the concerns by the Vietnam Veterans at the time of the build-up of troops in Iraq during 2002-2003.

“One day, in the midst of this emotion, I imagined the beginning scene – a young boy coming home from school and finding his uncle, a Vietnam veteran, dead on the floor. Because my daughter was in sixth grade at the time, I made the protagonist a sixth grader.”

Books by Audrey Shafer

Sleep Talker (2001)

The Mailbox (2006)

Awards

Henry J. Kaiser Foundation Award - Outstanding & Innovative Contributions to Medical Education, Stanford University School of Medicine (2007)

The Mailbox

- Junior Library Guild Selection 2006
- Book Sense Children's Pick Winter 2006-2007
- Featured Review on National Public Radio, ""The Spoken Word""

Annotation

Audrey Shafer, in her first novel for young adults, uses a simple thing -- a mailbox -- to create a poignant symbol of compassion and communication between a boy and a mystery correspondent that changes their lives forever. The central character of this book is one who is dead: Vernon Pace, but through the flashbacks and beloved memories of Gabe "Gabe" Pace, his nephew, who has lived with him for a scant few years in quantity but a lifetime in quality, Vernon pulsates with life and the lessons he lived and learned in Vietnam. Shafer creates a soul mate character for young readers in Gabe -- a young boy of twelve who loves tire swings, peanut butter and honey sandwiches, a good story, and a beloved dog named Guppy who comes to him days after his uncle's death from the mystery correspondent in the mailbox. Readers' hearts and eyes will fill with emotion as Gabe simultaneously works hard to hide the death of his uncle in order to preserve the precarious but stable life he has found here in the mountains of Virginia while he grieves Uncle Vernon's death and the life lessons Gabe learned from his salty but sensitive uncle. A best friend, an insightful teacher, the mysterious correspondent from the past, and a dear black dog help Gabe find his way through this time of confusion and grieving so that he can articulate his love for his uncle and follow his own dreams for his life. Suspense and pathos for the characters pull the reader through this tale of loneliness and love. Through the simple symbol of its title, The Mailbox illustrates how connections can be made between people, both present and past, and between periods of history, as long as love and understanding are the links creating the connections.

Literary Guide

Genres -- School Stories; Realistic Fiction; Survival

Point-of-View -- The Mailbox is told in Third Person narration.

Theme(s) – Survival; Foster Care; Vietnam War; Coping with Death; Depression; Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome; Interpersonal Relationships; Coming of Age; Family

Importance of Title -- An important symbol of the story, the mailbox alludes to the importance of communication and connections between the characters in the story and the past and the present. Through the correspondences left in the mailbox, Gabe seeks to find a way to cope with his current life situation, to communicate with the people who are still in his life as well as those that are not or he cannot see, and to connect past memories with his present life and what may be in store for him in the future. One never knows what may be inside a mailbox; it represents life's communications and possibilities.

Conflict -- There are several external conflicts present in this novel. Gabe faces the challenge of survival after the death of his uncle, as he is trying to live on his own. In this situation he is also in conflict with society, as he knows he will return to the foster care system, if discovered, since he no longer has a relative to care for him.

There are also internal conflicts: Gabe is battling himself in trying to decide what he should do about the death of his Uncle Vernon. He battles himself in facing the truth about how much he cares for Mr. Boehm and his desire to show reciprocal interest in the girl, Janet. Gabe is in internal conflict as he communicates with the mystery letter writer: should he be communicating with a stranger? Should he accept the gift of Guppy? Should he want to be with Smitty? Should he give Guppy back? Gabe battles large inner conflicts about doing the right thing, facing grief, and telling the truth. In all these conflicts, he is living with great fear and self-blame: huge conflicts for a boy his age.

Conflict Resolution – Some of the conflicts begin to resolve themselves. Uncle Vernon's body is found and the reality that Gabe is living alone. His future caregiver and home is resolved when Gabe goes to live with Mr. Boehm. The mystery communications between Gabe and Smitty resolve themselves in a face-to-face meeting and the ownership of Guppy comes to a sweet resolution, pleasing to both Gabe and Smitty. Gabe makes much progress in the resolution of internal conflicts as these external challenges are sorted out. Important adults such as Uncle Vernon, Smitty, Mr. Boehm, Ms. Rodriguez, and Captain Tarken help him resolve personal struggles with facing the truth, grieving as a way to love and move on, communicating, and living life to the fullest.

Characters

Vernon Culligan – Vietnam Veteran who adopted his nephew, Gabe, two years ago, and dies of a heart attack at the beginning of the book. He was a grizzled, gruff middle-aged man with an amputated leg below the knee from an injury in Vietnam.

Gabe (Gable) Pace – Gabe is a 12 year old boy, quiet, dark-haired, dark eyed, the main character in this book. He discovers his Uncle's dead body when he comes home from school one day, and is afraid to tell anyone so that he is not returned to foster care.

Paul Smith (Smitty) – a man who was a good friend of Vernon's and a comrade with him in the Vietnam War; the mysterious correspondent with Gabe; the giver of Guppy; an embalmer at the local funeral home. Smitty suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome and had a disfigured face from a self-inflicted gun shot.

Guppy – a big black dog (Labrador?) gifted to Gabe from Smitty

Webber – Gabe's best friend

Mrs. Pickering – Webber's mother

Annie – Webber's little sister

Janet – a classmate of Gabe who has a crush on him

Ms. Rodriguez – the social worker in charge of Gabe's foster care

Mr. Boehm – Gabe's English teacher, tall and slim with a short haircut and goatee

Captain Tarken – Uncle Vernon's captain in the Vietnam War

Mrs. Garvey – Gabe's math teacher with whom he lives after his uncle's death is discovered.

Sheriff Hewitt – Sheriff who questions Gabe about what he know about his Uncle's death and location of his uncle's body and gun collection.

Setting -- The Mailbox takes place in present day, rural Virginia, in the town of Drayford. The majority of the story takes place in Uncle Vernon's simple rural home and surrounding wooded ridge and forests, "cradled within a valley west of Virginia's Blue Ridge, north of Roanoke County." There are also parts of the story that take place at the school Gabe attends, scenes at his friend, Webber's, home, and scenes in Mr. and Mrs. Garvey's home. Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, DC is another key setting of the book when Vernon Culligan is buried with honors as a decorated war veteran of the Vietnam War.

Interest Level/Reading Level -- Interest Level: 3-6; Reading Level: 5.0

Classroom Guide

Booktalk

"Think about being twelve...a year or so ago for most of you...how would you feel about having to live alone and taking care of yourself? Who thinks that would be fun to try for awhile? Totally on your own, doing your own thing? Ok....who thinks the idea of living alone is a little scary, and you wouldn't want to try it yet? Well...in this book, The Mailbox, by Audrey Shafer, twelve year old Gabe comes home from school one day to find that his uncle who he lives with, dead on the floor, and he is suddenly on his own.

Gabe has been in foster care most of his life, until his Uncle Vernon was found, so he is very afraid if he tells anyone, he will be sent back into foster care and he really doesn't want that. He also afraid, very sad, and doesn't know what to do. On top of all this worry, he suddenly starts receiving strange notes from someone in his – guess where? – mailbox. And the next day when he comes home from school....Uncle Vernon's body has disappeared. This book is wrapped with mystery and suspense: who is writing to Gabe? What happened to Uncle Vernon's body? Will Gabe be discovered that he is trying to live on his own? If he is found out, what will happen to him? Read The Mailbox to see what happens to Gabe and what things he learns from his Uncle Vernon even though he is no longer with him, as well as other adults that come into his life and especially, from a special friend, named Guppy.”

Discussion Questions

Introduce the novel and the author, Audrey Shafer. Visit two websites in class so that the students can have a visual image of the author and hear her own explanation of how she decided to write this novel, based on a true event.

<http://www.ashafer.com/home.html>

http://med.stanford.edu/anesthesia/newsletter/pdf-word/06-11%20Gas_Pipeline_Nov_2006.pdf (page 3 of this Stanford Medical newsletter begins an interview with Audrey Shafer that provides much interesting background information about her writing of The Mailbox.)

Chapter 1

Pre-Reading: Name a time that you have received quite a shock: good news, bad news, a surprise visitor, someone jumping out from behind a door at you, a haunted house experience. Describe what you did: jump? Scream? Silent in shock?

During:

1. Describe Vernon Culligan. (p. 1) What do you learn about Uncle Vernon in this chapter even though he has died? (pp. 1-4)
2. Describe the stages of emotion that Gabe goes through as he realizes that Uncle Vernon has died? (pp. 2-5)

Post-Reading:

Draw an illustration of how you picture Uncle Vernon's house and the surrounding rural countryside of western Virginia, including the mailbox that becomes so important in the story.

Chapter 2

Pre-Reading:

Describe how it felt to begin middle school: new teachers, a new school, new students. Now imagine that feeling, along with knowing that you just left your only relative lying dead on the floor of your home....and you know he will still be laying there when you get home.

During:

1. What does Gabe do in Mr. Boehm's English class to earn him a merit? (pp. 10-11)
2. What does Mr. Boehm tell the class about books? (p. 11)
3. What surprises await Gabe when he gets home from school? (p. 14)

Post-Reading:

Visit the website <http://www.enotes.com/of-mice-and-men> to gain background information about *Of Mice and Men*. For extra credit, read this novel by John Steinbeck. Write an essay, explaining why you think Gabe became interested in this book.

Chapter 3

Pre-Reading:

Who has ever wanted to play hooky from school? If you had a whole day in front of you, and you were not sick, and everyone else was in school...how would you spend your day? Would you be happy or feel guilty, knowing everyone else was in school?

During:

1. Gabe begins to think his secret letter-writer is who? How does he imagine this person? (p. 17-19)
2. What does Gabe do during the day when he stays home from school? (pp. 19-23)
3. What do we learn about Uncle Vernon from Gabe's memories of him in this chapter? (pp. 21-22)

Post-Reading: Writing Activities:

For those reading *Of Mice and Men*, write a paragraph about why you think Gabe is so drawn to this novel? Which character does he identify with the most...Lennie or George? Why?

For those not reading *Of Mice and Men*, write a paragraph about what the tire swing means to Gabe and why?

Chapter 4

Pre-Reading:

Do you have possessions that are particularly important to you from childhood? Do you have anything in your locker or in your backpack that is special.....that you want not want anyone to see?

During:

1. Describe Webber's behavior in comparison to Gabe's. Are you surprised they are friends? Why or why not? (pp. 27-31)
2. In Gabe's backpack are three things: the bunny, the plastic button, and the card. Describe these things, where they came from, and why they are important to Gabe.

Post-Reading:

There are two pieces of mail waiting for Gabe in the mailbox when he arrives home after school: a letter from the middle school and another note from his mystery correspondent. What do you think each of these pieces of mail say?

Chapter 5

Pre-Reading:

Who owns a pet? Who would like to own a pet? Why? What can a pet do for you?

During:

1. Describe Guppy. (p. 34) Describe Gabe now that he has Guppy. (pp. 34-40)
2. What does Gabe need to finish working on for Guppy? How does this make him think of Uncle Vernon? (pp. 36-37)
3. What does Gabe need to write for Mr. Boehm? (p. 39)

Post-Reading:

Writing Activity: If Mr. Boehm's writing assignment was to you, what would you write as "What I Want Most in This World."?

Chapter 6

Pre-Reading:

Do you have a nervous habit – something you do when you are concentrating or worried about something?

During:

1. What changes are happening in Janet's behavior toward Gabe? Why do you think this is? (p. 48)
2. How does Gabe usually spend his recess? (p. 50)
3. What scares Gabe so much? (p. 51)

Post-Reading:

How are Gabe and Guppy similar? Do you think Mr. Boehm is a good teacher? Why or why not?

Chapter 7

Pre-Reading: Why do we need our parents? What do our parents remind us to do?

During:

1. What does Gabe do for the first time in this chapter since the death of Uncle Vernon? (p. 55-56) Why is this hard for him to do?
2. What prompted Guppy to bark for the first time? (pp. 54-55)
3. What memory does Gabe have of Uncle Vernon in this chapter? (pp. 60-61)

Post-Reading

What do you think you would forget to do if you did not have your parents there to remind you? Since living alone, has Gabe done anything that has surprised you? Why do you think the question Gabe asked Uncle Vernon about Vietnam made Uncle Vernon mad?

Chapter 8

Pre-Reading: Has anyone ever had a nightmare that was so terrible that it stuck with them and they could remember it even after waking up?

During:

1. Why does Webber not like to pretend? (p. 64)
2. Describe the nightmare that Gabe has when he sleeps over at Webber's house. (pp. 65-66)

3. Who was Bian Tam? What does this memory tell us about Uncle Vernon's experience in Vietnam? (p. 67)

Post-Reading

Describe Webber's relationship with his father. Compare it to Gabe's relationship with Uncle Vernon. Which adult male do you think is serving as the better father figure? Why?

Chapter 9

Pre-Reading: Who has ever star-gazed at night? What are some words you can use to describe what you saw in the sky? Did you star-gaze by yourself or with someone? Why would that matter?

During:

1. What does Gabe find out about his mysterious correspondent? (pp. 71-72)
2. What was Uncle Vernon's relationship with his father? Does this relationship affect Vernon in his relationship with Gabe? (pp. 74-75)
3. What happened when the car backfired while Vernon and Gabe were star-gazing? (p. 80)
3. What do you think were Vernon's and Gabe's wishes, made on the shooting stars? (p. 81)

Post-Reading

When Guppy ran away in the ravine, were you afraid that she was not going to come back? Why do you think she ran away?

Chapter 10

Pre-Reading: Have you ever made someone a gift? How did you feel when you gave it? What was the response from the person you gave it to?

During:

1. What gifts did Vernon and Gabe exchange for their first Christmas? How do you know these gifts meant much to each of them? How else did Vernon surprise Gabe that Christmas? (p. 85)
2. What did Gabe find in Uncle Vernon's top desk drawer? What do you think happened to the other picture of Gabe that Mrs. Pickering mentions in her card? (p. 86)

Post-Reading

What "big question" was Uncle Vernon going to ask Mrs. Pickering in the letter that Gabe finds half written? Why do you think he did not finish the letter? How do you think Smitty is going to respond to Gabe's request?

Chapter 11

Pre-Reading:

Who has read either Call of the Wild or Tarzan? Most of you should have read Call of the Wild last year in 7th grade. Do you agree with Mr. Boehm's interpretation of the title? Who has ever had to hide something from someone? Are you good at hiding something, or can someone usually tell that you are covering something up? How do you feel while you are trying to fool someone?

During:

1. Why does Gabe have a hard time with Math? (p.93)

2. What about Tarzan is interesting to Gabe? (p. 95)
3. What kind of relationship is Gabe developing with Smitty? (p. 96)
4. Ms. Rodriguez begins to say that it was Vernon's idea for her to come by. What do you think Vernon wanted to learn from the social worker? (p. 101)

Post-Reading

Writing Activity: Do you have a drawer or box that contains special things? What things do you have in there? Why are these things important to you? Extra credit for anyone who reads Tarzan of the Apes and writes a summary about lessons Tarzan learns about living alone.

Chapter 12

Pre-Reading: How many of you have to skip ahead and read the end of a book? Why do you do this? Who has ever had a nightmare? Why do you think we have nightmares or dreams?

During:

1. How does Gabe feel after he finds out the truth about his mother? (p. 103)
2. Describe puppets. Do you agree that life is like a "puppet thing"? How is this true for Gabe, Webber, and Uncle Vernon? (pp. 104-105)
3. Describe Smitty and Uncle Vernon's relationship. (pp. 106-107)

Post-Reading

Why do you think Vernon's nickname was Sniffer? How are dreams a curse and a gift?

Chapter 13

Pre-Reading

Have any of you been caught or discovered after doing something that you are trying to hide? How did you feel when you realized that you had been discovered?

During:

1. Are you more like Webber or Gabe? Why does Webber do the things he does? (p. 112, 116)
2. Describe what happens between Janet and Gabe on the field trip? (p. 115-117)
3. What is the general feeling held by the police toward Gabe when they take him off the bus? (p. 118)

Post-Reading:

Pretend your class is visiting the Art Museum of West Virginia. Visit the website for this museum at <http://www.taubmanmuseum.org/>. Work in groups to create your own plan for the day for your class: what exhibits to visit and what programs to attend. Create the itinerary and question sheet for the class for their visit to the Museum.

Chapter 14

Pre-Reading:

Does anyone have claustrophobia? How do you feel when you are in a small place? Have you had an adult help you or turn out to be friendly that you didn't expect? Can there be different definitions of "safe"?

During:

1. What information does Gabe find out about his Uncle and Smitty from Sheriff Hewitt that he did not know before? (pp. 121-122)

2. What do you think has happened to Guppy? Why does Gabe think? (p.123)
3. Who are the adults that are trying to help Gabe? (pp. 124-126)

Post-Reading:

Writing Activity: Why do you think Gabe did not tell anyone when he found Uncle Vernon's body or when it disappeared?

Chapter 15

Pre-Reading:

What does it mean to dread something? What are the feelings you have when you are dreading what you might see or hear?

During:

1. How does Gabe feel when he hears about Guppy? How did you feel? (pp. 128-129)
2. How does Gabe feel when he hears about Smitty? (p. 129)
3. Do you think Gabe is comfortable where he is staying? Is he comfortable with Mr. Boehm? (pp. 126-130)

Post-Reading:

What do you think is going to happen to Gabe?

Chapter 16

Pre-Reading:

Do adults ever make mistakes? How does that make you feel?

During:

1. Describe the conversation between Webber and Gabe. Whose feelings have been hurt? How do you know? (pp. 132-133)
2. Why do you think Ms. Rodriguez comes to see Gabe? (pp. 134-136)
3. Why does Mr. Boehm bring Tiresias to visit Gabe? (pp. 136-137)
4. What are the most innermost thoughts that he cannot even tell Tiresias? What is it that he wants so much? (p. 137)
5. What is Gabe feeling at the end of this chapter? (p. 137)

Post-Reading:

Do some research about Tiresias's name. Why did Mr. Boehm name his dog this name? What does this name mean, and where does it come from? Should Gabe have written a note to Smitty? If so, what should he have said to him?

Chapter 17

Pre-Reading:

Have you ever had someone find something of yours that was very private – like a diary or a private box? How did you feel when you knew the contents had been read or gone through?

During:

1. What things happen to Gabe when he goes back to school? Why do you think the students treated him this way? Are you surprised? (p. 139)
2. What adults try to help him in this chapter? How do they help him? (pp. 138-146)
3. What does Gabe learn about Smitty that shocks him? (p. 146)

Post-Reading:

What do you think will happen to Smitty? What does it mean to need psychiatric care? Is it more or less serious to be in a hospital for psychiatric problems than physical ones?

Chapter 18

Pre-Reading:

Who has ever been to Washington, DC? Who has visited Arlington National Cemetery? Can you describe it? For those of you who have not been there, let's visit this website so you can get a visual in your mind. <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.org/>
How many have you attended a funeral? What were some of the things you wondered or worried about before you went to your first one?

During:

1. What gifts does Mr. Boehm bring to Gabe in this chapter? (pp. 148-151)
2. What does Gabe learn about his uncle? (p. 149)
3. What does Gabe almost always include in his "conversations" with Guppy? (p. 151)
Why is this?

Post-Reading:

Do some research about Arlington National Cemetery, the Purple Heart, and the Distinguished Cross. What information do you find interesting about Arlington? What are these medals and how does a soldier receive them? Use the following websites to help you in your research:

<http://www.arlingtoncemetery.org/>

<http://www.homeofheroes.com/distinguishedservicecross/index.html>

<http://www.americal.org/awards/ph.htm>

Chapter 19

Pre-Reading: How many of you enjoy public speaking? Why do you think it is hard to do for many people? What makes speaking in front of a class or a group different than speaking to friends or at a family gathering?

During:

1. How does Mr. Boehm describe growing up the son of a senator? (pp. 153-154)
2. What surprises Gabe at the funeral? What does this help Gabe? (pp. 156-157)
3. How does Gabe honor Uncle Gabe's memory? How does Mr. Boehm help him do this? (pp. 158-160)

Post-Reading:

Writing Activity: What do you think is the best way to honor someone's memory?

Chapter 20

Pre-Reading: What do you think of rules? Do we need rules in life? Why or why not?

During:

1. What adults help Gabe in this chapter? How do they help? (pp. 162-167)
2. Do the events told by Captain Tarken in this chapter explain why Vernon's nickname was Sniffer? (pp.164-167)
3. What do you think about the events that happened in that Vietnam village? Was Smitty wrong for what he did? (pp. 166-167)

Post-Reading:

How did the events that happened to Smitty and Vernon in Vietnam lead them to being the adult men they grew to be? How did the events back then affect their personalities and their relationship with each other?

Is Gabe happy with the way things have turned out? How do you feel about what is going to happen to Gabe? Would Uncle Vernon approve? Would Smitty?

Chapter 21

Pre-Reading: Have you ever had to give something up or return something that you were borrowing that you really liked? What did it feel like when you had to give it back?

During:

1. Gabe is writing to Janet and Smitty. One writes back and one doesn't. Why? (p. 172)
2. What was in Vernon's locked fire box? Why do you think Vernon chose those things to put there? (p. 173)
3. What do you learn about Gabe in this chapter when he prepares to return Guppy to Smitty? (pp. 174-175)
4. What gifts did Gabe give to Smitty? (pp.176-177)
5. What is significant about the last note to Gabe from Smitty? (p.178)

Post-Reading:

The mailbox was a key form of communication in this novel. What other ways did the characters communicate in this novel? Use your imagination and think about all characters, human-not human, dead-alive.

Did this novel cause you think differently about the Vietnam War? About any war?

What do you think will happen to Gabe? To Smitty?

Vocabulary

Corrugated (p.2) – wrinkled, furrowed

Prosthesis (p.2) -- a device that substitutes for missing or defective part of the body.

Lariat (p. 22) – a long, noosed rope used to catch horses, cattle, or other livestock

Malicious (p. 25) – full of malice or spite; mean, devious, hateful

Chiaroscuro (p. 50) – the use of light or shade in a picture

Grouse (p. 55) – to grumble, complain

Emblam (p. 122) – To treat a dead body with chemicals, drugs, or balsams

Indiana Academic Standards

English/Language Arts 8.3.2, 8.3.3, 8.3.5, 8.4.5

Science 8.3.1, 8.7.5

Social Studies 8.1.28, 8.1.29

Visual Arts 8.1.1, 8.1.5, 8.1.7, 8.2.3

Guidance 6-8.3.13, 6-8.3.14, 6-8.3.15, 6-8.3.16

Anticipation Statements

Read the statements below. If you agree with the statement, make a check next to the statement in the **Agree** column. If you do not agree with the statement, make a check next to the statement in the **Disagree** column. Write any thoughts or comments you have about these statements in the Comments column.

		<u>The Mailbox</u> By Audrey Shafer	Comments
Agree	Disagree	It is sometimes all right to forge a signature on a school form.	
		Foster children are usually troublemakers.	
		Teachers with a sense of humor are the meanest teachers of all.	
		It is better to keep something a secret if it involves life or death.	
		If necessary, you could live by yourself for awhile.	
		Soldiers that participate in battle should try to not think about war times once they come home.	

Read Aloud Passages

Read-Aloud #1: The Mailbox (pp. 4-5)


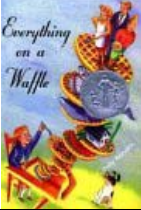

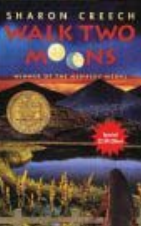

“With night pressing its shadows against the windows, and the trees talking night talk, Gabe was not brave enough to go back to his uncle’s study. Every evening since he had left the bumpy, eastbound trail of foster care homes and arrived at his uncle’s, Gabe would always tell Vernon that he was going to bed....”

This passage, with night looming after a shocking find in the afternoon, sets an eerie mood for the reader. The flight of the fly on the corpse of Uncle Vernon has adequate “grossness” appeal for most 8th graders, and the temper Gabe exhibits in the destruction of the fan is shocking and cries for discussion. Most 8th graders will identify with the extremeness of the situation to what to know what happens to Gabe next....short term at school that day, and long term now that he is alone and trying to do the unfathomable....live alone as a middle schooler.

Read-Aloud #2: The Mailbox (pp. 116-119)

“The students were herded back on the buses, and, as before, Mrs. Garvey’s lecture about proper for the bus ride slowed the departure of her busload of charges. The noise level on Gabe’s bus was initially low, but it increased steadily as they rode. When it reached a certain pitch, Mrs. Garvey carefully stood up, braced her knee firmly on her seat. And turned to face the children. Unfortunately, the movement caused Webber to turn his head, and the spitball from his straw, aimed at Charley, glued itself instead to Mrs. Garvey’s nose....”

Every 8th grader has been on a bus for a field trip and can identify with the noise and temperament of supervising teachers. This passage not only sets this scene to which all students can relate, but then slides immediately into the moment that not only Gabe, but the reader, has been waiting for, with bated breath: his secret discovered. What will happen to him? This discovery scene is complete with drama, the police, a chase, and screaming adults and children. The reader will be on the edge of their seat wanting to know what is going to happen to Gabe....and Smitty....and Guppy.....

	<p>If you enjoyed <u>The Mailbox</u>, by Audrey Shafer, try.....</p>
	<p><u>Pictures of Hollis Woods</u>, by Patricia Reilly Giff. Hollis, like Gabe, is a foster child wrestling with a secret and guilt from the past as she tries to create a place where she belongs. Both of these young people find love and learn important lessons from an older adult.</p>
	<p><u>Everything on a Waffle</u>, by Polly Horvath. Facing the potential death of her parents and trying to determine where and how she should continue living are large dilemmas that also confront Primrose. Both Primrose and Gabe exhibit great calm and fortitude as they cope with great uncertainty, and they both receive help from unlikely sources.</p>
	<p><u>Stand Tall</u>, by Joan Bauer. The Vietnam War plays a major role in this book, also, as twelve year old Tree learns about this volatile period in American history as well as life lessons from an older relative, as does Gabe. Both gain maturity and the ability to cope with challenges in their lives from these life lessons and their relationships with Vietnam War veterans.</p>
	<p><u>Walk Two Moons</u>, by Sharon Creech. Another story of a young girl trying to find out about her past and where she belongs now, as she is cared for by her grandparents. Both Gabe and Sal are facing big questions about their own identities and futures as they receive care and guidance from older relatives.</p>
	<p><u>Shiloh</u>, by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor. If you loved <u>The Mailbox</u> because of Gabe and his relationship with Guppy, this is another wonderful “boy and his dog” story. Although Shiloh is not Marty’s dog...just like Guppy is not Gabe’s. Where Guppy is a gift to Gabe, Marty finds Shiloh...but both boys form an intensive, emotional bond with their canine friends, and both must make hard decisions about the ultimate ownership of Shiloh and Guppy.</p>
	<p><u>Waiting for Normal</u>, by Leslie Connor. For those readers who were intrigued by the concept of Gabe caring for himself and living alone at a young age, the story of another twelve year old, Addie, will appeal, as well. Like Gabe, she finds herself coping with day-to-day life decisions in the absence of her mother, and also like Gabe, finds affection, support, and wisdom from nearby adults.</p>

Across Curriculum Connections

Visual Art: Demonstrate appropriate use of various media, technique and processes to communicate themes and ideas in artwork.

Students will explore the art techniques mentioned in The Mailbox by Ms. Tsang, Gabe's art teacher. One lesson will include analysis and then application of the skills involved in creating a still-life arrangement, including "Momento mori." With the understanding of these art applications, students will create their own still-life arrangement. Similarly, students will explore the art concepts associated with perspective and shading, including the term used by Ms. Tsang, "chiaroscuro", followed by their own creations using these art techniques.

Resources needed: computers, paper, rulers, chosen artifacts for student still-lives, chosen art utensils: pencils, chalks, paints, crayons

The following websites will aide students in their Art research:

WiseGeek

<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-memento-mori.htm>

The Cleveland Museum of Art

<http://www.clemusart.com/Explore/work.asp?location=8118&recNo=4&tab=2&display=>

Studio Chalkboard

<http://studiochalkboard.evansville.edu/s-chiaro.html>

Visual Art Standards: 8.7.4

Science: Awareness that large chunks of rock orbit the sun and can interact with earth; understanding that systems may stay the same because nothing is happening or because things are happening that counteract one another.

Students will explore two scientific phenomenons, mentioned in The Mailbox. Uncle Vernon and Gabe "star gaze", watching the Leonid meteor shower. Students will research this astronomical event along with general "shooting star" events. Students will also research the "Aurora Borealis", viewed by Gabe's class in the art museum's planetarium.

Resources needed: Computers

The following websites will help the students in their Science research:

StarDate Online

<http://stardate.org/nightsky/meteors/>

Leonids

<http://meteorshowersonline.com/leonids.html>

The Aurora Page

<http://www.geo.mtu.edu/weather/aurora/>

Science Standards: 8.3.1, 8.7.5

Book Activities

Book Activity 1: What is war all about? What is the Vietnam War all about?

Grade Level: 8th grade

Student Involvement: Small Group work. Students will work in pairs to research a topic of interest regarding aspects of battle in general, and specifically, the Vietnam War.

Indiana Academic Standards:

Social Studies 8.1.28 Recognize historical perspective and evaluate alternative courses of action by describing the historical context in which events unfolded and by avoiding evaluation of the past solely in terms of present-day norms.

Description of Activity:

The 8th grade Social Studies curriculum focuses on earlier American History up through the Reconstruction period, but this standard will be used to stretch the span of time the students study to include the mid 20th century when the United States controversially became involved in the Vietnam War. Students will also have an opportunity to learn more about aspects of battle, in general, spawned from earlier confrontations in our country's history. Students have, but are not limited to, the following topics as choices:

Geography of Vietnam

Timeline of Vietnam War

War medals: The Purple Heart, The Distinguished Cross

The Vietnam War Memorial

Post-Traumatic Syndrome

Arlington National Cemetery

Opposing Viewpoints: The Vietnam War

Veterans Issues Today

Students can visit the website for a general overview: **Digital History**, and follow the link below to their learning module for the Vietnam War.

<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/modules/vietnam/index.cfm>

Additional links from this website look at the Vietnam War from several different aspects. The timeline of the Vietnam war

<http://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/timeline/> ; another group will look at

consequences of the war; another will analyze maps of the area and battles

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/refer/maps.html>.

Additional websites that students can visit for information to the above topics include:

<http://www.arlingtoncemetery.org/>

<http://www.homeofheroes.com/distinguishedservicecross/index.html>

<http://www.americal.org/awards/ph.htm>

<http://thewall-usa.com/>

<http://www.capecodmouse.com/jacobs/vets/index.html>

<http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/index.jsp>

Each group will share with the class what they learned regarding these aspects of the war.

Student Resources: Students will receive a Literature Circle Role sheet, a Literature Circle Bookmark Sheet, and a Literature Circle Golden Lines sheet to use to record their responsibilities and important words and quotes they find in the novel they are reading.

Assessment: Self-assessment will also occur from the student Reflection sheet. The teacher may also use this form to assess participation and knowledge gained by students on this mathematical and interpersonal activity.

Book Activity 2: What was Gabe Reading?

Grade Level: 8th grade

Student Involvement: Small group work. Students will work in Literature Circle groups to read one of the books Gabe was reading in his English class.

Indiana Academic Standards:

English/Language Arts 8.3.2 Evaluate the structural elements of the plot, such as subplots, parallel episodes, and climax; the plot's development; and the way in which conflicts are (or are not) addressed and resolved.

8.3.3 Compare and contrast the motivations and reactions of literary characters from different historical eras confronting either similar situations and conflicts or similar hypothetical situations.

Description of Activity: In Literature Groups, students will self-select one of the novels which Gabe read throughout The Mailbox:

Of Mice and Men (Steinbeck)

Call of the Wild (London)

Tarzan of the Apes (Burrough).

After forming in their Literature Circles of four, students will read and discuss their chosen novels, looking at the plots and characters of these books and how these plots, characters, and themes correlate to the events happening in Gabe's life while he was reading these novels.

Student Resources: Students will receive a Literature Circle Role Sheet, a Bookmark Sheet, and a Golden Lines Sheet, attached, to use as they complete their responsibilities and monitor new words and important quotes they discover as they are reading their chosen novel. Sample Student Resource sheets came from the following website:
<http://www.lcandler.web.aplus.net/litcirclemodels.htm#Literature%20Circles%20with%20Roles>

Literature Circle Role Descriptions



Summarizer

1. Complete the summary section of your worksheet. Be sure to include only the important characters and events. Don't try to tell everything that happened!
2. Be prepared to read your summary to your team. (Practice your presentation in advance.)
3. After you read your summary to the team, help them to write their own summaries on their worksheets.



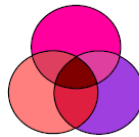
Vocabulary Finder

1. Choose 2 new words from your reading assignment.
2. Write each word and its page number on an index card.
3. Write the definition of each word on the back of the card.
4. Be prepared to teach the words to your team. To do this, read the sentence from the book and discuss the meaning of the word. Then everyone will write the words and meanings on their worksheets.



Question Writer

1. Create 3 to 5 interesting discussion questions.
2. Try to think of questions that will get your circle group to dig into the book and share their thoughts and opinions.
3. Write each question on an index card.
4. After you discuss the questions with your team, everyone will choose two to write on their worksheet, along with their answers.



Story Mapper

1. Choose a story map or graphic organizer:
 - * Character Map
 - * Story Elements Map
 - * Venn Diagram
 - * Other
2. Map the story using the graphic organizer.
3. Be prepared to explain the parts of your map to your team. Tell why you chose to use that story map. Help everyone complete this section of their worksheet.

Bookmark

• WONDER WORDS:

• QUESTIONS?

Bookmark

• WONDER WORDS:

• QUESTIONS?

Hill, B.C., Schlick Noe, K.L., & Johnson, N.J. (2001). *Literature Circles Resource Guide*.
Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.
Literature Circles Resource Center: <http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/kschlnoe/LitCircles>

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The Art Museum of West Virginia

<http://www.taubmanmuseum.org/>.

Audrey Shafer

<http://www.ashafer.com/home.html>

The Aurora Page

<http://www.geo.mtu.edu/weather/aurora/>

The Cleveland Museum of Art

<http://www.clemusart.com/Explore/work.asp?location=8118&recNo=4&tab=2&display=>

Dictionary.com

<http://dictionary.reference.com/>

Digital History

<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/modules/vietnam/index.cfm>

DOE Standards

<http://dc.doe.in.gov/Standards/AcademicStandards/index.shtml>

Eduscapes

<http://eduscapes.com/>

GoodReads

<http://www.goodreads.com/>

The History Place, Vietnam <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam>

Home of Heroes

<http://www.homeofheroes.com/distinguishedservicecross/index.html>

Leonids

<http://meteorshowersonline.com/leonids.html>

Literature Circles

<http://www.lcandler.web.aplus.net/litcirclemodels.htm#Literature%20Circles%20with%20Roles>

PBS

<http://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/timeline/>

Purple Heart

<http://www.americal.org/awards/ph.htm>

Random House Children's Books

<http://www.randomhouse.com/kids/index.pperl>

Remembering – Tribute to Veterans

<http://www.capecodmouse.com/jacobs/vets/index.html>

The Stanford Medical Newsletter, The Gas Pipeline

[http://med.stanford.edu/anesthesia/newsletter/pdf-word/06-](http://med.stanford.edu/anesthesia/newsletter/pdf-word/06-11%20Gas_Pipeline_Nov_2006.pdf)

[11%20Gas_Pipeline_Nov_2006.pdf](http://med.stanford.edu/anesthesia/newsletter/pdf-word/06-11%20Gas_Pipeline_Nov_2006.pdf)

StarDate Online

<http://stardate.org/nightsky/meteors/>

Studio Chalkboard

<http://studiochalkboard.evansville.edu/s-chiaro.html>

United States Department of Veterans Affairs

<http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/index.jsp>

Vietnam War Memorial

<http://thewall-usa.com/>

WiseGeek

<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-memento-mori.htm>

Zionsville West Middle School Media Center home (Destiny)

<http://zcsdestiny.zcs.k12.in.us/common/servlet/logout.do?site=201>