

# The Borning Room Short Guide

## The Borning Room by Paul Fleischman

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## Overview

As she lies dying in 1918, Georgina Caroline Lott tells the story of four generations of Lotts to her portrait painter. The artist has been hired to paint Georgina's death portrait, as was the tradition for her grandparents before her. Georgina narrates how her grandparents' farmhouse with its attached burning room was built when they settled in Ohio in 1820. She describes personal, important events that took place in the burning room—her birth in 1851, the birth of two brothers, the deaths of her mother and grandfather, her younger brothers' bout with diphtheria, the birth of her daughter, and her own imminent death. She also relates fond memories of events that took place elsewhere—listening to her mother read and tell stories, playing music with her sisters and brothers, worshipping with her grandfather, hiding a runaway slave, helping with the birth of Zeb, and marrying the local schoolteacher. This book, though only seven short chapters, is able to portray the natural life cycle of the farm and the family in a memorable, moving manner.

## Setting

The setting is rural Ohio during the late 1800s. The birthing room, located off the kitchen in the Lott family farmhouse, is where most of the drama occurs. Popular in early American times, birthing rooms were used for births, illnesses, and deaths.

The opening paragraph describes this spare, whitewashed room which contains only a bed, a table and a lamp. The room reminds Georgina of each of her family's births, illnesses, and deaths. The view from the room's one window evokes memories of important events experienced in the orchard, in the cornfield, in the barn, and beside the memory tree. The birthing room serves as a symbol for the life of Georgina Caroline Lott.

# Social Sensitivity

There is no socially sensitive subject matter in this book. Fleischman's treatment of birth, life and death through the lives of the Lott family is tasteful and natural, not controversial.

## Literary Qualities

The *Borning Room* is a first-person narrative that uses a flashback to begin a story. Only at the end of the book does the reader realize that this technique has been employed. Fleischman's style is spare, but the writing is enriched through the subtle use of similes, metaphors, and allusions. His fluid prose portrays a picture of one nineteenth-century family in good and bad times. His historical facts are carefully blended.



# Themes and Characters

The dominant themes of *The Borning Room* are family life in the frontier and social and political change in the U.S.

Both themes are skillfully intertwined to mutually support each other.

Through Georgina's memories, the reader is able to see how connection and tradition generate and strengthen familial love. Her memories also reflect how social and political changes, like the abolitionist movement, women's suffrage, and childbirth practices, affect individual lives.

Georgina Caroline Lott, the main character, narrates her story beginning when she is eight-and-one-half years old and ending when she is sixty-seven in her deathbed. Georgina's tales reveal that she is intelligent, witty, and caring. As she grows to womanhood, she describes her thoughts and feeling about family, courtship, nature, values, and religion.

Georgina's mother and her grandfather were the two most influential people in her life. Abram Lott, a strong, resourceful man, came from New Hampshire to Ohio in 1820. He built the Lott farmhouse with its borning room by himself. Often quoting Ben Franklin's writing to make a point, Grandfather was religious, worshipping in his own unique way. Because of her responses to his questions, Grandfather Lott felt that Georgina was the most insightful of all the Lott children.

"Mama" was one of the best farm wives in Ohio. A well-educated woman from an affluent background in Baltimore, Emmaline Lott held discussions on issues of the day, led music sessions of Schubert and Beethoven, and read novels aloud every night with her family. She was a churchgoer who taught her children to teach and think for themselves. Georgina said that her mother was "forever writing to legislators on education or the poor or women's suffrage."

The other Lott family members featured in Georgina's story are her father, Joseph Lott; her brothers Titus, Spencer, Zeb, and Ellsworth; her sisters Ada and Lucilla; her widowed Aunt Erna; and her husband Clement Bock, the itinerate school teacher.



# Topics for Discussion

1. What is the significance of the title?
2. Why do you think the author chose to portray most of the action in one room? Does this approach enhance his story? How?
3. Discuss grandfather's memory tree and Lott family tradition of planting a fruit tree at the graveside.
4. Georgina lived from 1851 to 1918.

As she told her story, what U.S. historical events are part of her family's life? What are some U.S. events that took place that were not described in her story? Why are some included and others not?

5. What are the superstitions that Georgina describes in her narrative?

What role do these superstitions play in the story?

6. Point out aspects of early American life that are included in this story that you did not know before.
7. Name instances that involve hands in Georgina's story. What do these instances signify?
8. Give examples of the use of humor in Georgina's story. What effect does the humor have?
9. Discuss the use of metaphor. Find the metaphors in this story and tell why each is used. What other figures of speech are used by the author?
10. Are there any similarities between the Lott family and your family?

What are they? What are the differences?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Aspects of the U.S. abolitionist movement are included in this story.

Write a paper on this movement's issues, leaders, and newspapers.

2. Investigate superstitions in early America. Select specific ones and find out where they originated, what effect they had then, and if they are present in our culture now.

3. Mrs. Radtke is a midwife. Write about midwifery then and now.

4. Write a first-person narrative of some of the important events in your life.

5. Research the author's background and other works. Write about his style and what he means by "a story's sound shape."

6. Read some of Fleischman's mysteries and historical fiction. What aspects of the book were a result of research, and what were a product of his imagination?

Ideas for Creative Projects 1. Produce a chart of your family tree. Include as many generations as you can.

2. Make a videotape of your family members telling important events in their lives.

3. Recreate a likeness of one or more members of your family. The portrait could be a painting, a drawing, a photograph, or a collage.

4. Joyful Noise and I Am Phoenix are Fleischman's books of poems for two voices. Reach one of these volumes and write your own poem for two voices about your family.

## For Further Reference

Comerford, Lynda Brill. "Paul Fleischman." *Publisher's Weekly* (February 23, 1990): 127-128. This critique of *Saturnalia* includes quotations from Fleischman and comments about the author's writing techniques.

Fleischman, Paul. "Newbery Medal Acceptance." *Horn Book* (July/August 1989): 442-449. In this speech, Fleischman relates personal anecdotes about *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* and some of his other works.

———. "Sid Fleischman." *Horn Book* (July/ August 1987): 429-432. As the author writes about his father's work, he paints a pleasant picture of Fleischman family life during Paul's "growing up."

———. "Sound and Sense." *Horn Book* (September/October 1986): 551-555.

The writer describes his composing process, discussing the rhythm, structure, and sound of sentences.

Fleischman, Sid. "Paul Fleischman."

*Horn Book* (July/August 1989): 452-455. Written by the author's father, also an award-winning author of books for young people, this article gives insights into the author's early interest and apprenticeship in writing.

Holtze, S. H., ed. "Paul Fleischman." In *Fifth Book of Junior Authors & Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983: 114-116. This article is an autobiographical sketch in which the author reveals his passion for music and its influence on his writing career.

## Related Titles

Bull Run is another of the author's books with a period setting and firstperson narration. In this one, sixteen fictional characters give their accounts of the first major battle of the Civil War. Through the individual voices of the men and women, the blacks and whites, the northerners and southerners, Fleischman paints a vivid portrait of the bloodiest U.S. war. The portrait is multi-dimensional, including both historical information and the characters' thoughts and feelings. As in *The Borning Room*, this technique gives the reader a more comprehensive understanding of the time and the event.

Fleischman's other historical novels for young adults include *The Half-aMoon Inn*, *Path of the Pale Horse*, and *Saturnalia*. Each offers engaging characters, important themes, and provocative plots. *The Half-a-Moon Inn* is a haunting story in which the main character, a young servant boy, works for Miss Grackle, the Inn's villainous owner. *Path of the Pale Horse* takes place in 1793 Philadelphia where fourteen-yearold Lep is the protagonist who helps the doctor during a yellow fever epidemic. *Saturnalia* is a satiric novel set in Puritan Boston in 1681. The hero is a poor Indian boy apprenticed to the town printer.



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