

# **Bridge to Terabithia Study Guide**

**Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson**

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## Overview

*Bridge to Terabithia* is a sensitive, emotionally honest novel about characters who rise above their weaknesses through emotional strength and generosity. Both Jess and Leslie have special needs, he for athletic recognition to appease a father disgusted by Jess's true interest, art, and she for acceptance from a new school whose students regard her as alien. In the woods near their homes, the children create an imaginary land in which their friendship flourishes away from social prejudice and familial pressure. Terabithia evokes the magic of the childhood forts, tree houses, or clubs familiar to most readers. However, a freak accident that kills Leslie shatters the peace of Terabithia, forcing Jess to seek friendship and understanding in the real world.

The events in this novel hold greater significance than the plot indicates, burying a quest story within a realistic narrative. Jess, Leslie, and most of the minor characters search for love and fulfillment, and the story evokes a strong sense of loneliness and yearning, leading up to Leslie's tragic death. Yet, the generosity and courage this tragedy inspires in Jess and in the parents of both children bring the characters to a new understanding and acceptance of each other.

## About the Author

Katherine Womeldorf Paterson was born on October 31, 1932, in Tsing-Tsiang pu, China, to Southern Presbyterian missionaries. World War II forced the family to flee China twice, but for the children, particularly Katherine, life in North Carolina proved as alien as life in China.

Educated at King College in Tennessee, the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Virginia, and Union Theological Seminary in New York, Paterson followed in her parents' footsteps, serving as a missionary to Japan from 1957 to 1961 after a brief stint as a public school teacher in Lovettsville, Virginia.

After her marriage to John Paterson on July 14, 1962, Paterson moved with him first to Takoma Park, Maryland, and then to Norfolk, Virginia. They have four children.

Jacob Have I Loved, 1980 Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom, 1983 Come Sing, Jimmy Jo, 1985 Yours Brett, 1988 Park's Quest, 1988 Paterson's experiences as a child of missionary parents, a practicing Presbyterian, and a Southerner influence all of her work, imbuing her realistic stories with a sense of order and hope.

According to Paterson, *Bridge to Terabithia* grew out of her son David's relationship with his friend Lisa. The children created an imaginary community similar to Terabithia. This friendship, however, came to a sudden end when Lisa was killed by a bolt of lightning. In part, the novel developed from Paterson's attempt to comfort her son, who was overwhelmed by the loss and its unexpectedness, but as the novel progressed, Paterson discovered that her difficulties in writing arose in part from coming to terms with her own mortality. Earlier she had dealt with the death of her mother to cancer as well as her own illness from a tumor.

The honesty and craftsmanship of Paterson's novels have earned her Newbery Medals twice for *Jacob Have I Loved* and *Bridge to Terabithia* and National Book Awards for *The Master Puppeteer* and *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. She has received a host of other awards, and is as popular with readers of all ages as she is with critics.



# Plot Summary

In *Bridge to Terabithia*, Jesse Aarons meets and becomes friends with a new girl who moves in next door, Leslie Burke. Together, they create a fantasy land called Terabithia. However, when Jesse goes off for the day without Leslie, Leslie travels to Terabithia on her own. She has an accident and dies, and Jesse must learn to cope with his friend's death.

As the novel begins, Jesse Aarons is determined to be the fastest kid in fifth grade. He has been training hard all summer, rising early to run laps in the cow field of his family's farm, only then to face a day full of chores. Whenever Jesse has a spare moment, he retreats to the privacy of his room to secretly indulge his talent for drawing, a pastime of which his father does not approve.

Jesse's dreams are dashed when Leslie Burke, the new girl who just moved in next door, crosses over to the boy's side of the playground to best everyone, Jesse included, in the recess races. Despite Leslie's attempts at befriending him, Jesse is initially put off by the girl's social awkwardness and boyish dress. Regardless of their differences, Jesse and Leslie soon become friends. Together they found the imaginary kingdom of Terabithia, which they enter by swinging on a rope to the opposite bank of a creek. From their sanctuary, as king and queen of Terabithia, Jesse and Leslie play, pretend, and plot against a bully.

Jesse and Leslie spend Christmas break together. Jesse gets Leslie a puppy, which they name Prince Terrian and dub the defender, and fool, of Terabithia. Anxious to spend more time with Leslie, Jesse volunteers to help the Burkes renovate their house. At school, Jesse and Leslie soon, ironically, find themselves helping the bully they once opposed.

Heavy rainfall widens the creek, making travel to Terabithia increasingly difficult. Leslie joins the Aarons for Easter mass, which she thoroughly enjoys despite her agnostic upbringing. Jesse's little sister, however, is disturbed by Leslie's lack of faith, worried that she might die and be damned to hell. As the rains continue, Jesse grows increasingly fearful of crossing the creek into Terabithia. Nevertheless, Jesse follows the seemingly fearless Leslie, day after day. Seeing the rain as some kind of curse, Leslie beseeches the imaginary spirits of the nearby wood for aid. Unfortunately, the rains persist, along with Jesse's fear.

Miss Edmunds, the kids' music teacher and Jesse's childhood crush, calls to invite Jesse on an impromptu field trip to the National Gallery. Without properly informing his parents, Jesse accepts the invitation. Jesse has a wonderful day in Washington D.C., intoxicated by both the nearness of Miss Edmunds and the many sights of the gallery. Jesse returns to a nightmare. Leslie is dead. Apparently the rope broke when she tried to enter Terabithia. She fell, hit her head, and drowned. Until Jesse walks in the door, his mother thinks that he died as well. Jesse, horrified by the news, must be physically restrained by his father. Jesse falls into an exhausted sleep, waking in deep denial.



Jesse's father takes him next door to offer condolences. After numbly meeting several of Leslie's relatives, Jesse snaps at hearing that Leslie will be cremated. He flees the house with raging grief. Jesse's father catches up with him at the creek, where he holds his grieving son and helps him come to terms with his heartbreak. Depressed, Jesse achieves a measure of peace by creating a simple memoriam for Leslie in the Terabithian wood. After rescuing his little sister, who tries to follow him across the creek using a fallen branch, Jesse decides to build a bridge across the water. Once the bridge is built, Jesse introduces his little sister to Terabithia, dubbing her its new queen.



# Characters

## Jesse Oliver Aarons, Jr.

The protagonist, Jesse Oliver Aarons, or "Jess," is ten years old. He lives in a quiet farming community just outside of Washington D.C. He is the middle child of five children and the only boy. He is a fifth grader at Lark Creek Elementary. While his family is not poor, they are struggling to make ends meet.

Jess suffers from middle child syndrome, worsened by his status as the only male child. His two older sisters dominate his parents' attention, while his youngest sister, as the baby, gets the lion's share of affection. With his father gone most of the day, Jess is expected to be the man of the house, doing chores while his sisters are busy being either teenagers or children.

Jess is desperate for love and recognition. To this end, he will pursue goals likely to earn him praise and avoid anything that will earn him scorn, especially from his peers. Jess feels particularly estranged by his father. As a son, Jess is not due the same type of affection that he sees his sisters receiving. Jess is an artist, but a callous long-ago comment from his father has caused him to denigrate his own talent. He is unwilling to share his pictures with anyone other than Miss Edmunds and, later, Leslie. He is afraid that his artwork will earn him criticism.

## Leslie Burke

Jesse's best friend, Leslie Burke, is nine years old. Originally from the suburbs of Arlington Virginia, Leslie's family moves next door to the Aarons to escape the materialism of city life. She is an only child and, like Jesse, a fifth grader at Lark Creek Elementary. Both her parents are successful writers. Leslie's family, while perhaps not wealthy, is affluent.

As an only child, Leslie does not compete for her parents' attention. She loves and respects both of her parents and enjoys spending time with them when they are not too busy with work. She refers to them by their first names, Bill and Judy. Leslie's parents are very proud of their daughter and seem to trust her implicitly.

Leslie is lonely living in the country. Her liberal upbringing makes her an awkward fit for the more conservative Lark Creek. Leslie's hair is too short for a girl, and she never wears dresses. The gender roles, in particular, seem more rigid in the country than they were in Arlington. She offends the boys at school by beating them in a foot race. Leslie is an imaginative girl and a voracious reader. She prefers the fantasy works of C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Most of the rules and rituals of Terabithia are spawned from Leslie's fertile imagination.



## May Belle Aarons

May Belle is the older of Jesse's two younger sisters and the sibling to whom he is the closest. She worships Jesse, clinging to him in part due to the lack of suitable playmates. Living in a rural area, the Aarons have few neighbors, and none with little girls of May Belle's approximate age.

## Mother

Jesse's mother, originally from Georgia, is an stereotypical farmer's wife. She looks after the children, cooks the meals, and maintains a sense of propriety in the household.

## Father

As the strong silent type, Jesse's father represents the power behind his wife's authority. Though also a farmer, he supports his family by commuting daily to a job in Washington D.C. While it is apparent that he loves Jesse, he is much more openly affectionate with his daughters.

## Joyce Ann Aarons

Joyce Ann is Jesse's youngest sister. She is just a baby, and her crying is certain to trigger a swift rebuke from Jesse's mother.

## Ellie Aarons

Ellie is Jesse's oldest sister. She is smart and manipulative and prone to correcting people's grammar. She and Brenda are particularly good at getting out of doing chores.

## Brenda Aarons

Brenda is Jesse's second eldest sister. She is less intelligent than Ellie and has a weight problem. She and Ellie are particularly good at getting out of doing chores.

## Julia Edmunds

Julia Edmunds is Jesse's music teacher as well as his schoolboy crush. Stunningly beautiful, she dresses casually for a teacher, wearing blue jeans and no lipstick. Jesse's mother thinks of her as "some kind of hippie." Miss Edmunds encourages Jesse to pursue his art.





## **Mrs. Myers**

Mrs. Myers is Jesse and Leslie's fifth grade teacher. Though she adores Leslie, Mrs. Myers spends most of the book as an object of ridicule. After Leslie's death, however, Mrs. Myers proves herself a sensitive and caring individual when she expresses her sympathy to Jesse.

## **Gary Fulcher**

Gary Fulcher is Jesse's rival and the boy who would also be the fastest kid in fifth grade. Jesse clashes with him on a few occasions, particularly over the matter of whether or not Leslie should be allowed to race.

## **Janice Avery**

The bully of Lark Creek Elementary, Janice Avery is an antagonist until finally befriended by Leslie Burke. Janice is being abused by her father.

## **Bill Burke**

Leslie's father, Bill Burke, is a successful political writer. He is intelligent, educated and liberal.

## **Judy Burke**

Leslie's mother, Judy Burke, is a successful novelist. Like her husband, she is intelligent, educated and liberal.



# Objects/Places

## Terabithia

Terabithia is the imaginary kingdom created by Leslie and Jesse. Physically it exists not far from their homes on the opposite side of a usually-dry creek bed. The proper way to enter Terabithia is to swing across the creek using an old rope tied to a nearby tree.

## The Stronghold

The stronghold is the fort that Jesse and Leslie erect inside Terabithia.

## The Forest

The forest is the sacred wood inside Terabithia, which Jesse and Leslie enter only during times of great sadness or joy.

## The Track

The Lark Creek Elementary boys and Leslie compete in foot races along a makeshift track.

## Lark Creek Elementary

Lark Creek Elementary is Jesse and Leslie's school.

## Swing Rope

The swing rope is the old rope that the kids use to swing across the creek and into Terabithia. It eventually breaks, contributing to Leslie's accidental death.

## Dad's Truck

Jesse's father drives a truck. Its "barripity" sound, heard as Jesse's dad goes to and from work, marks the beginning and end of the day.

## Miss Bessie's Shed

Miss Bessie, the family's cow, is stabled in a shed.



## **The Golden Room**

The golden room is the living room of the Burkes' house, after it is repainted by Leslie, Jesse and Mr. Burke.

## **Mrs. Myers' Classroom**

Jesse and Leslie's fifth grade class is taught by Mrs. Myers, and their lessons take place in a typical classroom.

## **Leslie's Desk**

Leslie's desk is awkwardly added to the front of Mrs. Myers' classroom. Its eventual absence marks Leslie's death in the minds of both Jesse and Mrs. Myers.

## **Cow Field**

The cow field is the patch of grass where Miss Bessie feeds and where Jesse trains to be the fastest kid in the fifth grade. It is also where Jesse and Leslie first meet.

## Setting

Set in the mid- 1970s, shortly after the conclusion of the Vietnam War, most of the action in this novel occurs in rural Virginia. Jess's father cannot support his large family in this depressed area and moves to Washington to earn extra money. The Burkes, a wealthy family from Arlington, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, have moved to a farm to reassess their "value structure." Jess Aarons and Leslie Burke meet at Lark Creek Elementary School, and despite dissimilar backgrounds and early tension, become close friends. Apart from the farm, the school, and Washington, D.C., the imaginary Terabithia that Jess and Leslie create in the woods becomes an important setting in which the characters reveal their pain and express their dreams.

## Social Sensitivity

Bridge to Terabithia provides a sensitive treatment of death. While Paterson's Christian beliefs influence her approach to this subject, the novel's symbolic and ethical systems are broad enough that they should not prove controversial. The novel acknowledges that children often have to face life's harsh realities and serves as a primer on grieving. It is a positive portrayal of characters dealing with the sense of loss, anger, and loneliness that follows the death of a loved one.

Also valuable is the novel's depiction of the rural poor and day-to-day farm life. Paterson contrasts the Aaron family's hardships with a humorous look at the liberal, well-intentioned Burke family's attempt to absorb rural virtues without facing the financial difficulties or the hard physical labor that characterize their neighbors' lives. The portrait of Janice Avery elucidates the plight of child abuse victims. The reader sees Janice's loyalty to a father who beats her, her shame in having revealed his crime, and the frustration that leads her to abuse young children in much the same way that she has been abused.

# Literary Qualities

Bridge to Terabithia alludes to many other literary works, largely through Leslie and Jess's conversations. Leslie describes Melville's *Moby Dick* and C. S. Lewis's world of Narnia, and she allows Jess to borrow books she cares for, such as Lloyd Alexander's *The Book of Three*.

Leslie and Jess model their imaginary Terabithia after Lewis's Narnia, and the characters particularly enjoy fantasy and romance. Despite its believable characters and generally probable situations, *Bridge to Terabithia* contains a buried romance structure, a heroic quest and psychological regeneration for the hero.

Like most fantasies and romances, *Bridge to Terabithia* is highly symbolic.

Leslie and Jess cross water to enter Terabithia, an act that Swiss psychologist Carl Jung has identified in *Man and His Symbols* as "a frequent symbolic image for a fundamental change of attitude." While in Terabithia, Leslie and Jess engage in heroic roleplaying that has repercussions for them in the real world, as when the two defend the "maiden" May Belle from the "dragon" Janice Avery. Because of their role-playing, Leslie and Jess's sense of responsibility triumphs over their fear of Janice.

Even Leslie's sudden death is symbolic. Preceded by ceremonies performed to stop the rain, her death symbolizes rebirth through death, not just for Jess, who must now go into Terabithia alone and create the world in which he wishes to live, but for May Belle and even, to a lesser extent, Jess's parents, who momentarily escape the trap of respectability and social anxiety to deal with Jess's and the Burkes' grief.

Parallels may be drawn between Leslie's death and Christ's crucifixion. Leslie says to Jess after the Easter service about the Christ story, "You have to believe it, but you hate it. I don't have to believe it, and I think it's beautiful." By combining the strengths of the novel and romance forms, Paterson creates true and virtuous action.

Among the strengths of Paterson's writings is her strong sense of plot.

Leslie's accidental death is something of an exception because it is not the logical consequence of the events that have preceded it; the reader has no sense that it is inevitable. Instead, Paterson uses symbolic imagery to foreshadow Leslie's death. The narrative frequently refers to water—the speed of the creek, Leslie's essay on scuba diving, the fear in Jess that Leslie's fearlessness inspires. Furthermore, the death is necessary in that the other characters' growth depends on it. Paterson's masterful character development and skillful use of symbolism make the novel's plot ring true.



# Themes

## Constructed Reality

The children of *Bridge to Terabithia* live in a world of their own creation. They observe a strict set of rules and rituals entirely separate from those imposed by adult authority. It is understood, for example, that girls do not play with boys, older kids sit at the back of the bus, and kids do not tattle on their parents. To violate these unspoken rules is to risk scorn from one's peers. This sort of constructed reality is organic, a product of societal forces. Its expectations are based on collective assumptions which may not be apparent to an outsider. This is why Leslie proves so awkward at Lark Creek Elementary.

Terabithia, the kingdom imagined to life by Leslie and Jesse, represents a more deliberate creation. Its rules and rituals, rather than being defined unconsciously by society, are instead the product of imagination. Terabithia is for the few rather than the many. It is secret, self-centered, and unblemished by the outside world—a sanctuary. In this respect, Terabithia is a counter-cultural construct, a place to escape the rules of others.

Constructed reality, however, only goes so far. Rules and rituals which prove contrary to objective reality are eventually replaced. Leslie proves that a girl can compete with boys at racing. This undermines the idea of racing as an effective means of proving one's masculinity. Instead the boys go play King of the Hill. Similarly, Terabithia may only be entered or exited via swing rope. Unfortunately the ancient rope breaks, leaving Terabithia inaccessible. The swing rope is then replaced by a bridge.

## Gender Roles

Jesse is Patterson's vehicle for exploring, among other things, gender roles. As the only male child, Jesse is very much aware of how his parents' treatment of him differs from his sisters. As the only boy, he is expected to perform the labor. He milks the cow. He picks the beans. His older sisters, meanwhile, are permitted to pout, whine, and wheedle their way out of doing anything. As the boy child, he also is not due the same sort of affection from his father. Only the direst circumstances call for Jesse to be held by his father.

Jesse's ideas regarding the opposite sex are likely shaped by his high-stereotypical older sisters. It is no wonder that he does not initially recognize Leslie as female. Leslie is a prepubescent girl with short hair who prefers jeans to dresses. She lacks the ornamentation, the hair, the makeup, the clothes that Jesse has come to recognize as feminine. Leslie's lack of artifice marks her as a natural. Her appearance represents femininity stripped clean of its trappings; a state of genuine beauty.

Leslie also does not behave like a typical Lark Creek girl. She competes against boys, and delights in her victories. When Gary Fulcher tries to dismiss her to the hopscotch



games, she refuses to be pushed around. Her struggle is admirable, and perhaps more importantly: believable. The narrative does not underrate the forces arrayed against her. While Leslie does not change the world with her "girl power," she does demonstrate that it is possible for one girl to maintain her individuality, even in the face of society's gender expectations.

## Class Divisions

Jesse comes from a middle class family with one working parent and five children. Their survival depends on careful budgeting. Leslie, on the other hand, comes from a family with two working parents, both educated professionals, and only one child. This means that Leslie's family has considerably more disposable income and a lot less worry. Both Jesse and Leslie are aware of these differences.

At Jesse's house, much of the argument and discussion in some way involves money. Elle and Brenda want money for school supplies, Christmas gifts, and Easter dresses. May Belle wants a Barbie for Christmas. Jesse is left with virtually no money to buy Leslie a Christmas present, even though he desperately wants to give her as good a gift as she will give him. As with his older sisters, Jesse desires enough money to balance himself socially with other people his age.

At Leslie's house, money does not enter into the discussion. The Burkes have enough extra income to renovate their home. They discuss what they want rather than what they need. They want gold paint rather than blue, hard wood floors rather than carpet. Leslie's house is more a place of possibility rather than a place of mere necessity. This sometimes causes Jesse to unfavorably compare his own family to Leslie's.





## Themes/Characters

Bridge to Terabithia has three groups of characters: the Burkes, the Aarons family, and the significant teachers and students of Lark Creek Elementary School.

Jess Aarons, the most important character in the story and the one who determines the location of action, is the middle child between four girls. Two, Brenda and Ellie, are selfish adolescents used to getting around their mother. The other two, Joyce Ann and May Belle, are younger and look up to him. Jess is the victim of his older sisters and the protector of the younger, particularly May Belle. Mrs. Aarons seems worn out from children, work, and poverty, and she makes the mistake, as her husband does also, of separating chores into men's work and women's work. Jess, outnumbered, performs most of the chores around the farm, especially in the absence of his father. Jess would like a closer relationship to his father, but overwork and worries about money exhaust Mr. Aarons. Only when Jess is in desperate need, after the death of Leslie, do his parents show the care that they have not given him because of their fatigue and carelessness. Mr. Aarons is especially effective in finding the gestures and words that comfort Jess's overwhelming grief over Leslie.

Leslie Burke's parents are very intelligent but not always as responsible as they should be. Moving to the country to absorb by osmosis the rural virtues of simple living, Judy and Bill remain absorbed in their writing. Only when Bill finishes his co-authored book on politics and begins to fix up the old farmhouse does the relationship between him and his daughter flower. Leslie is hungry for the talk and the shared work; she appears to need from her father what Jess needs from his. The books and music, the awareness of a larger world that Jess, who helps in the work on the house, shares with the Burkes, delight him. The Burkes satisfy hungers Jess did not know he had.

Lark Creek Elementary School, poor and overcrowded, is the scene of much testing, outside as much as inside the classroom. It is the home of two teachers important to the novel, Miss Edmunds, who is young, sympathetic, and conscientious, and Mrs. Myers, who is old, overweight, and fearsome. Inwardly Mrs. Myers is caring, concerned, and much appreciative of Leslie's intelligence and talent, and later, sympathetic to Jess's grief. The two students most involved in the action are Gary Fulcher and Janice Avery. Gary, like Jess, wants to be the "fastest kid in the fifth grade" and is upset when Jess forces him into racing Leslie and being defeated by a girl. More important than Gary is the overweight bully, seventhgrader Janice Avery, who is the dragon Jess and Leslie imaginatively defeat when Janice steals May Belle's treasured Twinkies. The dragon, however, winds up being also a suffering girl who betrays the father that has abused her and is comforted by her former enemies and conquerors, Jess and Leslie.

The bridge building that one sees Leslie and Jess doing with their former enemy, Janice Avery, is representative of an activity one sees repeated many times in the novel. Miss Edmunds sees Jess's need, questions him about his drawing, and encourages him. Jess responds to her emotional gift with a smile and nods to the then lonely Leslie, and together they later respond to Janice Avery's pain. Jess's parents, at first unresponsive,

emotionally locate their son, recognize his differences and needs, and give him the love he requires. Illustration by Donna Diamond for *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson. Thomas Y. Crowell Co.: New York (1977).

following Leslie's death. Their gift enables Jess to overcome his fear of drowning and rescue May Belle. Not content with a mere physical rescue, Jess, after formally mourning Leslie's loss in a ceremony of his own making, builds a bridge and welcomes May Belle, the new Queen of Terabithia, helping his sister to value her life as Leslie has helped him value his.

The theme of the novel thus seems to be a psychological response to the golden rule. Katherine Paterson's own religious values shape her story. Even the blows and curses are part of a longer chain of frustrated love, whether they be Janice Avery's or Jess's. For example, when Jess socks May Belle, he is angry, hurt, and lonely at his loss of Leslie. May Belle, hurt but wise in loving, ultimately responds to Jess's need, ignoring the blow, and loving her brother. For Paterson tragedy is a smaller event in a longer Christian quest.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written in a third-person limited style, told from Jesse's perspective. Jesse is growing up, and the reader sees the process of maturing through his eyes. The reader also sees all of Jesse's experiences through his point of view and understands how Jesse interprets events. As a ten-year-old boy, Jesse's priorities are how his peers think of him, what his peers value, ideas of self-image, being accepted by others, and matters of fairness. Interspersed throughout are flashes of childhood fantasy and wishful thinking.

Jesse sees adults as being distant and unfathomable. He does not have a sense of his parents, nor his teacher, existing outside of the context in which he knows them. When Mrs. Myers tells Jesse about her dead husband, he finds it difficult to imagine her as loving wife mourning a lost husband. In his mind, she is always just been his teacher. Similarly, Jesse cannot understand why Mr. Burke, Bill, wants to spend time with his daughter. It seems unusual to him that a grown man would want to spend time with a child, even his own.

As the narrative unfolds, Jesse's perspective matures along with his self-efficacy. He learns a great deal about love, loss, and responsibility. Leslie's death is a great shock to him, and Jesse must use what he has learned from his friendship with her, and also from his experiences in creating Terabithia, to cope with death. After Leslie's death, Jesse's pain encourages him to honor Leslie's memory by looking to the future with hope and optimism.

## Setting

The story is set in the mid-1970s. Jesse makes several pop culture references to television shows, commercials and products of the era. The specter of Vietnam still looms large, as does the language of anti-war protest. Miss Edmunds, in her dress and behavior, invokes the ideology of the "hippy" movement.

The entire story takes place in Lark Creek, an east coast rural township near Washington D.C. The exact state is not given. Within the town, there are four general locations where the story unfolds: The Aarons' house, the Burke's house, Lark Creek Elementary, the school bus, and Terabithia. Jesse also visits Washington D.C. near the end of the novel.

The Aarons and the Burkes are close neighbors in a town where neighbors are few and far between. Jesse and Leslie routinely visit each other's houses, as each is comfortable walking distance from the other. The Burke's place, which used to be called the Perkins place, is a dilapidated, fixer-upper.



At school and on the bus, Leslie and Jesse are among adults and peers, meaning that they are seldom in control. In Terabithia, however, Jesse and Leslie are alone, the solitary monarchs of Terabithia. Terabithia is the one place where Jesse and Leslie can spend time with one another on their own terms. The mood here is one of relaxation and safety.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple and geared toward younger readers. The novel also places much emphasis on names and titles. It is very important to Leslie, for example, that Jesse understand what it means to be a king. In naming the puppy, the two children debate not only his name, but also his title of prince and what it means. Everyone refers to Leslie as Jesse's girlfriend, which causes him varying degrees of annoyance and perplexity.

The dialogue differs by social class and age group. Jesse thinks a lot more than he speaks, but when he does his language is more or less what one would expect from a ten year old boy. Jesse and his family (and Leslie as well) will occasionally use rural idioms, with Brenda and May Belle occasionally lapsing in their grammar. The Burkes, Leslie included, use perfect grammar and tend to speak at length.

In Terabithia, Leslie occasionally adopts a poetic style of language commonly associated with high fantasy and fairy tales, something invocative of medieval Europe. Usually this marks some significant occasion, such as the defeat of an imagined enemy. Jesse finds himself unable to speak with similar eloquence until the day he enters the sacred wood to give Leslie's eulogy.

## Structure

The book is broken into thirteen chapters, most of which are relatively short. The fourth chapter, however, which details the founding of Terabithia and the metaphorical crowning of its rulers, is roughly three times the length of an average chapter, giving Terabithia's founding an important place in the novel. Each chapter is named for the most significant event, person, or emotion associated with that part of the story.

Time is linear throughout the novel, spanning approximately nine months. In one instance early on, when Jesse dismisses the U-Haul outside the Perkins place, the narrator foreshadows Jesse's friendship with Leslie by briefly flashing forward in time. The narrator mentions that Jesse would later wonder how he could fail to take note of something that would prove so significant in his life.

Each chapter is primarily tied to a single setting, but overlap and transition are common. School sequences often end with a bus sequence. Terabithian stories, meanwhile, often begin or end at one of the children's houses. Structurally, the content focuses on events, with an occasional diversion into Jesse's inner life. Whenever Leslie tells Jesse a story,

he imagines drawing or painting the images that appears in his mind's eye. Most of Jesse's thoughts, however, take the form of monologue rather than images.



## Quotes

"And May Belle would pop her buttons. Her brother was the fastest, the best," Chapter 1, p. 4.

"Jess drew the way some people drank whiskey," Chapter 2, p. 12.

"He couldn't honestly tell whether it was a girl or a boy," Chapter 2, p. 22.

"You're the only kid in the whole durnd school who is worth shooting," Chapter 3, p. 36.

"He could hardly manage English, much less the poetic language of a king," Chapter 4, p. 51.

"Sure. You probably have some big secret love down in Arlington," Chapter 5, p. 67.

"It was not that she expected anything expensive; it was that he needed to give her something as much as he needed to eat when he was hungry," Chapter 6, p. 74.

"It also helped to know some things that Bill for all his brains and books didn't know," Chapter 7, p. 87.

"You have to believe it, but you hate it. I don't have to believe it, and I think it's beautiful," Chapter 8, p. 108.

"He hardly slept the rest of the night, listening to the horrid rain and knowing that no matter how high the creek came, Leslie would still want to cross it," Chapter 9, p. 119.

"Your girl friend's dead and Momma thought you was dead, too," Chapter 10, p. 130.

"It came into his mind that someone had told him that Leslie was dead. But he knew now that that had been part of the dreadful dream," Chapter 11, p. 134.

"Why wasn't Leslie here to help him out of this?" Chapter 12, p. 144.

"It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him in vision and strength," Chapter 13, p. 161.



## Topics for Discussion

Why does Jesse want to be the fastest kid in the fifth grade?

What is May Belle's attitude toward her brother?

Why do the boys stop racing?

In what ways are Jesse's parents different from Leslie's?

Why does Leslie call her parents Bill and Judy rather than mom and dad?

Why is Janice Avery a bully?

If Jesse hadn't gone to Washington, how might the story have been different?

Is Jesse responsible for Leslie's death? Why or why not?



## Essay Topics

1. Jess's irritation with his four sisters, his conflicts with his short-tempered mother, and his defeat in the race for which he trained all summer might have prevented his friendship with Leslie.

How would you account for the growth of their friendship?

2. How does Terabithia aid Jess and Leslie in their developing friendship?

What do they bring to their imaginary land, and what do they gain from it?

3. Janice Avery is feared by Jess and Leslie. How just and how effective is the revenge that Jess and Leslie seek against Janice for her theft from May Belle?

4. What provokes Jess and Leslie to befriend Janice when they find her crying?

5. What is unsatisfying about Jess's relationship to his parents? Who, if anyone, is at fault for this? What needs to be done to improve the relationship?

Does this happen in the novel?

6. What is unsatisfying about Leslie's relationship to her parents? Who, if anyone, is at fault for this? What needs to be done to improve the relationship?

7. What are Jess's immediate reactions to Leslie's death? How normal are they? What would happen if he did not go through them?

8. What does it mean to Jess when he makes the funeral wreath in Leslie's memory? What does his experience with May Belle over the creek mean to him?

What guilt and what fear does Jess overcome in his rescue of May Belle? Why and for whom does Jess build the bridge into Terabithia? How does this action relate to Jess's friendship with Leslie?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Katherine Paterson likes novels with strong plots. She says, "As burdensome as the limitation of plot may seem to be, it is not one I'm willing to circumvent. I simply don't like novels that aren't going anywhere, and I can't imagine many readers who do." Define plot and discuss whether *Bridge to Terabithia* has an effective plot. Be sure to consider the accidental death of Leslie in this context.
2. Paterson sees herself writing novels, yet she has a preference for fantasies and romances. Define each form and discuss *Bridge to Terabithia* as a novel or a romance.
3. Although the narrator of the novel is third-person, the narrator stays close to the consciousness of Jess throughout the action. This proves to be a difficult strategy of telling the story in the period immediately following Jess's discovery of Leslie's death. How does Paterson describe Jess's reactions when he seems to be in a state of shock? Describe and evaluate the effectiveness of this narrative technique.
4. Jess's mother and Janice Avery are unsympathetic characters. How would you explain what seem to be their harsh actions? Compare the two characters.
5. Janice Avery provides a classic example of child abuse. After researching this topic by finding articles in *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, describe the causes and effects of child abuse and evaluate Paterson's portrayal of this problem. Does Paterson see any solutions to the problem of child abuse?

Do the articles that you have read see any solutions?

## Further Study

Bell, Anthea. "A Case of Commitment."

Signal 38 (May 1982): 73-81. An excellent critical overview of Paterson's work, particularly from a religious perspective.

Haskell, Ann. "Talk with a Winner." New York Times Book Review (April 26, 1981): 52, 67. A good short biographical portrait of Paterson with some critical commentary.

Huse, Nancy. "Katherine Paterson's Ultimate Realism." Children's Literature Association Quarterly 9 (Fall 1984): 99-101. This excellent article shows how Paterson's novels "combine the accuracy and literal truthfulness expected of realism with another kind of power usually associated with ethics and religion."

Jones, Linda T. "Profile: Katherine Paterson." Language Arts 58 (February 1981): 189-196. A revealing interview with Paterson in which she discusses her varying styles and ethical aims in fiction writing.

Namovicz, Gene Inyart. "Katherine Paterson." Horn Book 57 (August 1981): 394-399. Namovicz, a writer and friend of Paterson, presents an interesting biographical portrait.

Paterson, Katherine. *Gates of Excellence: On Reading and Writing Books for Children*. New York: Elsevier/Nelson, 1981. An extremely useful collection containing reviews of other authors' work, critical essays on aspects of writing for children, autobiographical essays, and acceptance speeches for the National Book Award and the Newbery Medal.

"Sounds in the Heart." HornBook 57 (December 1981): 694-702. This may be Paterson's most revealing self-portrait to date, giving the best clues to her identity as a person and as a writer.

## Related Titles

The Paterson novel most similar to *Bridge to Terabithia* is *Jacob Have I Loved*. Set on an island on the Chesapeake Bay, it presents the relationships of twin sisters, Caroline and Louise Bradshaw, with their family and friends. The elder Bradshaws' apparent preference for Caroline over Louise mirrors Jess's mother's seeming favoritism toward her older daughters. Despite Louise's anger and resentment, *Jacob Have I Loved* contains a gentleness and a rich symbolic narrative reminiscent of *Bridge to Terabithia*.

Paterson has written four historical novels, three set in Japan and one set in China. In each of these novels, Paterson tells a good fictional story while accurately recreating a historical period or event. *The Master Puppeteer* shares certain features with *Bridge to Terabithia*; the friendship, for instance, of Kinski and Jiro resembles that of Leslie and Jess, and the difficulties in parent-child relationships can be seen in Kinski's and Jiro's conflicts with their parents.

*The Great Gilly Hopkins*, set in Maryland, also deals with troubles between parents and children, but Gilly's conflicts involve her foster family and her hunger for recognition from the ideal mother of her imagination who in reality rejected her. Gilly, however, bears a greater resemblance to a Judy Blume character than to the characters in *Bridge to Terabithia*.



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