Seedfolks Short Guide

Seedfolks by Paul Fleischman

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Overview

"God Almighty first planted a garden," Sir Francis Bacon once noted. In Paul Fleischman's novel Seedfolks, a junk-strewn, rat-infested city lot is transformed into an urban oasis, a process that transforms the gardeners' lives, as well. From the day when the secret plantings of a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl named Kim are discovered to be nothing more illicit than lima beans, the ugly lot is headed for changes. Neighboring apartment dwellers of all ages and many cultural backgrounds begin planting there, too, and soon a new society—a vital and diverse human family—has developed. Every main character has improved his or her own life as well as others', all the while setting in motion improvements among relatives, friends, chance acquaintances, and even passersby.

Many have proved to be much better than they seemed before they joined the gardening, and most have learned to enjoy one another's company. Along the way, they have relinquished their prejudices and misunderstandings about one another, generally with no other help or deliberations than the prompt and productive responses that they give to the demands of their gardening projects. Fleischman shows the faith and work of the farmer—along with the curiosity of the researcher, the imagination of the activist, and the precision of the wordsmith—to be a promising approach to both personal and societal reform and a reliable source of practical information.

Having ended their first season with a harvest festival, the gardeners keep their society in mind throughout a long and biting winter. At Christmas time, someone puts up a Christmas tree on the lot anonymously, and when the snow melts, a little girl with a bag of lima beans—either Kim or someone thought to resemble her— is seen digging there. The seedfolks' good example of faith and work well set, the garden can be renewed for many seasons to come. The pioneers will take its changes to heart.

Their crises would keep one reminded, however, of the world that did not change—even offer glimpses into some of the antagonists' motivations and concerns. From this perspective, too, the story is instructive. Thomas Paine might see it to illustrate the lesson that his Common Sense offers on the distinction between society and government. Having begun as a free society that operated on consensus, the garden's seedfolk find that they must make rules, build walls, barbwire their fences, and post KEEP OUT signs before their first harvest. They must deal with the homeless man who so resented the removal of the discarded sofa (his nightly bed) from the lot that he yanked up some vegetables in retaliation. They must deal with the ironically described people of the apartment building next door, who will continue to toss their garbage and cigarette butts onto the lot while workers are there and after the plants have bloomed. They must deal with the cynical and bullying drug dealers, whose comical fear of rats unmasks their cowardice. They must deal with those who will help themselves to the food without having assisted the work. To be assured of any edible harvest, in other words, they must initiate some government.

The combination of memories and news that Seedfolks addresses gives this story serious purposes and possibilities. It can stimulate critical thinking about issues in American life with which young adults and others struggle daily. The degree to which it depends upon actions to construct meaning makes it especially useful for teaching inductive reasoning.

Setting

The setting for the transformations in Seedfolks is an urban neighborhood of Cleveland, Ohio—"a city of immigrants." Its Gibb Street, being the dividing line between a mostly black, Latino, and Asian neighborhood and a mostly white one, brings working-class people of many different backgrounds into one another's experience. They pass one another at the grocery stores, variety shops, and dry cleaners, for example, and they watch one another's comings and goings from their apartment windows above the street. Fleischman is a master at putting individual personalities and needs into play with a single environment. In Bull Run, it is the famous Civil War battleground. In the Coming-and-Going Men short stories, it is the New Canaan, Vermont, of 1800. In Westlandia, it is an entirely new civilization. Here in Seedfolks, it is around a vacant lot in the rundown section of Cleveland that the plot and characters are spun.

Kim braves the rats and the unseasonable cold of an April Sunday to start her project deep into the lot. Meaning to get only the attention of her dead father, a lifetime farmer in Vietnam whose death occurred before she was born, she chose an area behind a rusty refrigerator for her six beans. Her new sprouts need watering sooner than she expected, however, and the junk that secures her project from all but the most watchful eyes also limits its sunlight.

Ana, who suspiciously watches the activity from her third-floor window and takes the trouble to investigate it, enlists Wendell, a janitor living on the first floor, to help with the watering. In a reflection finely expressed, Wendell soon clears himself an area of the lot and starts planting, too. When a few others have joined, Leona, a neighbor who has learned how to get indifferent public officials to cooperate, takes the initiative to research the lot's ownership (it was the city of Cleveland) and persuade the owner to haul away the rotted trash. "The smell...

made you think of hog pens and maggots and kitchen scraps from back when Nixon was president," Leona says. She takes a bag of it into the Public Health Department and opens it right there.

After that, the number of gardeners grows to a crowd as Leona envisioned. Its eyesore converted to what one gardener would call a Paradise, this part of Gibb Street becomes so pretty and proud that one gardener wishes to see it included in the sites that the city recommends to tourists. The many abandoned buildings notwithstanding, it now has this surprising garden to give a lift to strollers and shut-ins alike and encourage other improvements in the street's atmosphere.

Appropriately, the reader sees precious little of the interiors of the apartments and the shops. We learn that the apartment in which Kim lives with her grieving mother and sisters had, at least on that April Sunday when she first sneaked out to the lot, a traditional altar to her father's memory. We learn that Wendell's apartment includes a

telephone (it has brought him such bad news that he dreads its ring), that one of the more faithful onlookers owns a rocking chair, and that the window from which Lateesha sees the beefsteak tomatoes Curtis is growing in the hope of winning her back has lace curtains. Otherwise, the garden gets most of the attention throughout the book.

As to time, the presence on Gibb Street of Kim's family places the story in the America of the post-Vietnam War years. Refugees from other twentieth-century wars in Southeast Asia—Cambodia, for example—also live on the street. They, and the assortment of refugees from the more recent civil wars and economic crises of Latin America and the Caribbean, were the latest nonwhites to join the African Americans. That group began to migrate from the southern United States to the northern industrial states during World War I and to move to Gibb Street during the Depression. Gibb Street, Ana tells us, is "like a cheap hotel. You stay until you've got enough money to leave."

Social Sensitivity

The realistic range of prejudices that it exposes and treats with its simple remedies of constructive contact and labor with nature makes Seedfolks excellent for raising one's social consciousness. Except that he builds his character portrayals upon cultural, as well as personal, backgrounds, neither of which would be flawless, Fleischman can subvert old stereotypes without feeding new ones. For example, does Virgil's father exemplify the stereotype that many northern urbanites harbor about the West Indian businessman? Noting the earnestness of the father's effort with his dream crop and the poor results that he gets from these exertions alone, we can see his indifference to the pregnant teens' squash to have gotten its just deserts. Seeing his pain, however, readers wish him better luck thereafter.

Partly by bringing to the foreground desires and motives that the stereotypes ignore, Fleischman provides for the stereotypes to be overcome. Amir, the Indian shopkeeper, upon meeting and hearing in the garden a Polish woman whose walk there was the same seven long blocks as his own, realizes that he has previously heard nothing about Polish women in Cleveland, where they are numerous, except that they "cooked lots of cabbage." He soon realizes, he says, "how useless" is all that he has heard about Poles, "like the worthless shell around an almond." And seeing Curtis' tenderness toward Lateesha, the labor and creativity that he invests into producing her tomatoes, and the mentoring that he gives Royce—along with the change in self-image that his new way of dressing projects—the reader learns to view Curtis as a vulnerable human being despite his obsession with developing his deltoids.

Along with its information and practical ideas, Seedfolks brings enlightenment, often directly, on the abiding social questions of equity, international relations, immigration, civil rights, responsible government, fair housing, constructive care for the aged, and economic reform of the urban environment.

Because it demonstrates its remedies, it provides for the remedies to be applied.

Literary Qualities

Seedfolks gives a good experience when read alone, and it could be yet more effective when read aloud by differing voices.

This device to which Fleischman entrusts the plot as well as the character development has brought the story some criticism.

Some critics have viewed its vignettes as too brief, superficial, and disjointed in action to have the coherence expected of a novel. Fleischman seems aware of such objections but undisturbed by them. He acknowledges being more interested in the puzzling out of the plot, the wording of the speech, and the sounds of the activity. He clearly values the multiple points of view that vignettes like those in Bull Run and Seedfolks give a story, and he clearly believes that children and young adult readers have different expectations than adult readers in these regards. "I really write," he says, "for the home theater.... You know, the kitchen table is my stage." Viewed from that perspective, Seedfolks fully qualifies as a novel. Its departures from the norm of adult fiction enhance its literary value for readers of all types.

Fleischman's crafting this story within less than seventy pages attests to the genius of his design. Its being told by the characters individually—the technique used successfully in Bull Run—makes Seedfolks at once simple and complex, and invariably entertaining. The natural challenges of gardening give the plot convincing pattern, focus, action, even suspense. Having met one character, the reader hungers for the next. The characters' very diversity makes the lot engaging, and the garden's breadth, set against the "city of immigrants" and the unspoken histories that have ignited migration and immigration, makes every character seem a natural choice. Well assisted by Judy Pederson's simple drawings, the character sketches generally ring true.

With each character being allowed to show the substance of his or her pertinent thoughts, feelings, and experiences, the style of the expression becomes too insignificant for accuracy in dialect to seem required, or even appropriate. Only in Sae Young's style do we see any noticeable amount of dialect, and that departure is brief. The more she gardens and hears the others' speech the more Sae Young acquires the others' syntax.

The characters often express themselves figuratively. Ana compares the street, as mentioned, to a cheap hotel; and when her curiosity about Kim's plantings causes her to disturb the growth of Kim's beans, she says she feels like one who has "read through her secret diary and ripped out a page without meaning to." Sam spins another metaphor. "You've seen fishermen mending the rips in their nets," he says. "That's what I do, only with people." Virgil says the meddling drug dealer, when the rat ran up his leg, "shook his leg like his toe was being electrocuted"; and he sees their lettuce raising as "like having a new baby in the family. And I was like its mother." "He was a salmon traveling upstream through his past," Nora says of Mr. Myles, returning to the metaphors. "Gardening boring?

Never!" she later says, voicing the author's personal view. "It has suspense, tragedy, startling developments—a soap opera growing out of the ground." Noting the intensity with which her black stroke patient Mr. Myles concentrates on his weeding and other soil work and the mental lift that they both get when taking in the garden's sights, the British nurse Nora recalls the ancient Egyptian prescription for insanity that Fleischman had learned of from the New Age newspaper article. "It was a mindaltering drug we took daily," Nora says of their strolls through the lot. Such analogies seem to be uttered randomly. Some come, in fact, as a surprise. All well drawn, they serve the plot and its characters well.

Seeing how their interaction with the garden improves the participants' and onlookers' lives, we feel no noticeable regret about their prior conditions and no anxiety about the imminent deaths of aged and feeble characters like Mr. Myles. Having seen them live more vibrantly, we can believe them to be happy.

What happens in the end to Kim, who unwittingly started it all, Fleischman leaves us to imagine. If it is Kim herself whom Florence sees in the lot with a trowel and a bag of beans that next spring, why does Florence not recognize her? Has Kim grown that much physically over the long winter, or simply achieved such emotional maturity? Is a Vietnamese girl of another family reenacting Kim's drama for much the same reasons? Readers may speculate not only about this but also about whether other members of Kim's family ever join her in the gardening work or at least learn of her contribution to it. Do they ever wonder about the healthy beans that Kim brings home for their table, or fear, once they learn of it, that her role in the garden might cause her to be charged with trespassing.

The appearance of loose ends here could be symbolic and philosophic. Is the lone initiator least suspected, understood, or appreciated by those closest to him or her?

Does one's uniting with the universal family relieve one's dependence upon the birth unit? Since, as many believe, it is from one blood that God made all nations, and since it is "a little child" who is to lead the human family back to harmony, the reader might tolerate this inconclusiveness for the possibly fruitful inquiry that it can stimulate.

Themes and Characters

Just as the lone individual can do much harm in society, Cotton Mather says, the lone individual can also do much good, and this theme subtly dominates Seedfolks.

Fleischman's message is gentle because the average participant in the gardening is drawn to it either by some strength or need in his or her own background and character or by some personal ambition that the American freedoms encourage. Only one character sees in the gardening a model for the world, and the soapbox that he makes is for an unnamed little girl to stand on while reading her winning essay on how to give the garden a convenient water supply. Kim plants her beans not to start any movement but to ease the loneliness that she feels as the only member of her family whom her 388 Seedfolks father never saw. She believes his spirit will know that she is his child when it sees her following in his footsteps and succeeding at growing food.

Fleischman's confidence with the themes of individual activism and therapeutic gardening comes from his knowing of real-life people and situations in which these worked.

He had heard his mother tell of her volunteer work at a Los Angeles Veterans Hospital whose therapeutic garden was used to treat "shell-shocked soldiers from the Korean and Vietnam wars." He had one friend who helped found many community gardens in Boston and another friend who worked at the Homeless Garden Project in Santa Cruz. He had, then, much human truth from which to mold his story. After seeing the New Age article, he says, "I tossed out all the research I'd done on soil composition and cabbage family diseases and focused on the characters."

Fleischman merges this theme of the power of the lone individual to change public conditions for the better with the idea that constructive projects with nature bring out people's strengths. In these qualities, the novel might remind a reader of the wish that the poet William Cowper expresses in Conversation "that good diffused may more abundant grow." It recalls the spirit with which Cowper says in The Task, "God made the country, and man made the town" and also says in that poem Nor rural sights alone, but rural sounds, Exhilarate the spirit, and restore The tone of languid nature.

In Seedfolks, that argument spawns certain subthemes: People should be judged by what they do, and if given the chance to do good—even good for others—many will.

Any person may be greater than his or her visage, physical condition, or ability to communicate in a given setting or language might suggest. Even the most standoffish person may have some longing for human community, some yen to hear others' voices, win others' praise, be treated as a useful member of a family or family-like group.

Feeling productive makes everyone happier. A person who has grown old or is displaced from his or her native country or region yearns to apply his or her native knowledge and skills in the new place.

Even a businessman can get joy from giving something away. One can always enjoy, in any case, the good that one does for oneself.

A person may be placed in a negative environment or condition by the misfortunes or misdeeds of his or her historical community, but the person can overcome that condition by taking the right actions individually. The passion for independence may be universal.

Playing out these themes are thirteen major characters and a few minor ones.

Each of the story's short, unnumbered chapters carries the given name and portrait—a Judy Pederson line drawing—of a major character and is spoken from that character's point of view. In a departure from the character sketches of Bull Run, each Seedfolks character speaks only in the one chapter that is named for him or her. Thereafter, the reader learns of a character's development largely through what is said about the character by others. Few of the characters are totally fictional; the average character was inspired by someone whom the author knew or had heard of from the family members and friends mentioned here. Others, Fleischman says in his Internet feature, "are parts of me."

Fleischman's zeal for mending the tears in the social fabric guides his choice of characters while leaving him much latitude for the individual personalities. While the characters include refugees from despotism and war, corporate abandonment and social isolation, family dysfunction, racial discrimination, and white flight, their sketches abound with surprises. The first chapter is devoted to a secretive Kim of Vietnam, while the next is devoted to an observant Ana, a retired and mildly disabled white woman whose family has lived in Cleveland since moving to America in 1919, when she was four. Ana makes her window her television screen and says she has watched Gibb Street change from a neighborhood of Romanians, to one of Slovaks and Italians, to one blending "Negroes" with Mexicans, other Latin Americans, Asians, and people of various ethnic backgrounds. Having once moved up to Cleveland Heights, she returned to Gibb Street after eighteen years to care for her ailing parents, now dead, and does not expect to leave again.

Wendell, the voice of chapter three, exemplifies the sustained insecurity of the white working class. A school janitor whose work subjects him to much bossing around, Wendell is now the only other white person in Ana's building. His telephone has brought him so much bad news that he dreads its ring.

Gonzalo, a character created from the author's experience as a volunteer aide for two years in a middle-school class for students learning English as a second language, makes his chapter, the fourth, show the role reversal that language barriers pose for adult immigrants from other lands.

Gonzalo is from Guatemala and in the eighth grade. He has discovered from the dependence that his father and aged Tio Juan (Uncle John) suddenly have upon him that "the older you are, the younger you get when you move to the United States." His growing mastery of the English language is the source of his independence and his

main usefulness to his family. It also gives him another thesis: that cartoons and other television fare "can make you smart." Gonzalo is assigned to babysit his Uncle John on weekdays after school. Uncle John was a farmer back home, but since he speaks an Indian tongue that only Gonzalo's mother—who is away at work for long hours—understands, he has no way of getting help when he wanders out into the neighborhood and becomes lost. The day that he stumbles upon the garden, however, is the day that he begins to feel at home in America and to seem a man again, not a toddler.

Gonzalo helps Uncle John plant a vegetable plot, and Uncle John sometimes motions helpful advice to other gardeners.

Sam of chapter six is closely modeled after the author himself. "When I lived in conservative Omaha for a year and owned the only beard on the block," Fleischman says in his HarperCollins statement, "I went out of my way to start friendly conversations with people at the bus stop and at the checkstand, trying to mend the rips in the social net." Sam is white and Jewish and, while retired, seems to have more means than most of the others. He studies and recites the etymologies of words and now makes it his "occupation" to get people to smile, especially at those fellow beings whom they habitually shun. Sam has devoted his career to leading and helping charitable organizations, including groups that support pacifism and world government. He sees in the gardening project some ways to continue his life's work. Being seventy-eight years old and "in no condition to dig up the soil," he hires a Puerto Rican teenager for that part and a third grader who owns a wagon to haul his water. Instead, Sam uses his own talents to work understandingly against the matter that Ana notices: the gardeners' tendency to group themselves by "race" or color.

Sam tells the others that the garden is a paradise, giving the word's Persian background. When the gardeners work together without regard for race or nationality, he thinks of the Garden of Eden. When they divide themselves by superficial qualities, 390 Seedfolks he thinks of the Tower of Babel—or Cleveland itself.

Some major characters introduce interesting minor persons and events. Virgil, the Haitian boy helping his much seen but never named father raise gourmet lettuce, reports the heroism of Miss Fleck, his recently retired third grade teacher, as well the ambitious frenzy of his father. Sae Young, the young Korean widow who has lived in near-total seclusion since her dry cleaning shop was robbed and she was mugged, tells of the water-works contest. Maricela, the Mexican girl of sixteen who is to become, unhappily, an unwed mother, tells of the General Equivalency Diploma (G.E.D.) project that, reinforced by a talk from Leona about the beauty of life, gave her and two other pregnant teenagers the will to live and a way of keeping their babies alive.

Leona, Curtis, and Florence, the three main characters who are African Americans, depict both the problems that members of this group share with other workingclass Americans and the racial discrimination that African Americans expressly suffer. Individually, they play significant roles in the story's development. Leona, who has migrated from Atlanta, does more than plant herself a patch of goldenrod as her grandmother would have done. Knowing that precious few others will be attracted to the

garden as long as the smelly junk—"enough to curl up a crocodile's nose, especially in the summer"—is present, she takes the initiative to track down the vacant lot's ownership and convince the City of Cleveland to haul the trash away. Curtis, whose daily workouts at Kapp's Gym have caused him to be nicknamed for his deltoids—and to attract numerous admirers while losing Lateesha, his true love—acquires more lasting sources of pride. While learning to raise the tomatoes that remind him of his love for Lateesha, Curtis mentors Royce, a minor character resembling himself who claims to have been abused by his father. Finding that Royce would rather sleep on one of the gardener's grass clippings than return home, Curtis gives Royce money for food, buys him a sleeping bag and pitchfork, and makes him the garden's night watchman. Florence, the retired librarian who speaks in the closing chapter, is the character whose family lore gives the novel its name. She knows her great-grandparents walked from Louisiana to Colorado in 1859 to free themselves from the cotton culture. Her father, who told her of this, called them seedfolks, for they were the first members of their family to live in Colorado.

The arthritis in her hands has kept Florence from joining the gardeners, so she remains among their faithful watchers. (She once shames a man from taking a tomato just by daring him to go through with it.)

We learn from Florence what we want most to know: that the garden has been renewed each spring, perhaps to this day.

Topics for Discussion

1. On the April Sunday that she plants her first seeds, Kim's apartment includes an altar that has contained candles, incense sticks, food, and a photograph of her father to commemorate an anniversary of his death. What are the origins of such family altars to the spirits of the dead? In which cultures are altars to dead ancestors common? How does the Vietnamese family's altar compare with the altars that Latin American families create to observe El Dia de Los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead, each year?

2. Why is Kim living in Cleveland, Ohio, instead of the village in which her father farmed in Vietnam? What events might explain her family's presence in America?

3. Ana tells us the national or ethnic origins of other Gibb Street families but tells nothing about her own origin except that her parents were born in a village named Groza. In what country was Groza? Was it Romania? What was Groza like when her family lived there? Do people still live in Groza? Does it still have that name? Do we see that name on a map? If Ana's family left Groza for America in 1919, what events would be likely to explain their immigration to America?

4. Amir says that the Cleveland population includes many people who came from Poland, and Ana says that Gibb Street once included "a lot of Slovaks and Italians." Which immigrants besides Poles might the label Slovak include? If the Slovaks and the Italians both arrived prior to the Great Depression, when did they leave Europe? What events might explain their immigration?

5. Today, Ana says, she sees families moving to Gibb Street who came from Mexico, Cambodia, and countries she does not know. How might these immigrants' reasons for coming to America compare with the earlier immigrants' reasons? Would the Mexican immigrants have left Mexico for the same reasons that the Cambodians left their homeland?

6. What are the factors that make large numbers of people leave their homelands, and at around the same time, to live in other countries? How have the trends in immigration to America changed since Ana's family moved to Gibb Street in 1919? Which national groups have been the latest to immigrate to America? What caused them to leave their homelands?

7. Can everyone immigrate to America who wishes to do so? When and why did America first encourage immigration? When and why did America first begin to control immigration? What laws serve this purpose? Which federal agency is most in charge of enforcing the immigration laws? What problems is that agency being challenged to solve today?

8. What does it mean to say that an immigrant to America has become naturalized? What process does the naturalization involve? What ceremony signals its formal success?

9. At what stage in their lives in America, according to Ana, did the typical group settle on Gibb Street?

10. At what stage in their lives in America, according to Ana, did the typical group leave Gibb Street?

11. What achievement made it possible, according to Ana, for the typical group to move to better neighborhoods?

12. Would the African Americans living on Gibb Street have come there for the same reasons that the others had come? What were the African Americans commonly fleeing? What were they commonly seeking? To what degrees had they succeeded when this story was told? What main challenges have African Americans, as a group, had to meet?

13. Ana notes that "Negro" families began moving to this section of Cleveland during the Depression and that "Gibb Street became the line between the blacks and the whites, like a border between countries." What might it mean that she has remained on Gibb Street after most of the other white people have left? Was it good for the black people and the white people of the neighborhood to remain as divided as 394 Seedfolks if they lived in separate countries? Why or why not?

14. What did Ana assume that Kim was burying? Why did she think of "drugs, money, or a gun" before she thought of vegetable seeds?

15. Kim tells us that her family was from Vietnam, but Wendell first speaks of Kim as "the Chinese girl," and others speak of her as "Oriental." What might that mean? Is it important to learn how the people of different Asian cultures differ, as well as how they relate?

16. Gonzalo argues two theses, the first being that "the older you are, the younger you become when you move to America." Does his story prove that thesis to our satisfaction? Have you experienced or observed situations that caused your adult relatives to depend upon persons much younger to lead, represent, or supervise them? Did the younger persons prove useful?

17. Why do younger people seem to be able to meet the challenges of life in America? Do you think Gonzalo's second thesis—that cartoons make you smart—is as supportable as his first one? Does Gonzalo appear to have benefitted at all from his American school? If he had depended entirely upon the playground and the cartoons to train him, what other things might he have learned besides how to read, write, count, and speak well in English?

18. Leona tells us of the medicinal uses her grandmother made of goldenrod. What do we know about this plant? What can we learn? In what medicines of other names is this herb used today? What are some of the other herbs that are popular in today's medicines?

19. What do we think of the strategy that Leona finally uses to convince the Public Health Department to haul the junk off the vacant lot? Why did she turn to the Public Health Department? Why did she decide to take a sample of the garbage along? Did it help that the City of Cleveland owned the lot? Had that lot been in your own city, what laws would have applied? Is it good for readers to learn these things?

20. What event in the garden was the most effective in making Sae Young feel a part of the family there? What role did Sam play in this change? What role does Sae Young herself play in the change? What do these examples suggest that individuals can do to help others feel a part of their group?

21. The story leaves us to imagine how Kim's family reacted when she began taking beans home to them. What do you think her mother and older sister said? What do you think Kim said or did to explain the beans? What might she have had to do to get her family to believe her? Try dramatizing the scene that you think may have occurred between Kim and her family when she entered their apartment with her first harvest of fresh beans.

22. Except for Mr. Myles' flowers, the garden's plants are all edible and nutritious. Make a list off all the nutritious plants growing the the garden. Which ones would we recognize if we saw them growing in a garden? Why was Wendell sure that what Kim had planted were beans? Why was it better for the teenager who helped Sam to plant pumpkin seeds instead of marijuana?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is the status of therapeutic gardening, or horticultural therapy, in America today? How many such gar dens, if any, does your state include?

What is their history, their size, arid their enrollment? When and how was the first therapeutic garden started in the United States? What services does it give today?

2. How does one become a horticultural therapist? What schools give degrees in this field? What subjects do their degree programs include? How many students do these programs presently enroll? Where or how are their recent graduates employed?

3. What is the history of the American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA)? What services does this organization provide?

4. Does your school have a garden? If so, how does it operate and who cares for it?

5. The gardeners in Seedfolks seemed to succeed in growing plants without the use of chemicals. This is known as "organic gardening." What challenges must the organic gardeners meet? What are the advantages and disadvantages of organically grown produce?

6. What demographic changes has your city, suburb, or community seen in the past five or ten years? What social changes has your community's demographic changes caused?

7. Are demographic changes the only causes, or the true causes, of social conflict?

8. What subjects do people in the United States need to learn in order to live constructively despite their diversity?

9. What lesson does Thomas Paine give in Common Sense about how human "society" and "government" relate? What support does one find for that idea in Seedfolks? What support for that idea have you experienced or observed?

10. Does the social life of your school or neighborhood make everyone there seem useful and welcome? If any individuals or groups there are systematically treated as outsiders, what might be done to change that? What might you yourself do to improve it? What might the excluded people do to relieve their isolation?

11. What are the chief advantages and disadvantages of city life? How might city dwellers and suburbanites or rural dwellers exchange advantages?

12. The characters in Seedfolks discuss their gardening in rich analogies. If you have not done so already, start a small gardening project in your yard, neighborhood, or school and describe its activity in metaphors and similes. Then develop these figures of speech into poems and add your poems about this to others', making an album that you

might publish for each contributor arid his family and friends to read. Illustrate your album with photographs.

13. What is the usefulness of a high school diploma? How can teens who drop out of middle school or high school obtain a G.E.D.? How many diplomas of this type have local programs awarded to teens within the past five years? What percentage of the teenage recipients dropped out of regular school programs because of pregnancy or unwed parenthood? How long after dropping out did it take the average teen parent, male or female, to pass the G.E.D. test and receive that diploma? What were some of the causes for the delays? How many of the students who dropped out of school within the past three years have yet to earn a diploma? Where are they now? How are they employed?

What educational help does the community offer them? How might your school assist this effort?

14. List and describe at least three civic improvements that were started in your community in the past ten years by a single individual and are useful to many people today.

15. Sam, the character in Seedfolks who most resembles author Paul Fleischman himself, made a hobby of studying the etymologies—meaning histories or parentage—of words. He knew to call the garden "paradise," the Persian word for "walled park." Why is it useful to learn the origins of the key words of an activity or story about an activity?

Where in its dictionary definition do we find a word's origins? Using the dictionary for a beginning, research the origins of ten words in Seedfolks besides paradise that you would like to know more about so as to understand those parts of the story better. For your report, prepare an "Etymology and Meaning Table" on the words researched.

Giving your table three columns, write in the first column the older words in older languages from which each word has come. Write in the second column the sentence, or context, in which the word is used in Seedfolks. Write in the third column what you now understand that sentence to mean.

16. Does your neighborhood include a vacant lot that resembles the Gibb Street lot before the garden was started there?

If so, consider making it a class project to find out who owns that property.

Daydream individually or brainstorm as a group for ideas about what you would like to see happening on the lot.

Illustrate your ideas. If the owner can be located, plan, draft, and polish a letter to the owner that tells about Seedfolks and shares your daydreams or brainstorming ideas about how the improvement of that lot could begin the improvement of the neighborhood.

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The contributors offer ideas on how their works might be introduced to youth. An overview of the poet's life and work precedes each interview.

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Shearin, John W. "An Interview with Paul Heischman." Indiana Media Journal (spring-summer 1998): http://ideanet.doe.state.in.us/aime/journal/intervu. This illustrated November 14, 1997, interview conducted with Paul Fleischman in Indianapolis during his visit there for a Reading Connection conference discusses his childhood, his reliance upon words and sounds to convey sense, why and how he writes, why his books appeal only to a limited audience, and what he himself was reading at the time. It closes with a list of Fleischman's books from 1979-1998.

Related Titles

Since every book, as Fleischman says in the Indiana Media Journal review, is different, and he writes "very different types of books," each title offers a different experience. Some titles—Copier Creations, for instance—are devoted entirely to practical, contemporary information. Other titles overlap in purposes, and the same purposes may be treated in different genres. The fictional Bull Run and the nonfictional Dateline: Troy both take the reader to earlier times.

A fuller experience of the technique of Seedfolks is found in Bull Run and Comingand-Going Men, the Fleischman book that won no awards but is his favorite. For a clearer demonstration of the skill with which Fleischman depicts voices and sounds, see the award-winning Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices, I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices, Townsend's Warbler, and the children's story Rondo in C.

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