

MY NAME IS BLESSING



TEACHER'S GUIDE

ALIGNS WITH COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS



TUNDRA BOOKS

ERIC WALTERS

Illustrated by
EUGENIE FERNANDES

DEAR EDUCATOR

Based on the life of a real boy, this warm-hearted, beautifully illustrated book tells the story of Baraka, a young Kenyan boy with a physical disability. The story begins by looking at Baraka's disability as a misfortune, but ends by looking beyond it, to his great heart and spirit and the blessings he brings. This powerful story reminds us to always look for the beauty inside.

Teachers can use the text in a number of ways, including:

- As a means to explore conceptual and thematic connections such as physical disability, family, hope, poverty, connection, responsibility, culture and global citizenship
- As a study in nonfiction storytelling
- As inspiration for taking action within and outside the school community, locally and abroad

The activity guide includes discussion questions, writing activities and prompts to elicit a meaningful understanding of the text. Where applicable, activities have been aligned with Common Core State Standards. The activities can be used for a Social Studies and Language Arts unit or can be used as stand-alone enrichment in whole class, small group or independent studies.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Muthini and eight cousins live with their grandmother. She gives them boundless love, but there is never enough money or food, and life is hard — love doesn't feed hungry stomachs, clothe growing bodies or school keen minds. Muthini is too young, and, with his disability, needs too much, and his Nyanya is too old. A difficult choice must be made, thus grandmother and grandchild set off on a journey to see if there is a place at the orphanage for Muthini. Before being welcomed into the orphanage, Muthini's name, which means "suffering," is changed to Baraka, which means "blessing."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A former social worker and elementary school teacher, Eric Walters wrote his first novel, *Stand Your Ground*, in 1993, as a way to get his grade five class of reluctant readers more interested in literature and writing. He did that by creating a novel about them — and it worked! Since then he has written more than ninety books for young adults that together have won more than one hundred awards. In conjunction with his writing, Eric talks to hundreds of young people in schools and libraries across the country each year. He also founded and runs The Creation of Hope, an organization dedicated to providing care for orphans in the rural Mbooni district in Kenya. Eric has three grown children. He lives with his wife in Mississauga, Ontario.



© Photo by Eugenie Fernandes

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Award-winning illustrator Eugenie Fernandes has written and illustrated more than twenty of her own books and has created the art for more than a hundred other picture books. Her father, Creig Flessel, was a well-known comic-book illustrator, and as a child, Eugenie spent many hours drawing at a desk right next to his. The whole Fernandes family has a flair for the creative: Eugenie's husband and their two children are also artists. Eugenie lives with her husband beside a lake near Peterborough, Ontario.

PRE-READING DISCUSSION/ACTIVITIES

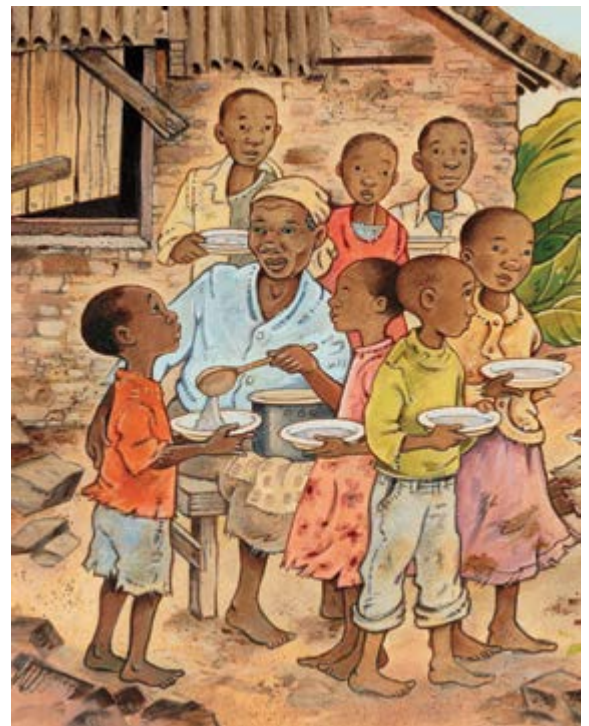
1. Ask students to research the meaning of their names. If possible, ask the students to interview the person/people who were responsible for naming them. If time permits, students can work in pairs to create a questionnaire to use when interviewing their parents/caregivers. Conduct a follow-up whole class discussion using the following prompts:
 - Do you think names are important? Why/why not?
 - Do you know the meaning of your name? Does knowing the meaning of your name affect or change the way you feel about it?
 - Why were you given the name you have?
 - If you could change your name, would you? Why/why not? What would you change it to? Why?
2. Select a few of the illustrations in the story to show the class.
 - Where does the story take place? How do you know?
 - Who do you think the main character/characters are in this story?
 - Do you notice anything special about the little boy?
3. Ask the students if they think the story is true and to explain their thinking.
4. As a class, brainstorm ideas as to why the book is called *My Name Is Blessing*. Talk about the meaning of the word “blessing.”
5. Discuss what it means for someone to have a physical disability.
6. On a world map, ask students to locate Africa. Within Africa, locate Kenya. Divide a piece of chart paper into two sections. Label one section BEFORE and the other section AFTER. Ask the students what they know about Kenya. Record their answers on the BEFORE side of the paper. Leave the AFTER side blank for now.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. Baraka

- Baraka was born with no fingers on his left hand and only two on his right. Discuss the following:
 - What kinds of challenges would this pose for him?
 - How did other people react to this?
 - Make a list of ten things you have done in the past hour. Now consider how your ability to complete these tasks would change if you had the same disability as Baraka.
- Baraka’s given name, Muthini, means suffering. Discuss the following:
 - Why was he given this name?
 - How do you think this made him feel?
 - Why do you think Gabriel insisted that Muthini change his name to Baraka?
- Baraka is a brave boy. Reread the story aloud and, as you read with the students, locate examples that demonstrate his bravery.

(*RL.1.1, RL.2.3, RL.3.1, W.3.1*)



LEARNING ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

2. Mumo (Nyanya)

- Ask students how they would describe Mumo’s character. Using a Rally-Pair-Share (one paper and one pencil is passed between partners), instruct students to write down as many words as they can think of to describe Mumo. Have each pair choose three words from their list that they both agree are the most appropriate and present their three words to the class explaining their choices.
- Mumo’s name means grace — “something she always showed through quiet and calm acceptance of what fate had given her.” Ask students, what does this mean? Share the dictionary definition of “grace.” Ask students the following:
 - What would the antonym of grace be?
 - Do you know anybody personally whom you feel has grace?
 - Draw a picture of this person and, in a few sentences, explain why you feel this person has grace. If you can’t think of anybody personally, you can write about Mumo.
- “I am too old to do what I want to do. So now I must do what I have to do.” Ask why Mumo felt she had a responsibility to take Muthini to an orphanage. Challenge students to find three examples in the story that demonstrate how much Mumo cared for Muthini.

(RL.2.3, RL.3.1, RL.3.4)

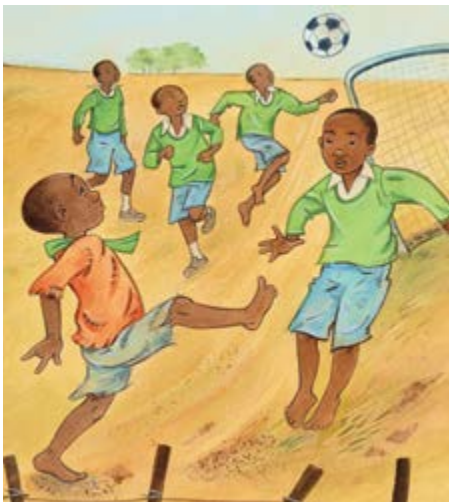
3. Muthini and Mumo’s Journey of Hope

- Mumo said to Muthini, “You and I must go on an even longer walk. I only hope you can forgive me.” Ask students to imagine they are Muthini and their grandmother has shared her plan to take you to the orphanage.
 - Write a description of what you would see, hear and feel as the two of you walk to the orphanage. Younger children can draw a picture and talk about what they would see, hear and feel.
- Ask students if they think Mumo felt more hopeful about Baraka’s future when he was accepted into the orphanage. Why/why not?

(W.3.3)

4. Spirit, Head and Heart

- Mumo tells Baraka, “Even if they tease you about having fewer fingers, don’t tease them back about what you have that they do not. Please use your spirit and your head and your heart.” Ask students what lesson Baraka’s Nyanya is trying to teach him. How does this apply to your school community?



5. Story Map

- Have students create a story map of the book. Younger students can draw pictures, older students can make notes and/or use a combination of drawings and words. Include the following on the map:
 - setting (where, when)
 - major and minor characters
 - problem
 - three events (minimum)
 - resolution
- Ask students to rewrite the story of Baraka and his Nyanya in their own words using the story map as a guide. Younger students can create a wordless picture book.

(W.1.3, RL.1.2, RL.2.5, W.3.3)

LEARNING ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

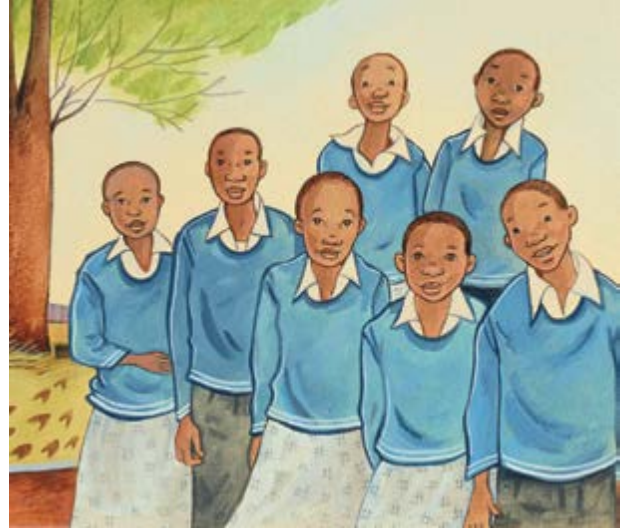
6. Action in the Community

- The author and his family were spurred to action when they met the real life Baraka and his Nyanya in Kenya. Discuss:
 - Why do you think the author chose to write a story about Baraka and his Nyanya?
 - Why do you think he told the story in a picture book?
 - What effect did the story have on you as a reader? Compose a letter to the author explaining your thoughts about the book.

(RI.2.6)

7. Baraka's World

- We learn more about Baraka and some of his interests and strengths in the afterword. Although it is likely that most students reading this story live quite a different life from Baraka, ask students to consider the similarities between themselves and Baraka. Ask, if you were to meet Baraka in person, what connections might you make with him?
- There is a picture of Baraka in the afterword that shows him singing. Assign different forms of Kenyan music for students to research. Find examples of Kenyan music to play for younger students.



EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Your World

- BARAKA'S WORLD at the end of the book gives the reader a quick look into his life. Ask students to create their own story using a booklet, scrapbook, PowerPoint presentation, poster board, etc. If possible, they can include photographs from their life, maps of where they have lived, and any other relevant material that helps the reader understand who they are.

2. Kikima, Kenya

- After reading the afterword, as a class revisit the BEFORE page of what was known about Kenya prior to reading Baraka's story. Fill in the AFTER side with what is now known about the region of Kenya where Baraka lived.
- Ask students if they have any more questions about Kenya, Baraka's story or the author. Make a list of what they would like to research further. Brainstorm a list of resources that will help them find the answers to these questions.
- Ask students to compare their hometown to Baraka's home. Consider any similarities or differences in the weather, culture, food, sports, activities, homes, etc.

(RL.1.1, W.1.8)

WRAP-UP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did the illustrations influence your understanding of Baraka's story? What shades of colors did the illustrator use in her illustrations? Why do you think she used these colors? Students can draw or paint a scene from the story that had an impact on them. Encourage them to use a similar color scheme to convey the climate and environment of Baraka's rural home.
2. *My Name Is Blessing* is an emotional story, made all the more powerful because it is true. Did any part of the story make you feel sad? Happy? Nervous? Excited? In small groups, discuss any emotions you may have felt as you read the story. Alternatively, write a reader response journal entry. Younger students can respond to the following sentence starters / discussion prompts:
 - I felt happy when ...
 - I felt sad when ...
 - I felt excited when ...
 - I felt _____ when ...
3. In what way did the story change how you think about physical disabilities or confirm what you already believed and understood?
4. The author writes in the afterword that Baraka "...is a source of inspiration and joy, and he is one of my heroes." How did meeting Baraka and his Nyanya inspire the author?

(RL.2.7)

LINKS

www.ericwalters.net

www.creationofhope.com

PRAISE FOR *MY NAME IS BLESSING*

"This expressive picture book, based on a real family, lovingly tells a hard story with a twist. It's difficult to broach poverty, disability and custody issues in so few pages without sounding maudlin, but Walters manages by speaking simply ... With dignity and quiet acceptance, this story illustrates that blessings, like family, can take unexpected forms."

– **Starred Review, *Kirkus Reviews***

"*My Name Is Blessing* is more than an engaging and uplifting story. Through the narration, readers of all ages can easily connect to the real life story of an orphan and his plight in a rural district in Kenya. This book highlights global citizenship and the opportunity that an organization can provide for children, their extended families and communities in Kenya as an investment in the future. Highly Recommended."

– **CM Magazine**

APPENDIX: COMMON CORE STATE STANDARD

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.2.6** Identify the main purpose of a text, including what the author wants to answer, explain, or describe.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.1** Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.2** Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.3** Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.5** Describe the overall structure of a story, including describing how the beginning introduces the story and the ending concludes the action.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.7** Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.1** Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from nonliteral language.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1.3** Write narratives in which they recount two or more appropriately sequenced events, include some details regarding what happened, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide some sense of closure.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1.8** With guidance and support from adults, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.1** Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.3** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.