



Telling Tales: Patricia McKissack

Friday, March 26, 2004
11 a.m. - 12 p.m. ET
Grades 5-8

When viewing *Telling Tales: Patricia McKissack* and participating in this guide's suggested activities, the following language arts standards sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association will be addressed: 1 through 7.

Background Information

The Author

It is often said that fact is stranger than fiction. But fiction can be as compelling as fact, particularly when a writer is inspired to create a work of fiction based on actual events of the past. Author Patricia McKissack consistently uses fact to enhance her works of fiction and writes nonfiction with the skill of a storyteller.

McKissack was born Patricia Carwell in Smyrna, Tennessee in 1944. She lived in St. Louis, Missouri with her paternal grandparents after her parents' divorce. When McKissack was 12 years old, she moved back to Tennessee to live with her mother, siblings and maternal grandparents in Nashville. McKissack grew up in a segregated society. The schools for African Americans often had large classes and few books, but McKissack states she still "loved school, and [she] had great teachers."

After graduating from Tennessee State University, McKissack received a Masters degree in Early Childhood Literature and Media Programming at Webster University in St. Louis. Prior to writing full-time, she worked as a teacher and a children's book editor which "helped me [Patricia] realize what books were needed and what children

enjoyed reading; my career as an editor taught me how to develop an idea."

McKissack's books reflect her dedication to sharing her cultural history with young readers. Using the cadence and pacing of a storyteller, McKissack makes history come alive. In fact, McKissack grew up hearing and telling stories, which is evident in her writing and the absorbing topics about which she writes. By sharing these family stories, McKissack affirms her devotion to family while empowering readers to tell their own stories.

Patricia McKissack's work has received numerous awards including a Newbery Honor citation, several Coretta Scott King Awards, and the Orbis Pictus Award for Nonfiction.

Nellie's Diary: Color Me Dark...

Color Me Dark: The Diary of Nellie Lee Love, The Great Migration North, Chicago, Illinois, 1919 is a fictionalized account of a family that moves from Tennessee to Chicago during a time of great turmoil and change in the United States. Told through Nellie Lee's entries from the diary she received as a Christmas gift, the book chronicles the story of the Love

family's move north. Nellie's voice also reveals the hurt endured, the healing experienced, and the lasting strength of the Love family. The novel grew out of stories told by McKissack's paternal grandfather who with his brother migrated to Chicago during the riots of 1919. "When asked how he survived those trying times, my grandfather used one word: 'family.'"

The period in which the novel is set was marked by vicious attacks on African Americans, the growth of the Ku Klux Klan, and the inequities of segregation. It was also a time that gave rise to African-American activists such as W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Madame C.J. Walker, and writers such as James Weldon Johnson and Claude Mackay, all of whom are incorporated into this novel. By seamlessly integrating real people and events, McKissack provides the novel with depth and a historical context, and educates readers about the impact of these actual people. The story also conveys a sense of hope and the strength and unity of family.

Color Me Dark... has been adapted as a dramatic play. During the stage production, the book's readers become engaged in the story in a very different way.

About the Program

Noted author and storyteller, Patricia McKissack will discuss her novel, *Color Me Dark...*, and its adaptation for a theater production with moderator Maria Salvadore. The author will read from the book and highlight its important themes. Scenes from the stage version may be shown. Discussions will include a comparison of the different ways stories are shared such as in books, on stage, and through oral storytelling. McKissack will also discuss her interest in the history of African Americans and how family stories become part of a cultural history.



Patricia McKissack

Internet Resources

For curriculum connections and additional resources, visit:

kennedy-center.org/pwvtv

For more information, connect to:

voices.cla.umn.edu

lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/cja/greatmigration

pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/

Resources related to *Telling Stories: Patricia McKissack* can be found on page 22.

Instructional Activities

• Reading

Read *Color Me Dark...* How does the author integrate factual information into the novel? How and why does she inform the reader of the difference between fact and fiction in this novel?

Read another book by Patricia McKissack. What genre is it? Fiction? Folktale? Nonfiction? What similarities does this book have to *Color Me Dark...*? If fiction, is factual information incorporated? Does it strengthen the book? If primarily informational, what elements of a novel, if any, are used to keep the reader engaged? (Consider language, illustrative material, pacing, and tone, for example.) How do fact and fiction work together to both inform and absorb the reader?

• Writing

Keep a daily journal. Write about your daily activities, the movies you see, your thoughts and feelings. Add newspaper clippings of events that are of interest or

important to you. React to news items that attract your attention. Your journal may be considered an historical document as a “primary source.” It could also be made into a work of fiction as McKissack did in *Color Me Dark...* in which real people and events were integrated into a fictionalized story.

• Researching

Identify a real character in the book such as activist W.E.B. DuBois or writer James Weldon Johnson. Visit the library to learn more about them and their accomplishments. What is their lasting impact? Consider how things have changed or stayed the same since 1919. After reading about these individuals, do you think they would have behaved as they did in the novel? Why or why not?

Find out more about the “Great Migration” from art by Jacob Lawrence. Why did the artist use a series of panels? What is the effect on the viewer?

