

## PTM 1

### Guided Listening/Notetaking Activity:

#### Katherine Paterson's Life and Work (Teacher Version)

Katherine Paterson was born Katherine Womeldorf on October 31, 1932 in Huayin formerly Qing Jiang), China. Her parents were in China doing missionary work for the Presbyterian Church, but when war broke out between China and Japan in 1937 (how old was Paterson?), the family had to leave China. They first moved to North Carolina. Between the age of five and eighteen, Paterson attended 13 different schools. Of that experience, Paterson has said, "I remember the many schools I attended in those years mostly as places where I felt fear and humiliation. I was small, poor, and foreign. . . . I was a misfit in the classroom and on the playground" (Sanderson 2004, 6).

Paterson remembers vividly Valentine's Day during her first grade year. She returned home with zero valentines. Once her mother asked Paterson why she never wrote a story about the time she didn't receive any valentines, and Paterson replied, "But Mother, all my stories are about the time I didn't get any valentines" (6).

By the time she was in fifth grade, Paterson learned that she could win the respect of her classmates by writing plays for them to act out. But she wanted to become either a movie star or a missionary. After graduating from high school in 1950, she went to King's College and majored in English. She taught English for a year in rural Lovettsville, Virginia, the future setting for *Bridge to Terabithia*. It was during graduate school, while pursuing a master's degree in Christian Education, that a professor told Paterson she ought to become a writer. She recalls being appalled at this idea, saying, "I

don't want to add another mediocre writer to the world." Her teacher responded by telling her that if she wasn't willing to risk mediocrity, she would never accomplish anything. But Paterson was determined to become a missionary, and after completing her graduate program, Paterson went to Japan, which became the setting for her first children's novels.

In 1961, Paterson returned to the United States to attend Union Theological Seminary. There she met John Paterson, whom she married in 1962. She taught at the Pennington School for Boys for two years until her first son was born. Her family continued to expand as the Patersons had another son and adopted two daughters. During the years of her family's beginnings, Paterson began writing, and eventually, her practice and persistence paid off. In 1973, she published her first novel, *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum*. *Bridge to Terabithia* was her fourth novel. Published in 1977, it won the Newbery Award in 1978.

*Bridge* came about because, as Paterson puts it, she was trying to make sense of the tragedy of the death of her son's best friend. The family had already had a difficult year in that Paterson had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Although surgery was successful, everyone in the family had been frightened by that brush with death, and then Lisa Hill, the best friend of David, 8 years old, was struck and killed by lightening. During a meeting of a children's book writers, an editor heard her tell the story of David and Lisa and suggested to Paterson that she put it on paper. Paterson eventually followed this advice, saying, "I wrote *Bridge* because I couldn't do anything else. Of course, if I could've done anything I *wanted* to do, I would've brought Lisa back from the dead. But I couldn't do that, and I couldn't even comfort my son, who was totally distraught. So I

did what writers often do when they can't do what they really want to do. They write a story to make sense of something that doesn't make sense. . . . And people always want me to say that it comforted my son, but no, it was really for me" (10).

At first the writing went very quickly, but when it came time for Leslie to die, Paterson froze. She told a friend that she couldn't face going through Lisa's death again. But her friend responded by saying to her, "I don't think it's Lisa's death you can't face; it's yours" (10). Paterson became motivated to face her fear and then pushed through to finish the book. She says now, "I discovered gradually and not without a little pain that you don't put together a bridge for a child. You become one—you lay yourself across the chasm. . . . In writing this book, I have thrown my body across the chasm that most terrified me" (11). She feels that reading *Bridge* allows readers to have a kind of rehearsal for dealing with grief and learning how to mourn the loss of somebody close to you.

Some parents have criticized *Bridge* saying that death isn't an appropriate topic for children. Paterson defends her novel: "I find this very sad, because two of my children had lost friends by the time they were eight years old. . . . Death was not appropriate for my children, but somehow, as their parents, we had to help them face death" (49).

Paterson also says that she believes in the importance of secret places, such as the Kingdom of Terabithia. That's because she feels that if we don't have a place "where your imagination can run wild and you can ask yourself any question with no one censoring your thoughts, it's hard to grow either spiritually or emotionally" (13).

When asked if she has any advice for readers who want to become writers, Paterson tells them to read, read, read. Without reading, Paterson believes it is hard to

learn how language works, or how stories work. And she talks about the importance of books in her own life. Given that she was often an outsider at school, Paterson spent much time in libraries which “gave me books where I found friends—other children like myself who were lonely and frightened and friendless” (16). She found herself bullied and humiliated on the playground and in the classroom, but libraries provided a safe environment, and she is grateful to librarians for helping her connect with books.

Paterson believes deeply in the power of imagination. She notes that would-be writers often believe they have to live exciting lives in order to write good books. But Paterson has said, “I believe that you have to have a rich imaginative life. You don’t have to fight dragons to write books. You just have to live deeply the life that you’ve been given” (55).

## **Reference**

Sanderson, Jeannette. 2004. *Scholastic BookFiles: A Reading Guide to Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson. New York: Scholastic.