

educator's guide

Bayou Magic

Curriculum connections

- ❖ Fairy Tales & Folklore
- ❖ Environment
- ❖ Family

Ages 8 – 12 up



by
Jewell Parker Rhodes

UNFAMILIAR VOCABULARY: airboat, bayou, levee, wetlands, silt, crude

I. PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Look at the jacket illustration. Before beginning the novel, put a check by those attributes of the setting listed below that are supported by the illustration. Be able to back up your opinions by noting points from the illustration. After reading the novel, check those descriptors that describe Bon Temps to you. Support your answer with examples from the text.

Before Reading	Descriptor	After Reading
	Busy	
	Magical	
	Romantic	
	Commercial	
	Pastoral	
	Private	
	Luxurious	

II. LANGUAGE ARTS–CHARACTERIZATION

The author begins her story by introducing the main character. In the blank next to the following attributes, list the information Rhodes shares about Maddy.

1. Her age: _____
2. Her place in the family: _____
3. A physical description: _____
4. A difference between Maddy and her sisters: _____

On the first page, Maddy observes: “I like to cook. My sisters don’t.” Why is it important that the author set Maddy apart from her sisters at the very beginning of the novel?

When Maddy gets an invitation to go to visit her Grandmère in Bon Temps, her sisters share their distaste of Grandmère and the town. But, as the story progresses, Maddy begins to see their criticisms through her own eyes. Look at the following complaints the sisters have about Bon Temps and then write a word that best describes how Maddy comes to see these characteristics.

Maddy's Sisters' Descriptions	Maddy's Interpretation
Boring	
No Telephone	
Chores	
No Burgers	
Witch's House	
Spider Webs	
Creepy Shadows	

Grandmère gives Maddy three important pieces of advice: respect yourself, pay attention, and use your imagination. How does each piece manifest itself in Maddy's development as a strong character?

When Grandmère asks Maddy who she wants to be, Maddy replies: a hero. Does she become a hero or does she allow the mermaids to become heroes? Decide how you would answer this question and share your answer in a paragraph.

Grandmère says that one can only become a hero when something bad happens. Do you agree or disagree with that statement? In developing your answer, use examples from history or contemporary events.

Who is Mami Wata? What is her place in Maddy's family history?

III. LANGUAGE ARTS—AUTHOR'S CRAFT

In developing her story structure, and to make the magic believable, author Rhodes employs several literary conventions. She uses great detail when describing the setting, showing readers numerous realistic features. To acknowledge that detail, list as many of the plants, animals, and watery descriptions of Bon Temps that you can find in the text.

Another way the author shows that detail is through descriptive verbs that allow readers a visual image of the setting. Take one of these sentences and draw a sketch of what is happening in the Bayou. Compare your sketch to one drawn by a classmate who has chosen the same example. Are they similar or different? Why?

1. "A red tailed hawk glides, arcs across the blue bay" (p. 46)
2. "Stalks of wild grass clump, struggling to hold soil together." (p. 48)
3. "I watch a pelican fly, skirt above the waves." (p. 49)

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Once the author has firmly grounded the setting of Bon Temps in reality, the job of asking the reader to believe in the magical elements that create that setting requires just a small literary step. Again, the author uses two conventions to help readers take that step. First, she must make the ordinary seem fantastical, and second, she must reverse that process by making the fantastical appear ordinary. In both cases, Rhodes lets events slowly reveal themselves. Consider how she introduces the fireflies, ordinary creatures that gradually take on mystical qualities. Fill in the blanks of the progression about the fantastical elements associated with the ordinary firefly.

Appearances of the Fireflies	Maddy's Reactions
When traveling to Bon Temps, Maddy notices a firefly on the rim of the car door.	Maddy vaguely thinks the firefly might be a symbol, but doesn't know of what.
When they arrive at Bon Temps, Grandmère asks: "Did my firefly come?"	
A firefly lands on Grandmère's porch rail.	Maddy notices the firefly.
Grandmère asks Maddy to call the fireflies.	
Grandmère asks Maddy to name her firefly.	

Think about the appearance of Mami Wata and the mermaids. Again, the author uses a slow progressive realization recognizing the mermaid's existence.

Appearance of Mami Wata	Maddy's Reaction	Bear/Grandmère's Reaction
Maddy sees eyes staring at her from the bayou.	Maddy believes she has seen a mermaid.	Bear accepts her belief and helps search for Mami Wata; Maddy doesn't immediately tell Grandmère.
Grandmère tells Maddy the role Mami Wata plays in her own family history.	Maddy believes Grandmère's stories.	Maddy doesn't tell Bear of her family history, so he has no reaction.
Maddy spies a flicker of a hand waving from the depths	Maddy doesn't tell Bear, but later tells Grandmère.	
Mami Wata meets Maddy at an inlet, and the two explore the surrounding waterways.		
Maddy asks Mami Wata to help save Bon Temps.		

IV. SOCIAL STUDIES— COMMUNITY

The words Bon Temps are French and translate to “Good Times.” Are there good times in the bayou at the beginning of the novel? At the end of the novel? If so, what are they? If there are no “Good Times,” what are the “Bad Times?”

Grandmère gives Maddy many lessons. One is: “Do good and it’ll fly right back to you.” What does this phrase mean? How is it seen in the community of Bon Temps?

Bear’s father, Bailey, works on an oil rig, but knows that work may harm his home in Bon Temps. He hates the work, but he needs a job. There are many jobs that need to be done that some might find distasteful. Two are listed below. Discuss the positives and negatives of the following:

Pilot of armed drones during times of war

Caring for animals (some of whom may be euthanized) in a shelter

Think of another job that, for you, would be distasteful, but needs to be done. Explain your choice.

V. SCIENCE

Rhodes gives three reasons for the disappearance of the wetlands. What are they? Explain how each of these events contributes to the erosion of the wetlands. Research this question and find at least one more reason for the disappearance of the wetlands. Explain how this new reason contributes to erosion.

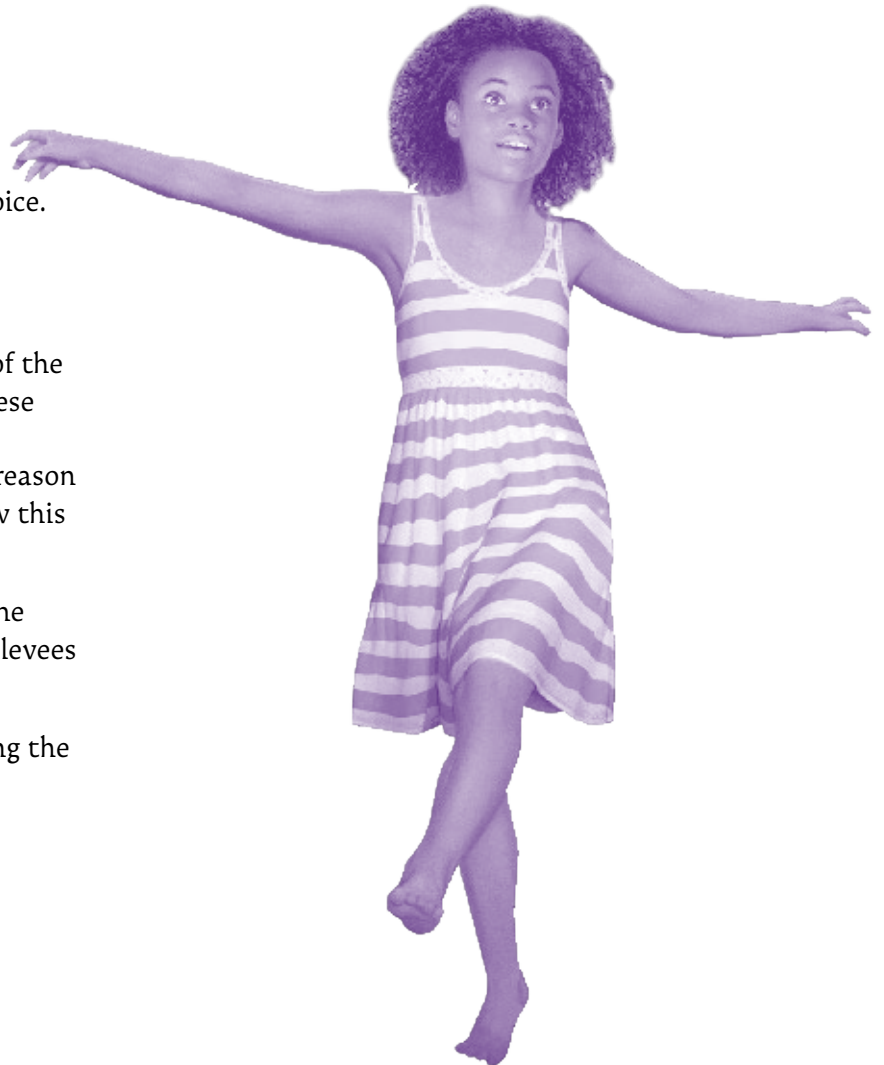
If the building of levees plays a part in erosion of the wetlands, how can the mermaids’ construction of levees help the situation?

The book contains a detailed description of cleaning the

pelicans harmed during the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. Other animals mentioned in the text, such as dolphins, shrimp, and turtles, were also affected. Research the effects on one of the animals, and report on what, if any, steps were taken to address the harm inflicted on that animal. What is the state of your animal today?

VI. CONCLUSION

The sentence “Blood like river water flows,” applies to the characters, the community of Bon Temps, and the wetlands habitat. First, explain what this sentence means to you. Second, explain how it applies to each of these three areas (character, community, and the immediate environment.)



Q&A WITH JEWELL PARKER RHODES

Q: *You wrote award-winning books for adults before you started writing for children. What inspired you to shift your attention to a young audience? What challenges and rewards are there in writing for children?*

A: I've always wanted to write for children. Writing for adults helped me practice my craft, but I never stopped studying children's literature and exploring ideas. After four decades of serious writing and experiencing the heartache of Hurricane Katrina, I finally heard a girl's brave voice and began writing *Ninth Ward* (Little, Brown, 2010). The challenge is to remain emotionally truthful. My reward is visiting schools and reading children's letters.

Q: *You've written about Louisiana in your adult fiction and also in your middle-grade novel, *Ninth Ward*, about Hurricane Katrina, and in *Bayou Magic*, which deals with the oil spill disaster—and with such affection. What connection do you have to Louisiana?*

A: In my first creative writing class, the professor said, "Write what you know." I wanted to write what I could *imagine*. So, I went home, pulled my *Time/Life Creole and Acadian* cookbook off the shelf and, inspired, wrote a story rooted in Louisiana culture. I'm actually a Pennsylvania/California girl. But Louisiana profoundly stirs my heart, mind, and spirit.

Q: **Ninth Ward*, *Sugar*, and *Bayou Magic* feature such wonderful grandmother figures. Was your own grandmother an inspiration for these characters? What did she have in common with Maddy's Grandmère?*

A: My grandmother raised me and taught me Southern folklore and traditions. Besides being a minister's wife, she was also a hoodoo healer. She "mothered" our entire community. Maddy's Grandmère is most like my grandmother, and her sayings are actual quotes my grandmother spoke to me. Mama Ya-Ya (*Ninth Ward*) and Mrs. Beale (*Sugar*) are elders who honor my grandmother's care-giving and love.

Q: *I had never heard of Mami Wata. How did you decide to include her in Maddy's story?*

A: African diaspora tales are often lost or left untold.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art featured an exhibit of 500 years of Mami Wata incarnations in Brazil, the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean. Literature teaches culture. I want girls of color to know there are heroic mermaids that mirror them. I want *all* girls to know there are diverse, global mermaid tales that depart from the western trope of a mermaid transforming herself for a prince.

Q: *You travel all over the world teaching creative writing to students of all ages, and you teach writing at Arizona State University as well. How do you find time to do your own writing? What advice do you have for aspiring writers?*

A: For me, consistent writing, in small doses, makes a novel. If I waited to have more time, I'd never write. It also helps that I only write stories that I feel passionate about, so I've never experienced writer's block. For aspiring writers, I'd urge them to honor their voice and the process. A writer writes. Every writer's process is different: find yours.

Q: *Are you planning a return to Louisiana in your next book for children? I'd love to see more of Maddy, Bear, and Grandmère. What other writing projects are in your future?*

A: My next project is *Towers Falling*, and it's about Dèjà, who discovers how her life has been impacted by the 9/11 New York City terrorist attacks. As always, my writing follows my heart. I'm open to voices, characters who appear like ghosts when I'm doing the dishes or dreaming. I suspect Louisiana will haunt me again.

Q: *There is plenty of folk magic in Maddy's story—Mami Wata and the mermaids, the fireflies—but I think the real magic of the story lies in Maddy's bravery. What was the inspiration for Maddy's character?*

A: None of my Louisiana girls are based on real people—I hear a voice and I follow. The first line is very *important*. Maddy announces, "My name is Madison Isabelle Lavalier Johnson." That sentence was my gateway. As I wrote, I was astounded at how different and special Maddy was—how her rhythm was slower, more thoughtful than Lanesha's or Sugar's. Maddy is a courageous girl. Does she exist? Of course, she does. While unique to my book, Maddy channels girls everywhere.

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about the book



Bayou Magic

HC 978-0-316-22484-0

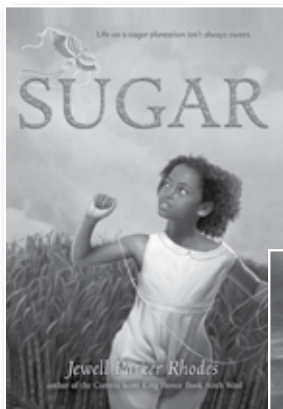
Also available in downloadable eBook format

If only Maddy sees the mermaid, can it be real?

It's Maddy's turn to have a bayou summer. At first she misses life back home in the city, but soon she grows to love everything about her new surroundings—the glimmering fireflies, the glorious landscape, and something else, deep within the water, that only Maddy sees. Could it be a mermaid? As her grandmother shares wisdom about sayings and signs, Maddy realizes she may be the only sibling to carry on her family's magical legacy. And when a disastrous oil leak threatens the bayou, she knows she may also be the only one who can help. Does she have what it takes to be a hero?

- ★ “Her coming-of-age story is set in a world of magic, folk history, and rituals that's easy to embrace. *Bayou Magic* revels in friendship, and love while reflecting life in the Deep South.”—*Booklist*
- ★ “Maddy is a brave and hopeful heroine, and the descriptions of the bayou are almost as magical as her legacy. Hand this to middle grade readers who enjoy family stories, history, and a dose of fanciful magic.”—*School Library Journal*

also by JEWELL PARKER RHODES



HC 978-0-316-04305-2

PB 978-0-316-04306-9

Also available in downloadable eBook format

“[Rhodes'] prose shines, reading with a spare lyricism that flows naturally. All *Sugar's* hurt, longing, pain and triumph shine through. . . . A magical story of hope.”—*Kirkus Reviews*



HC 978-0-316-04307-6

PB 978-0-316-04308-3

Also available in downloadable eBook format

- ★ “With a mix of magical and gritty realism . . . the spare but vivid prose, lilting dialogue, and skilled storytelling brings this tragedy to life; the powerful sense of community Rhodes evokes in the *Ninth Ward* prior to the storm makes the devastation and the hardships Laneshia endures all the more powerful.”—*Publishers Weekly*
- ★ “Heartbreak and hope are reflected in Laneshia's story, which will capture even reluctant readers due to the inventive storytelling and the author's ability to bring history to life.”—*School Library Journal*

about the author



Jewell Parker Rhodes is the author of *Ninth Ward*, a Coretta Scott King Honor Book, and *Sugar*, winner of the Jane Addams Peace Association Children's Book Award. She has also written many award-winning books for adults. Jewell lives with her family in Arizona. Visit her online at jewellparkerrhodes.com.



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This educator's guide was written by Betty Carter, an independent consultant and professor emerita of children's and young adult literature at Texas Woman's University.