

## **Hidden Hearts—Love Speaks Any Language: An Author Study of Tomie de Paola For ESL Students**

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*Story always tells us more than the mere words, and that is why we love to write it and to read it.*

Madeline L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*, Introduction

### **INTRODUCTION**

This curriculum unit idea was born from a happy marriage of my two loves: ESL students and children's literature. Before I ever taught ESL kids I was a Tomie de Paola fan. I taught Pre-K and Kindergarten in the eighties and he was considered **THE** man in children's literature. I read all of his picture books to my own children (now 25 and 22) and we spent hours in the children's section of the library devouring his writing. We attended book fairs and signings, eager for the latest offering from the "heart man." It wasn't until I later began to teach ESL intermediate school children, and studied second language acquisition in graduate school, that I began to consider de Paola as a valuable resource for my ESL kids. It was in an ESL strategies class that I learned that students acquire a second language in much the same way they acquire the first. Drawing upon my early childhood years of experience, I experimented with picture books in my ESL intermediate grade classes. Much to my delight, they were an instant hit! Why? Quite simply, I think the reason is that de Paola is a master storyteller. Getting and holding a student's interest (ESL or otherwise) is a teacher's greatest challenge, and no student can resist a great story. And in my own personal experience, the teachers I remember best and most fondly had an enthusiasm for the subject matter that was contagious. Interestingly enough, they all taught in much the same way—they were irresistible storytellers. Could I, I mused, use this picture book approach to effectively deliver the demands of the ESL language arts curriculum? I had, I thought, the perfect formula—my enthusiasm and de Paola's storytelling.

In my limited experience thus far, I have found that children's picture books contain the perfect blend of invitation and challenge, warmth and intrigue, to suggest them as alternative resources for the teaching of language arts. de Paola, in particular, uses illustrations that are both inviting and whimsical, yet the text is often more challenging than the average picture book. In order to make the book study effective, there must be ample opportunity for vocabulary building and enrichment necessary for the L2 learner. de Paola fills this need, yet his books are non-threatening and the illustrations often provide context clues for the ESL student's struggling comprehension level.

Because I believe that L2 learners are all too often easily discouraged in their attempts to read and write in a second language, I heartily endorse the use of high interest reading material to motivate and excite. A prolific author like de Paola allows me a wide choice of high interest, often-multicultural themed literature that validates the existence of other cultures beyond the ESL student's American school world.

Finally, de Paola is just plain fun to read! My students greatly benefit from having authentic literature read aloud to them, especially by a native speaker. de Paola is undeniably read aloud worthy. Even with little or no introduction, children readily respond to his comical characters and wonderfully cartoonish illustrations. ESL students eagerly engage in this type of language arts instruction. My students in particular have exited the HISD bilingual program and are learning solely in English for the first time. They have varied ability levels; within their wide ranged ability levels they vary greatly in the four designated strands of HISD's PROJECT CLEAR: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Traditional strategies of ESL instruction can be a torturous experience for them, especially if they've had little or no English instruction before. A language arts approach that is engaging and entertaining lifts the affective filter of fear and insecurity, and creates a comfortable classroom climate suitable for optimal second language acquisition.

It is not a new idea to integrate literature study with other curricular areas. Indeed, it has been done effectively for years. Social studies, in particular, readily lends itself to this approach. My unit will be no exception. It is an approach that all children benefit from, but once again, it is even more important when teaching ESL. Here is where de Paola offers a wealth of opportunities (i.e. rabbit trails) to explore, as many of his selections have multicultural themes. Cultural sensitivity is a must for all ESL instruction, as again the affective filter comes into play. Validating and celebrating the existence of a variety of cultures goes far in establishing the comfort zone necessary for the ESL classroom. I will make use of the HISD PROJECT CLEAR SOCIAL STUDIES strands in the area of citizenship. SS420.a & b both require that students are able to understand the similarities, differences, and contributions of racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups in Texas. These strands provide a nice framework for pleasant lesson extensions inspired by our themes.

## **THE UNIT**

It is my intent to create a teacher/student friendly unit that allows for the use of traditional ESL strategy within a nontraditional approach. Hopefully, it will provide numerous exciting springboards allowing further investigation for especially enthusiastic participants. My unit is entitled *Hidden Hearts—Love Speaks Any Language: An Author Study of Tomie de Paola for ESL Students*. This unit will be designed with fourth grade ESL students as the focus, but I hope to make the format flexible enough to use with other grade levels. Because de Paola has over 200 books to his credit, it is the teacher's challenge to choose which books work best with his or her student population. At this

writing, I envision a four-week unit, with four themed weeks. I intend to cluster my choices in the following categories: autobiographical, folk tales/fairy tales/legends, grandparent stories, and Christmas. Each week will contain several selections on the theme with opportunities to compare and contrast, explore the country of origin (if applicable), engage in literature circles, build vocabulary word banks of cognates (maybe even dabble in some etymology), and write in response to the weekly literature selections. I have tentatively considered the timing of the unit to coincide with the holidays. To keep the sequence seasonally accurate, the unit should begin in mid-November and end on the day before the Christmas break.

## **WEEK 1**

Naturally, any author study begins with learning about the author. Armed with the autobiographical *Fairmont Avenue Series*, *Oliver Button is a Sissy*, *The Art Lesson*, his website and two of his videos, I intend to immerse my students in the magical world of Tomie de Paola, author and illustrator. It will be important to learn about who he is, what he likes, where he lives, and how he decided on his career choice. While the *Fairmont Avenue Series* will give details about his childhood years, the videos will introduce the students to Tomie in the present. I plan on introducing him through the video, *Tomie de Paola Live in Concert*. This is a wonderful glimpse of the author as illustrator and master storyteller. In this video, Tomie tells stories from his youth and reads aloud two of his personal favorites, *Strega Nona* and *Tom*. He gives clear directions in his easy to follow, step-by-step art lessons of how to draw animals and *Strega Nona*. This particular segment of the video is especially appealing. Even the “only draws stick people” types like me are able to render successful artistic replicas with his instructions. What a simple, but powerful message for ESL kids! With this small segment of the video they can easily achieve success if they only try. Thus the tone is set for future positive experiences with the literature.

An important selection in this week’s studies will be *Oliver Button is a Sissy*. This is a heartwarming story of Oliver (Tomie), the young boy who dares to be different. While his stereotypical Italian father initially scorns his girlish interests, his supportive Irish mother indulges him, as he cannot help but march to a different drummer. Ultimately, Oliver’s persistence wins out; despite some early failures (he doesn’t win the talent show he has begged to tap dance in), it is clear he is loved and supported by a nurturing family circle. My hope is to extend this story into literature discussions, involving the terms “sissy” and “bully.” I am interested in hearing the students’ responses to Tomie’s “different” behavior. Keeping in mind that he would have been a young child in the late 1930s and society would have been far less tolerant of his seemingly feminine pursuits, it will be interesting to hear the ESL students’ take on this. There is so much more opportunity and acceptance in the year 2003 for girls to do “boy” things and for boys to do “girl” things. Will the students be surprised at the lack of tolerance for individualism and narrow-minded attitudes regarding traditional male and female roles? Or, will they surprise me with their conservatism and side with the traditionalists? Will they be

surprised to learn that their own teacher was forbidden to be the president of her eighth grade class (I had the votes!) because the president needed to be a boy?

The other term worth pursuing in literature circles is “bully.” Bullying is a hot topic in all character education curricula today. In Tomie’s story we see the price he paid for being different. Today’s school children are painfully aware of the devastating school tragedies (Columbine) that have been traced to bully victims. This piece should generate healthy discussion toward the promotion of tolerance and acceptance for all.

The final selection of the week will be *The Art Lesson*. In this story, Tomie pays tribute to the teacher who recognized his needs and nurtured his artistic leanings. In all of the autobiographical selections, his message is clear. Tomie is grateful to all those who recognized his need to do things his own special way. He has returned that kindness in his literary tributes to them.

To wind up the week, it seems fitting to encourage a written response to the literature selections. It is appropriate at this point to assign autobiographies to the students. We can begin by using graphic organizers to brainstorm and plan our writing. Using an “All About Me” format, children will compose autobiographical pieces, which include personal data: name, birthdate, birthplace, family members, likes and dislikes, personal goals, favorite hobbies, etc.

## **WEEK 2**

In my de Paola sequence, the next logical step is to explore some of his grandparent stories: *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs*, *Now One Foot, Now the Other*, *Watch Out For the Chicken Feet in Your Soup*, and *Tom*. Most significant in de Paola’s story lines are his strong family ties and cultural pride. This is a meaningful theme for ESL kids, and I imagine these selections will be particularly appealing to them. Our school community sits in the geographic center of Denver Harbor, an exclusively Hispanic neighborhood in northeast Houston. Most households are multi-generational, and it is often the children’s grandparents that I first meet and conference with. This segment of the unit will offer countless opportunities for us to tell our own stories, either in oral or written format. Because de Paola’s grandparent stories are rich with respect and empathy for the aging and dying, as well as generational relationships and the wisdom and love received from them, I envision this topic to be beneficial from a socio-emotional standpoint as well.

This week’s selections will be paired in two’s. The first set, *Tom* and *Watch Out for the Chicken Feet in Your Soup*, are lively accounts of Tomie’s experiences with loving grandparents who dote on him, play with him, and are totally devoted to him. Tom is young Tomie’s playmate, who conspires with his grandson to play practical jokes on unsuspecting relatives and friends. Nona, on the other hand, is the typical Italian grandmother who speaks broken English and spends all day cooking and baking. Joey

(Tomie) feels obligated to explain her strange behavior to his American friend, Eugene, in a half apologetic tone, “My Grandma talks funny.”

It is clear in both books that Tomie’s parents are from a working class background. I chose these two selections precisely for this reason. My student population is 100% Title 1. They come from poverty and their parents are recent immigrants with little or no formal education. I am immediately struck by the reference to chicken feet in both books (Tom is a butcher who turns them into toys; Nona uses them to flavor the soup). Perhaps in a more American, white-collar classroom these references will seem odd. Not so in the world of Denver Harbor, where chicken feet are real and usually first noticed while still attached to the family chickens!

And it’s on to the next two selections. *Now One Foot, Now the Other* deals with a young boy’s changed relationship with his grandfather, after the old man Bob suffers a debilitating stroke. Bobby is named for his grandfather and they are an inseparable team from the day he is born. Bob teaches Bobby to talk and walk and play games. Once the stroke happens, Bobby’s relationship with his grandfather necessarily changes. Although he is initially frightened by the changes, (Bob can’t walk or talk, and only makes strange, scary noises), Bobby realizes he must do for his grandfather as has been lovingly done for him. He becomes the rehab therapist, teaching his grandfather to talk and walk again; more importantly, with his simple loving acts and solicitous gestures, he charms Bob from the deep depression that threatens to destroy their once special relationship.

I intend to pair this selection with another de Paola book of a similar theme. *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs* describes a young boy’s relationship with his grandmother and great-grandmother. His grandmother (Nana Downstairs) is active and well, while his great-grandmother (Nana Upstairs), is old and frail. She must be tied in a chair so that she won’t fall out, and because she is old and wrinkled, with long white hair, sometimes she looks like a witch to Tomie’s brother. Yet she is an important presence in the book, and a highly valued family member. Her death is handled in a natural gentle way; Tomie’s experience with her death is positive, lovingly and sensitively captured by careful word choice and soft illustrations.

If my guess is correct, this unit should generate an explosion of language in my classroom. Here is where digression may be the most valuable part of the week, as I imagine a lot of spontaneously shared grandparent stories. When the subject matter is relevant and the students are motivated and eager to be heard, the writing experiences are bound to be plentiful and easily obtained. Students may write their own fictional versions of any of the shared literature selections, or do an authentic nonfiction interview of their grandparents. A family tree assignment seems appropriate here, or the perennial favorite “What My Grandparents Mean To Me.” The timing of this unit should coincide nicely with our school’s traditional Grandparents Day celebration, held the day before Thanksgiving vacation. I intend to have the class host a luncheon for their grandparents

with shared dishes of grandparent specialties on this day. This should provide a satisfying wrap up to our week, just in time for Thanksgiving.

### **WEEK 3**

Having shared our stories and special traditions from our respective cultures, we venture into the delightful world of fairy tales, folk tales, and legends. To my mind, this is an area where de Paola shines. Our lesson would begin with the definitions of these three types of literary genres. We will create T-charts while compiling lists of common motifs and stereotypes. In addition, we will reacquaint ourselves with prior knowledge of those tales we already know.

The selections I have chosen for this week seem suitable for travel and geographic exploration. We'll head to Europe first for tours of Ireland and Italy and then swing through Mexico (perhaps discovering our roots) before heading back to Texas, our home, sweet home. Using a website designed specifically for students, we'll use the atlas to chart our course and head for Ireland first. There we will learn about the terrain and climate, culture, people and traditions, especially folklore about fairies and "the little people." (see Appendix for more information about the "tours") The first of paired readings this week will be *Fin McCoul the Giant of Knockmany Hill*. In this story of benevolent giants who build causeways on the island, there is one bully, Cucullin, whose goal it is to fight and subdue all other giants. He has but one left, Fin McCoul, who has spent his life on the run, in fear of a fatal beating. It is his wife, the lovely Oohnagh, who takes charge and insists that Fin must face his foe and put an end to his life of flight. Oohnagh's clever plan unfolds, and with the aid of some fairies, Cucullin is undone.

We head for Italy next to the tiny town of Barletta on the Adriatic Sea. From our geographic website, we will have gotten some cursory information about the geographic profile, the climate, the culture, and the mysterious tradition of the "stregas." In the story, *The Mysterious Giant of Barletta*, Barletta is a peaceful place with no military protection; the citizens do not even have the means available to raise an army if necessary. In the center of the town stands Il Colosso (the giant one) in military garb. Legend says he protects the town of Barletta from coastal invasion. When Zia Concetta (the town strega) gets wind of an impending invasion, she turns to Colosso for help. With her clever plan and his cooperation, the army is frightened away and the town is safe once again.

At this point, my students are ripe for a compare/contrast writing experience. Venn diagrams and T-charts will be the stuff of our brainstorming, pre-writing preparation. It should be clear that the stories have much in common: giants, clever females, some degree of magic, threatening enemies, and large men who present themselves as baby versions of mythical supermen. The contrasts are fairly obvious as well: different countries, trickery by different schemes using different props, magic performed upon rather than magic from within, unmarried female heroine versus married female heroine,

and so on. These pre-writing activities should be thorough and lengthy, in order to provide ample material to write a first draft. My experiences with reluctant writers have always been that they are intimidated by the empty page. That is why the pre-writing activities are crucial for the ESL writer. They provide the “stuff” and the organizational plan with which to brave a first draft. These giant stories have intriguing plots and interesting word choice. Just for fun we will create word banks of cognates between the sister languages of Italian and Spanish (*zia*, *colosso*, etc.). They also have appealing illustrations and happy endings. They all add up to a positive first experience with compare/contrast essays for the novice L2 writer.

Our intercontinental travel takes us back to North America, but “south of the border, down Mexico way” (Kennedy and Carr 1949). Here we’ll explore the little town where de Paola’s *Adelita* takes place. Although billed as a Mexican *Cinderella*, de Paola takes some interesting departures from the traditional fairy tale format. Mexican folklore already has a more traditional Cinderella figure—Cindacierta, a character based upon the Mexican translation of the Charles Perrault classic. *Adelita* actually combines some of the Cindacierta elements with a far more realistic storyline. There is no magic in *Adelita*, unless it is the tremendous magical strength and power of human love. Far more than in any other Cinderella tale, human love both protects and prevails without the aid of any fairy, wand, or talisman in de Paola’s *Adelita*. His beautiful, vibrant, and colorful illustrations make this an appealing (perhaps preferred) version of the fairy tale. The language is fun, liberally dosed with Spanish words, phrases, and idiomatic expressions that are bound to delight an ESL student of Mexican extraction. So often I find in my teaching that the best icebreaker can be a simple “Como se dice?” (“How do you say?”). This question validates the knowledge base and linguistic sophistication level of the ESL student who longs to share but lacks the forum. This type of teacher sensitivity goes far in extracting the very best efforts from the reluctant reader. It’s fairly obvious that *Adelita* lends itself readily to compare/contrast oral reports/discussions/writing activities with the more traditional version of *Cinderella*. It’s quite possible this topic might just generate interest in *Cinderella* tales from around the world. I plan to keep the classroom library well stocked with multicultural *Cinderellas* for interested readers. Because there are an estimated 750 versions of *Cinderella* from all over the world, time does not permit anything more than a cursory mention—indeed, that’s another whole unit by itself!

From Mexico we’ll travel north to Texas, our home state. There we’ll refresh our knowledge of the cultural diversity of Texas, especially the social studies units first covered in the early part of the fourth grade year. Specifically, we’ll focus on the Native American tribes who lived in and around the Texas hill country. Our two selections, *The Legend of the Bluebonnet* and *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush* are both Native American legends about the origins of two popular Texas wildflowers. The hill country of Texas is known for its lovely wildflowers, made famous by former First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson’s beautification project of the 1960s. It was Lady Bird Johnson who spearheaded the ingenious project to computer program the seeding of the wildflowers from season to season. (This programming allowed for the rotation of the plantings and

in turn, varied the patterns of wildflowers on the Texas country highway system.) According to a great story retold by University of Houston Professor R.F. Abrahamson, de Paola was at first disinterested in doing any story suggestions sent by well-intentioned readers. It was the persistence of a Texas elementary school teacher who Fed-Exed freshly picked wildflowers to New Hampshire that finally convinced de Paola to write about the Lone Star State. The results are the now classic *Legend of the Bluebonnets* and the less famous but equally delightful *Legend of the Indian Paintbrush*.

In the *Legend of the Bluebonnet*, a small Indian girl, She-Who-Is-Alone, has lost her family and much of her tribe to a terrible famine caused by drought. She believes she must do something to help her starving people. When the Shaman declares that a great sacrifice must be made to appease the Spirits, it is she who nobly and unselfishly volunteers her one possession, her doll. It was made for her by her mother and is the only thing she has left to remind her of her now lost family. The doll is adorned with beautiful feathers from the blue jay; when it is sacrificed the ashes are left on the ground. The healing rains bring relief to the drought-parched land and the spot where the doll was sacrificed is covered with new blue flowers. They are a reminder of the loving sacrifice made by the newly named She-Who-Loved-Her-People.

The *Legend of the Indian Paintbrush* has a similar theme. A young Indian brave with great artistic talent wants only to capture the beauty of the sunset. Despite his attempts, his colors do not do it justice. He perseveres, and through the intervention of the Great Spirit, he is finally able to depict its loveliness on the deerskin canvas. In the place where he persistently returned time and again, to capture the sunset's beauty, the Indian Paintbrush now grows as a tribute to his brilliant gift.

Because both of these Native American legends have powerful oral/aural appeal, these stories will easily lend themselves to dramatic interpretations. I think that my students will truly enjoy reenacting them in a Reader's Theater format. In cooperative groupings they will take on the roles of playwrights, performers and producers, complete with set design and props to stage their own classroom plays of these two legends. Creativity, flexibility and group planning skills will be stressed and 100% participation will be our class goal.

I am aware that this week is really full; I am not sure all of these activities suggested will work within a one week time frame, especially if teachers are bound to 90 minute language arts blocks. At the very least, the Native American legends are certainly worthy of some time "stolen" from the social studies weekly minutes, especially if the class is self-contained. In addition, the projected calendar for the 2003-2004 school year provides some "wobble" room, as the actual amount of school days from post-Thanksgiving through the start of the Christmas holidays is more like three weeks instead of two. It's important to see this whole unit as a general overview, and teachers may choose to add or delete as time permits. My main goal is to have fun with my ESL students while still delivering the requirements of the mandated curriculum. The positive



merits of this unit will become lost, or at best suffer, if tied too strictly to a minute-by-minute, week-by-week adherence to its contents.

#### **WEEK 4**

Our final week will be spent enjoying de Paola's many Christmas stories. Most students are aware that different cultures celebrate winter holidays in different ways. Indeed, in the Hispanic and European cultures, Christmas is almost eclipsed by the more meaningful holiday of the Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>. It is on this day that tradition suggests the Three Kings finally arrive in Bethlehem, discover, and recognize the Christ Child as their King. Even today, the term epiphany has become a term associated with recognition, revelation, self-discovery, or understanding. de Paola has written a tribute to the Three Kings, but I chose his Italian version of Santa Claus, *Old Befana*, as our first selection this week. Befana is a fussy old woman, obsessed with her housekeeping, specifically her sweeping, and has no time for small talk or unimportant (i.e. non-housekeeping) tasks. She hears about the birth and dismisses it as a silly notion, but that star keeps her awake all night. She finally decides that perhaps she can put her sweeping skills to use for the new mother, and even bake some cookies as a gift for the Holy Family. When the Kings arrive and suggest that she join them, she puts them off, as her chores are not yet done. So obsessed is she with her ritual, that she misses her chance to join them. When she finally makes time for the journey, the Kings are long gone and she is at a loss to find the child on her own. Recognizing her mistake, she searches relentlessly for the baby, even to this day. She leaves treats at the home of any young child and cleans the house to boot, just in case it is the home of the Holy Family. The message is clear: Befana (like us) is too absorbed in her own lifestyle to recognize the greatest invitation she ever received. Her fussiness and self-absorption are her great vices. She realizes her mistake and spends the rest of her life giving and doing for others. It's a great lesson for people of any culture or any faith!

Next on the list is *Tony's Bread*. This is a legend about the origin of the Christmas bread panettone, which is a traditional favorite in northern Italy. Tony is but a poor baker; he has no dowry for his daughter Serafina. She is enamored of a wealthy bachelor, Angelo, who becomes Tony's distributor after Tony bakes a bread so tasty no one can resist it (including me--we'll definitely be sampling some.) The bread is a citron and raisin filled sweet bread all Italians know as panettone ("Tony's bread"). Tony becomes wealthy, Serafina has her dowry, she marries her beloved, and everyone wins in this story! de Paola sprinkles just enough Italian words and phrases throughout his text to make the prose authentic and the familiar terms will delight any Italian American who reads it. This story, as well as *Old Befana*, provides an ample selection of vocabulary to build a word bank of cognates for the ESL students. Italian and Spanish, like the other Romance languages, are so closely related and have lent so many words to the English language, that ESL students actually find word origin discussions quite interesting. Here's where the English dictionary can be introduced as a valuable resource (I love the dictionary; it's one of my favorite books. I even read it as a kid when I ran out of library

books!) If it is presented with reverence and true fascination, students will look with new eyes at the dictionary. It is worth at least one class period just pointing out and enjoying all the things the dictionary teaches. Not just those dreaded guide words and sample entries that show up on standardized assessment tools, but word origin, pronunciation guides, and indeed the very history of our language. And because English is such a dynamic language, it is changing all the time. It can be quite fun to discuss pronunciation of various American dialects with ESL kids. I find that when it is presented with enthusiasm, it is the dictionary that lights up some of my most exciting classes.

The last two selections are both Christmas stories that take place in Mexico. This is the point at which I hope to celebrate the culture of my students (Mexican) as the perfect wrap-up to the four-week unit of study.

The first selection, *The Legend of the Poinsettia*, tells the story of a little girl who has no gift to bring to the nativity scene at church, per her town tradition. She and her mother are poor, but they begin to knit/weave a beautiful blanket for the Christ Child. All is going well, until the child's mother becomes ill. Unless Lucinda completes the task alone, there will be no gift. She tries, but she is young and unskilled. Her pathetic attempt becomes an unrecognizable, gnarled mess. By Christmas Eve she has nothing to give, and rather than go to Midnight Mass empty-handed, she grabs a handful of weeds from outside the church steps. She hastily drops it at the crèche and says her prayer. When she looks up from prayer, her weeds have bloomed into glorious red flowers. Thus is born the Flor de Noche Buena or "The Flower of the Holy Night." At this point, Hispanic ESL kids are always relieved to hear the story of Poinset, the American diplomat who returned from a visit to Mexico enamored of this lovely flower. Americans named it the poinsettia. ESL kids find this amusing. Why did it need to be renamed? It already had a name—Flor de Noche Buena!

The last selection of this unit is *The Night of Las Posadas*. A posada procession is a long honored Spanish and Mexican tradition. It begins on the 16<sup>th</sup> day of December and continues for nine nights. (Probably because it began as a novena, a prayer petition in the Catholic faith that lasts for nine consecutive days.) de Paola's story relies on the Santa Fe tradition. Various Hispanic groups celebrate the posada in the same basic way, but with some regional differences. As the ancient story of the Holy Couple's journey to Bethlehem is reenacted, the posada participants, carrying lighted candles, accompany a selected couple (it is a great honor to be chosen) to several different homes, seeking shelter. There is a script, well known to participants, and all parts are sung acapella to the very simple singsong melody. Designated homes become the many inns that refuse shelter; the final home welcomes the entire procession in for a huge fiesta. (A different home hosts the fiesta every night.) There the revelers feast on traditional homemade tamales and hot chocolate. There is often a piñata for the children; music, gaiety, and fellowship are the key ingredients that make for a successful fiesta. In *The Night of Las Posadas*, the basic story line revolves around the planning of a posada. de Paola's story

takes a sweet turn as the statues of the expectant Mary and spouse Joseph come to life to help out a blizzard doomed posada procession.

I decided at the onset of planning this week that because things are often frantic and stressful for teachers and students during the week before Christmas holidays, we might as well have a week of activities that requires active participation from the students. Without ignoring the basics and fundamental skills, this week will require “doings.” My students will plan and execute the entire posada and fiesta afterwards. Our focus will be on oral presentations and group planning. Using scripts that are in both English and Spanish from a Mexican website, they will assign parts, memorize lines, and prepare props for our posada. Parent participation will be necessary. I am hoping that the students’ family members will prepare the traditional tamales and hot chocolate. All bilingual classes will be invited to participate; their classrooms the “inns” we visit where the responses are sung. The last room is ours of course, where parents will be prepared to throw open the doors and welcome the procession in for the fiesta. While we will have spent most of the time this week experiencing the children’s own culture, I hope to also offer several non-de Paola selections on Christmas traditions throughout the world (Kwanzaa, Hanukah, Pere Noel, Father Christmas, Babushka, just to name a few). In addition to the wealth of language learning possibilities here, my hope is that the students feel validated as members of their own culture and excited about learning the traditions of others.

#### **AUTHOR’S NOTE:**

It must be stated here that several weeks alone could be spent in de Paola’s *Strega Nona* series. I am well aware of their delight potential but have chosen to exclude them in the unit, except for the limited contact in the video used in Week 1, because my children will have been exposed to them before. I imagine *Strega Nona* is his best read and most famous children’s book (it is certainly one of his favorites, according to his video). However, for interested parties, the entire series will be made available during independent reading time, when students are permitted free choice from the classroom library.

#### **APPENDIX**

These geographic tours will provide my students with related, non-fiction reading material while we enjoy the unit together. Since the tours are within the theme of the unit, non-fiction resources are a natural addition here. Far from being “filler”, these readings are equally important and the operative term here is **related**, (that is, not forced). While most of the unit is dedicated to fiction (with the exception of some of de Paola’s autobiographical pieces which are based in fact), it would be lacking without some time set aside for non-fiction selections. ESL students (and all students, for that matter) need exposure to such material, especially in the fourth grade, as more and more standardized testing uses a greater percentage of non-fiction passages than fictional ones. Because this

unit is geared specifically to Tomie de Paola's books, I leave it up to classroom teachers to choose appropriate non-fiction reading material for the tours. I have included useful websites, as well as two Houston International Festival Curriculum guides in my bibliography, that are nice starting points.

## **LESSON PLANS**

### **Lesson Plan 1**

#### **Video: Tomie de Paola Live in Concert**

##### ***Student Objectives***

- Students will be introduced to the author of focus in our unit of study.
- Students will listen to the author's reading of two chosen, popular selections for understanding and entertainment.
- Students will replicate author's favorite illustrations following his step-by-step instructions.
- Students will enjoy a positive first experience with our author of focus, Tomie de Paola.

##### ***Materials:***

- Video: *Tomie de Paola Live in Concert*
- TV/VCR
- Art paper
- Drawing implements (markers, crayons,)

##### ***Activities***

Teacher should watch this video before the students view it, and judge just how much of it to use with the student population. It is rather long (60 minutes), but extremely entertaining, as de Paola is a master storyteller and a gifted art instructor and illustrator. Allow students to listen to the stories Tomie tells about growing up, and then to his two readings of *Tom* and *Strega Nona*. I find it is useful to have copies of those books on hand during and after the viewing. I suggest even holding the book up for the children to see and turning the pages while Tomie reads the book on the video. (Here's where a Big Book would be an awesome prop, but use the regular sized book if no Big Books are available.)

About midway through the video, de Paola will give art instructions, specifically about how to draw animals, facial expressions, and even *Strega Nona!* Children may follow his directions to create their own illustrations. Even the limited English speaker will have success in this activity, and I find it is an entertaining way to introduce this author.

### ***Suggested Follow-up***

De Paola has another video, *A Visit With Tomie de Paola*, designed to give a glimpse of his private life at home. It is a very chatty, but informative behind the scenes look at his home and lifestyle. A tour of his uniquely furnished farmhouse, and a detailed look at his gallery are some of the video highlights. I find that students enjoy this video more **after** having seen *Tomie de Paola Live in Concert*.

### **Lesson Plan 2**

#### ***Oliver Button is a Sissy*, by Tomie de Paola**

#### ***Student Objectives***

- Listen for purpose, and determine author's intent.
- Define, discuss and understand the terms "sissy" and "bully".
- Write a short narrative essay from a prompt.

#### ***Activities:***

Teacher will read aloud the book *Oliver Button is a Sissy*. Students will be grouped in 3s for literature circles. They will be given a series of questions to discuss. Each student within a group will have an assigned duty. These duties are: RECORDER, REPORTER AND LEADER. Each duty has a separate job description

Questions for literature circle:

1. What is your definition of a sissy? A bully?
2. Do sissies and bullies really exist?
3. How do sissies bother others? Bullies?
4. Do sissies have a right to be sissies? Do bullies?
5. Was Oliver a sissy?
6. How did Oliver's family help Oliver when others called him a sissy?
7. Are there activities that are only boy activities? What about girl activities?
8. Should sissies be tolerated? Should bullies?

Students will be given time to discuss and prepare responses. Groups will be asked to share responses with the entire class. Teacher led class discussion will follow each group report.

#### ***Follow-up assignment:***

Write about a time when a bully victimized you or someone you know.

### **Lesson Plan 3**

#### ***Fin McCoul, the Giant of Knockmany Hill and The Mysterious Giant of Barletta*, by Tomie de Paola: A compare/contrast writing experience.**

#### ***Student Objectives***

- Listen for purpose, and determine author's intent.

- Using a Venn diagram, students will create a graphic organizer that shows similarities and differences in the two selections.
- Students will compose a rough draft using a four-paragraph compare/contrast writing outline.

***Activities:***

Teacher will have read aloud both books during the course of this week’s unit. Using an overhead projector, teacher will brainstorm with the entire class and model the use of the Venn diagram to organize ideas. Using student suggestions, the overhead will reveal the class-constructed diagram. The class will be instructed to use this model as the content of their 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraphs in the writing outline given. Paragraph one will be their introduction and the last paragraph will contain their conclusions.

\*Previous class experiences with “leads” and introductory paragraphs, as well as conclusion paragraphs containing stated opinions and final remarks, would have been taught prior to this lesson.

**Lesson Plan 4**

***The Night of Las Posadas, by Tomie de Paola.***

***Student Objectives***

- Listen for purpose and determine author’s intent
- Categorize selection as a legend, according to criteria learned in Week 3
- Understand the posada tradition as it relates to the Hispanic culture
- Work in cooperative group setting to learn, practice, and perform the posada procession song.

***Activities***

**Part 1**

Teacher reads aloud *The Night of Las Posadas*. Teacher led class discussion covers the following points:

- 1) What type of book is this?
- 2) If this is a legend, what makes it so?
- 3) What is a posada?
- 4) How many students have ever participated in a posada?
- 5) How could we arrange to have a posada at our school?

**Part 2**

Distribute posada song sheet

([http://www.mexconnect.com/mex\\_/travel/dpalfrey/dpposadawords.html](http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/travel/dpalfrey/dpposadawords.html)), explaining that one part is sung by the processional group and the response part is sung by the inn people. In cooperative groups of 4-6 students, students will take turns practicing the parts of the procession and inn people.

***Suggested follow-up:***

Choose a couple to take the parts of Mary and Joseph, or you may have a designated student carry a crèche, with figures but sans infant.

- Distribute posada song sheets to interested classrooms. It is appropriate to be sure to include any bilingual classes and designate those participating classes as the inns you will visit on posada day.
- Your fiesta for the end of the posada. The fiesta should include traditional Mexican food, including but not limited to tamales and hot chocolate. A piñata is a nice ending activity for the students. Words for the traditional piñata song sung before participants take turns are available at the following website:  
[http://www.mexconnect.com/mex\\_/travel/wdevlin/wdpinatahistory.htm](http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/travel/wdevlin/wdpinatahistory.htm)

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