

THE MATCHBOX DIARY



PAUL FLEISCHMAN

ILLUSTRATED BY BAGRAM IBATOULLINE



When a little girl visits her great-grandfather at his curio-filled home, she chooses an unusual object to learn about: an old cigar box. What she finds inside surprises her: a collection of matchboxes making up her great-grandfather's diary, harboring objects she can hold in her hand, each one evoking a memory. Inspired by each matchbox she opens, the great-grandfather tells of his journey from Italy to the United States, before he could read and write.

With a narrative entirely in dialogue, Paul Fleischman makes immediate the two characters' foray into the past. With warmth and an uncanny eye for detail, Bagram Ibatoulline gives expressive life to their journey through time—and toward each other.

Using the activities below, investigate immigration, art, and story with your students. Many of the activities will help you tie into the Common Core State Standards, as is noted throughout. Because The Matchbox Diary is a story for many levels, the suggested activities are intended for a wide range of ages and abilities. Please feel free to select the best activities for your class.

LETTER FROM PAUL FLEISCHMAN

It was two decades ago when New Hampshire artist Gary Hamel lifted the lid off one of his matchbox journals and my eyes expanded. The cigar box contained several dozen matchboxes that he had brought on one of his trips, each one dated and holding a few objects found on that day. Though we'd only just met, I was bold enough to ask if he might let me play with the idea as the basis of a story. He agreed, and my mind began whirring.

A writer's toughest task isn't finding an idea but figuring out what to do with it. This particular germ of an idea overflowed with personal connections and possibilities. My mother had long ago given me a tiny sliding cardboard box that she had made and covered with paper she'd marbled, a work whose craftsmanship I aspire to whenever I write. The smallness of matchboxes, I thought, might be tied to the smallness of children and their knack for spotting little objects (I had been the smallest kid in my class year after year). The urge to record could be a focus. Or the way people live on through their objects, which is the reason my father kept his tailor-father's heavy shears close by his

desk. Maybe a diary-in-objects could be kept by a character longing to communicate. The desire to communicate is a thread that has run through my work and my life, leading me to study instruments and languages and tutor new immigrants in English.

With so many choices, it should have been easy, but every use of an idea comes with problems. It took fifteen years of periodic attempts before I found an approach with problems I could solve, weaving several of the themes mentioned above around a story of immigration in my grandfather's era, letting the similarities to my immigrant students' lives hover in the air. What a pleasure it was to visit Gary Hamel in his hometown of Orange, New Hampshire, this summer to have him give his blessing on the book his idea had spawned, and to have him bestow upon me one of his matchbox journals. My eyes jumped again. I love this job.

Paul Fleischman

DISCUSSION

1. Before reading *The Matchbox Diary* with your students, have them examine the opening spread (pages 4–5). Ask them what they notice in the illustration, and make a quick list of their responses. After the class reads the story, return to the opening spread. Ask your students: “Now that you know more about the great-grandfather, what can we add to the list? Are there things you did not see before? Do you notice the boxes more after reading the story? Anything else?”

COMMON CORE CONNECTION

RL.3.7. Explain how specific aspects of a text’s illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting).

2. Have your students look closely at the illustration on page 24, in which the great-grandfather is explaining about the empty box. Ask: “What do you think the great-granddaughter is thinking?” Invite students to explain why they have come to their conclusions.

COMMON CORE CONNECTION

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.

3. Ask further discussion questions to support comprehension. For example: “Why did the boy create a diary of matchboxes? Why did the boy stop keeping this diary? What are some ways you can record an event without writing about it?”
4. Note to the class that keeping a diary can preserve our thoughts and activities for decades or even centuries. Ask your students if any of their parents keep or kept diaries or journals. Ask: “What do diaries look like? Why might you be glad you kept one?”

READ ALOUD

1. Ask students to view the cover of *The Matchbox Diary* and identify the following:
 - The title of the book
 - The author
 - The illustrator
2. *The Matchbox Diary* is written entirely in dialogue, which makes it fun to read aloud. Have students take turns reading to the class without showing the illustrations. Note to students the ways the dialogue increases our understanding of the characters and advances the story. Discuss the fact that Bagram Ibatoulline had just the words of dialogue to guide him as he created the world depicted in his illustrations.

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

RF.1.4. and RF.2.4. Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.

- a. Read grade-level text with purpose and understanding.
- b. Read grade-level text orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression.
- c. Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary.

RL. 2.5. Acknowledge differences in the points of view of characters, including by speaking in a different voice for each character when reading dialogue aloud.



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WRITING

1. Note to students that Paul Fleischman tells the entire story of *The Matchbox Diary* without using the word *said* or any other word to indicate who is speaking. He shows who is speaking through the tone and language. Invite students to write about an event that happened to them, using dialogue alone.
2. Read aloud to the class Paul Fleischman's author letter. Note how long it took him to write *The Matchbox Diary* after he had his first idea. Paul Fleischman says that "a writer's toughest task isn't finding an idea, but figuring out what to do with it." Have your students use the idea of a matchbox journal to write a different story than the one the author tells.
3. Invite each student to select a matchbox from the book and write about what it represents in the history of the great-grandfather. For example, the matchbox containing the olive pit reminds him of where he grew up, of being hungry, and of how his mother tried to help him.

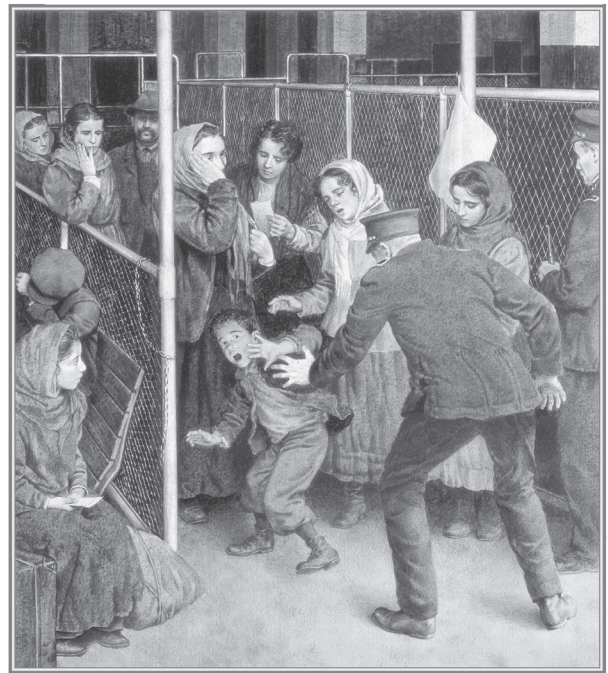
COMMON CORE CONNECTION

RI.3.1. Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

4. Ask each student to bring in an item small enough to fit in a matchbox—one that represents part of his or her own history. Have students write about the ways the object is significant to them. Invite them to take turns presenting their writing to the class. Collect the stories in a class book.

COMMON CORE CONNECTION

SL.2.4 Tell a story or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, speaking audibly in coherent sentences.



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INVESTIGATION

1. Having his eyes checked with a buttonhook (as described on pages 20 and 24) was clearly a frightening memory for the boy in the story. Together with your class, use Google Images or other resources to find out what a buttonhook looks like. Research the process of checking the health of immigrants on Ellis Island and discuss the reason officials used this tool. Based on the story's mention of the buttonhook, can the class figure out approximately what year this family immigrated? What other health issues would the officials have looked for? Why was this part of their job?
2. Remind the class that people immigrate to the United States every day. Ask: "Do today's young immigrants face the same problems the boy in *The Matchbox Diary* encountered? What other issues might today's immigrants face?"
3. Note to students that learning a second language is hard. Ask: "Can anybody in the class speak two languages? More than two? How do people learn a second language?" Have the class research factors that make English especially difficult to learn.
4. The boy in the story moved from Italy to the United States. Ask your students to find out what geographical moves their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents may have made. Have each student make a map, using a different color for each generation's travels. Combine these maps into a class map.

ART

1. Have students examine Bagram Ibatoulline's illustrations in *The Matchbox Diary*. Ask: "How would you describe his style? What is unique about it?" Investigate with the class some of the other books Bagram Ibatoulline has illustrated and note the various styles he has used. Then have each student choose a part of *The Matchbox Diary* and illustrate it in his or her own style.
2. Invite students to make their own matchbox diaries, using a template you make yourself or find on the internet. Note that the craftsmanship of the box Paul Fleischman's mother made for him many years ago continues to inspire his writing to this day.



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ABOUT PAUL FLEISCHMAN



Paul Fleischman grew up in Santa Monica, California, hearing his father, Sid Fleischman, read his own books aloud as they were written, chapter by chapter. Words have always been Paul Fleischman's world. Though he thought about teaching history as a career, he decided to bring history into his books instead.

Music has also been an inspiration for many of his books. He lives with his wife in California.

More books by Paul Fleischman

The Animal Hedge, illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline

Big Talk: Poems for Four Voices, illustrated by Beppe Giacobbe

The Birthday Tree, illustrated by Barry Root

Dateline: Troy, illustrated by Gwen Frankfeldt and Glenn Morrow

The Dunderheads, illustrated by David Roberts

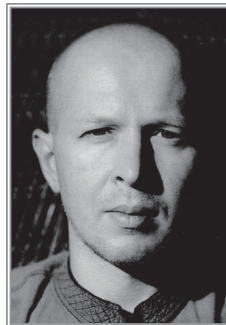
The Dunderheads Behind Bars, illustrated by David Roberts

Graven Images, illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline

Sidewalk Circus, illustrated by Kevin Hawkes

Weslandia, illustrated by Kevin Hawkes

ABOUT BAGRAM IBATOULLINE



Bagram Ibatoulline was born in Russia, graduated from the State Academic Institute of Arts in Moscow, and has worked in the fields of fine arts, graphic arts, mural design, and textile design. He has illustrated many acclaimed books for children. He lives with his wife in Pennsylvania.

More books illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline

The Animal Hedge by Paul Fleischman

Crossing by Philip Booth

Great Joy by Kate DiCamillo

The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane by Kate DiCamillo

The Nightingale by Hans Christian Andersen, retold by Stephen Mitchell

The Serpent Came to Gloucester by M. T. Anderson

The Tinderbox by Hans Christian Andersen, retold by Stephen Mitchell

Thumbelina by Hans Christian Andersen, retold by Brian Alderson