

The Ghost of Gracie Mansion, by Susan Kohl, is a story set in New York in 1803. When a yellow fever epidemic strikes the city, the Gracie family moves from their home in New York City (downtown Manhattan) to their summer mansion at Horn’s Hook (today still very much a part of New York City and now the home of the City’s mayors). In the early 1800s this area was considered the country—there were no paved roads and few houses nearby. However, Mr. Gracie, a powerful shipping merchant, is still able to conduct his shipping business from Horn’s Hook because of its proximity to the East River. William, at 16, the oldest of the six Gracie children, works with his father as a clerk, keeping track of all of the items on board his father’s ships. Despite his new responsibilities, he still finds time to investigate the strange disappearance of household items that has been occurring since their arrival at Gracie Mansion—his sister Sarah is convinced a ghost is living in the house. After exploring the basement and discovering a secret passageway leading down to the river, the Gracie children learn that a Hessian stowaway has been living there and “haunting” their house.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Before reading ***The Ghost of Gracie Mansion***, discuss with the class what they already know about the time period after the Revolutionary War. After sharing responses, read the title and tell them the story takes place in New York in Gracie Mansion, now the home of New York City’s mayors, but then a summer mansion in the countryside outside the City.

Some questions for discussion might be:

- If this story takes place in New York in 1803, where does it fit chronologically with other historical events already studied?
- Look at the map at the beginning of the book. Note the border of New York City. Where is that border today? Notice Horn’s Hook and the site of Gracie Mansion. What advantages could a home in that location offer? Students may refer back to this map during their reading to better understand the setting and movement of the characters.
- Have any students been to Gracie Mansion? What are their impressions of this area of New York now? If you have a current map available, notice what else is located in that neighborhood now. If possible, try to visit Gracie Mansion or the surrounding neighborhood.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Literature • Social Studies • Art • Writing

1. After reading a few chapters of the book, discuss historical fiction as a type of literature, a mixture of fact and fiction. Some of the characters in the story actually

existed, and many of the events really occurred. Even those characters that are created by the author probably shared some of the experiences and feelings of real people who lived at the time. Discuss how the reader can distinguish between what is fact and what is fiction. Groups of students might try researching events and characters in the story using sources such as encyclopedias, historical documents, newspapers, etc. Have a mini-lesson about how to use these sources and a class “debriefing.” What names and events could they read about in other sources? Which were most likely created by the author?

2. This story exposes children to the life of an influential New York shipping merchant in the early 1800s. Yet there is so much more to learn about this time period and the people mentioned in the book. Look at the Historical Postscript on page 94 for ideas, and encourage your students to dig a little deeper into the past to discover more information:

- This story took place in the early 1800s not long after the Revolutionary War ended. What else was happening in New York and nearby towns around the same time?
- What else can you learn about the Archibald Gracie’s other contributions to New York? Alexander Hamilton’s?
- While the Gracie family was wealthy enough to escape the yellow fever epidemic, most families had no choice but to remain in the City. What other information can you learn about the yellow fever epidemic?
- Choose any aspect of the Post-Revolutionary War to research further. Brainstorm a list of possible topics as a class.

3. To recreate the setting of New York City in 1803 the author describes what William hears, sees, smells, and feels. Ask students to describe the setting of New York City in the early 1800s using their senses: What would you hear? (Clomping horse hoofs, squeaking wheels, noisy bells, vendors yelling); What would you smell? (Hot buns, pastries); etc. After reading further along in the book, have students repeat the activity by describing the setting of Gracie Mansion. As a homework assignment, ask students to describe their house or neighborhood using all of their senses.

4. On page 9, the author describes the clothing of William and his father. Using information from the descriptions and illustrations in this book, as well as in other books about clothing and costumes from this time period, make a class “fashion magazine” illustrating the clothing of men, women, girls, and boys in the early 1800s.

5. Grammar was Sarah’s best subject and Eliza’s worst subject (p.49). Often people in the same family share some talents, while also being very different in other ways. Have students compare themselves to family members using Venn Diagrams as a way to organize their information. Start this project with a mini-lesson on how to

use Venn diagrams (comparing Sarah and Eliza, perhaps), and then ask each student to make a Venn diagram of his/her own. After completing the Venn diagram, ask students to use this graphic organizer to write an essay about how they are similar to and different from a family member.

6. William was very excited to be working as a clerk for his father. However, sometimes (p.50-51) he wished he could be playing with his brothers and sisters instead. Have students choose some aspect of growing up that has its good sides and bad sides (getting a job, learning how to cook, being able to stay at home or walk to school alone, etc). Ask them to make a T-chart listing the pros and cons of their newly earned responsibility and write a short essay explaining their mixed emotions.

7. In the early 1800s, New York City streets were not paved above 10th Street. On pages 12-15, the Gracies talk about the conditions of the City's roads and Mr. Gracie notes that the first street commissioners were recently appointed. While New York City streets are now paved throughout the five boroughs, many people still complain about the conditions of the roads. Have students write or call the Department of Transportation to find out the role street commissioners play in the city or county where you live. Perhaps a street commissioner could visit your class to make a presentation about the task of keeping the streets of your city in good condition two-hundred years after the Gracies traveled the streets of New York.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING ACTIVITY
Creating Their Own Mysteries!

After reading *The Ghost of Gracie Mansion*, and other Mysteries in Time books, students may be excited to write mysteries of their own. Their mysteries could be written as stories and/or performed as plays. This is a great project to do in groups, since students' ideas and enthusiasm are likely to build upon each other. Before breaking students up into groups of four or five, have a class discussion about what makes a good mystery, and list the parts of the story or play that will have to be determined: i.e., the characters, setting, time period, plot, etc. You may wish to set some parameters about the time period or historical characters you are studying that you want to be included in the mystery. After groups have had sufficient time to work on their projects, students could do group readings or perform their mystery plays for the rest of the class.

TEACHERS GUIDE

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