

dam. A debate can be staged in front of another class and the audience can vote, via applause, for each team after the debate. An interesting follow up to the debate would be to have students research local conflicts between developers and conservationists and present their findings to the class. The class might even want to adopt a conservationist “cause” as a class project and write to local developers.

Here are some other activities students can do on their own, or in groups, to extend a lesson using *Fire in the Valley*:

1. Sarah is the true heroine of the story. Create a character web to describe her. Compare your web with those of your classmates. How similar or different is your web from theirs?
2. A chain of cause-and-effect events concerning the water rights almost led to violence. Draw a series of drops of water. In each drop, write one event that led to another event, that led to another event, etc. to tell what happened.
3. Create an historical picture map of the Owens Valley area, the Owens River, and the city of Los Angeles. Draw some scenes and characters from the story to depict what happened.
4. Imagine you are a newspaper publisher and you must take a position about the water rights issue. Whose side would you take? Create an editorial to express your opinions. Or, if you prefer, write a letter to the editor to express your views.
5. Uncle Will referred to Owens Valley as “a slice of paradise”. Is there a place you know that you consider “a slice of paradise?” Write a description of that place so that others can picture it and understand your feelings.
6. In the postscript section, Mary Austin and John Muir are described as having been greatly concerned about the natural environment and conservation in California. Research either of these people. Share your findings in a report, a speech, or other creative manner.

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TEACHERS GUIDE

Fire in the Valley

by Tracey West



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Fire in the Valley, by Tracey West, returns to the difficult times of the early 1900's in Owens Valley, California, when a dispute arose between the farmers and ranchers of the Valley and the city of Los Angeles over water rights to the Owens River. When water is diverted to Los Angeles from Owens Valley, young Sarah Jefferson, a farmer's daughter, writes a letter of protest to President Teddy Roosevelt. She also comes to the aid of her family when their barn is on fire and finally proves to them that being a girl doesn't mean she can't help her family. This historical fiction novel about the struggle over water rights is part of the *Stories of the States* series—historical novels whose intent is to bring moments in history to life, and to show the diversity and strength of our heritage and American culture. *Fire in the Valley* concludes with a short “historical postscript” section that tells more about the events and some of the real people depicted in the story.

BACKGROUND

The author points out that most of the characters in the story are made up. However, Fred Eaton did exist, and he did purchase land in Owens Valley for use by the City of Los Angeles. Mary and Stafford Austin, who in the story led a meeting of the farmers and ranchers, also were real. Mary Austin was a long-time resident of Owens Valley, a naturalist, and an author. She and her husband did speak out against the aqueduct, but the meeting that takes place in the story did not actually take place. The announcement of the plans for the aqueduct did stir fear and anger in the people of Owens Valley. However, they remained peaceful. After the aqueduct was built, the Los Angeles government made sure that the Valley residents had a water supply by only taking water from the lower end of the Valley. In addition, a new railroad connection linked Owens Valley to the rest of the country, thus enabling farmers and ranchers to prosper by selling goods to a wider market.

FACT, FICTION AND, AND HISTORY

Point out to students that *Fire in the Valley* is a novel of historical fiction, and that this form of literature mixes real and fictional events and characters.

- Engage your students in a discussion about how a reader can tell what is fact (history) and what is fiction. Be sure students understand that facts can be checked in reference books such as encyclopedias; in historical documents and other official public records; and in personal accounts such as journals, diaries, and memoirs. Photographs, paintings, and drawings can also serve as an historical record.
- Share with students that authors of historical fiction often let readers know in an introduction or postscript which events and characters are real and which are made up. Be sure students read the postscript section of the book to learn about the characters in this novel.
- Point out that in order to bring their characters to life, authors provide details about their appearance, age, actions, and feelings. The words that the characters speak are made up, but they make the characters seem real. Students can better understand the characters if they pay attention to the characters' descriptions, actions, and words. Tell students to note especially differences in the way Sarah and Sam are treated by their parents and the restrictions placed on Sarah because she is a girl. How does Sarah deal with these restrictions? How does her parents' attitude toward her change by the end of the story? What causes this change?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe this novel to a friend who hadn't read it?
2. What facts surprised you the most about this period in history?
3. If you had lived in Owens Valley during this time period, what would have made you the happiest? The saddest?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

CONSERVATIONISTS vs DEVELOPERS:
A CLASSROOM DEBATE

Before students read the novel, discover what understanding they have about how farms and cities get their water supplies. Bring in several outside sources of water supplies and the development of towns and cities to share with the class and extend the discussion on Owens Valley to other conservation issues. For instance, the postscript introduces another California fight over water use in 1901 between the mayor of San Francisco, who proposed damming a river in the Hetch Hetchy Valley, and conservationist John Muir, who said that the dam would destroy one of the most beautiful places on earth. Have students form two teams to side with either San Francisco Mayor James D. Phelan or John Muir, and prepare their arguments for or against the