

THUNDER CAKE

Patricia Polacco

Teacher's Guide Written By Laurie Rozakis, Ph.D.

(FASSROOM **FAVORITES**

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

This guide was prepared using the Putnam & Grosset edition, @1990. Other editions may differ.

Synopsis

Grandma scans the dark, thick clouds on the horizon and announces that it is Thunder Cake baking weather.

Grandma goes inside to get her granddaughter out from under the bed, where she is hiding, afraid of the thunder.

The child clutches her grandmother in fear. Grandma explains how to count to determine how far away the storm is. They need to know that, Grandma says, so they have time to make and bake the cake or it won't be a real Thunder Cake.

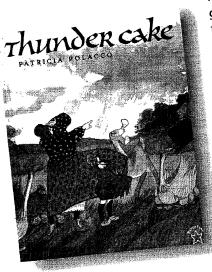
Grandma finds the recipe, writes the ingredients on a piece of paper, and hurries to the back door.

Seeing the bolt of lightning, the child starts to count and realizes that the storm is ten miles away. The girl gathers eggs from Nellie Peck Hen, the mean chicken. Another bolt of lightning splits the sky. Now the storm is nine miles away.

Next they get some milk from the mean cow, Kick Cow. Now the storm is eight miles away.

As they walk to the dry shed, another bolt of lightning streaks across. The storm is now seven miles away. They hurry to the dry shed for chocolate, sugar, and flour. The storm is six miles away. They have everything they need but the secret ingredients: three overripe tomatoes. They also need some strawberries for garnish. The girl climbs the trellis for the tomatoes while Grandma picks the strawberries. The storm is now five miles away.

Back in the kitchen, they make the cake. The storm is now three miles away. Grandma is delighted that the cake is in the oven so it will be a real Thunder Cake.



Recounting all the things that the girl has done, Grandma concludes that she must be very brave indeed. The little girl decides that her grandma is correct: she is very brave! As the storm arrives, they sit down to their delicious cake. From then on, the little girl is never afraid of thunder.

PROTECTIVE MEASURES TO TAKE DURING A THUNDER-STORM

According to the American Meterological Society, lightning strikes pose the greatest threat during thunderstorms, however,

following their lightning safety guidelines can reduce the risk of injury or death.

No place is absolutely safe from the lightning threat, however, some places are safer than others.

- Large enclosed structures (substantially constructed buildings) tend to be much safer than smaller or open structures.
- In general, fully enclosed metal vehicles such as cars, trucks, and buses, with the windows rolled up provide good shelter from lightning. Avoid contact with metal outside or inside the vehicle.

AVOID being in or near:

· High places and open fields, isolated trees, unprotected gazebos, rain or picnic shelters, baseball dugouts, communications towers, flagpoles, light poles, bleachers (metal or wood), metal fences, water (ocean, lakes, swimming pools, rivers, etc.)

When inside a building AVOID:

 Use of the telephone, taking a shower, washing your hands, doing dishes, or any contact with conductive surfaces with outdoor exposure such as metal door or window frames, electrical wiring, telephone wiring, cable TV wiring, plumbing, etc.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Patricia Polacco was born in 1944, in Lansing, Michigan. Her father started his career as a salesman and later became a television talk-show host. Her mother worked as a teacher. Polacco has built much of her career on elements of her rich heritage: her father was Irish and her mother was Russian and Ukrainian. After her parents'



divorce when she was three years old, Polacco and her older brother spent their school years with their mother and summers with their father. Until she was five years old, Polacco lived on her grandmother's farm in Michigan, but when the elderly lady died, Polacco, her mother, and brother moved to Coral Gables, Florida, for three years before settling in Oakland, California.

Polacco was not a good student but she was a skilled artist. Instead of attending college or art school, however, she decided to marry right out of high school. She attended Ohio State University briefly, but after her divorce, she left college to focus her attention on working and raising her two children. Later, she returned to college, eventually earning her M.F.A. in painting from Morash University in Melbourne, Australia, and a Ph.D. in Russian and Greek iconographic history from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. While studying in Australia, Polacco met her second husband, Enzo.

Polacco did not publish her first book until 1987, when she was forty-one years old. Most of her books describe generational relationships, cross-cultural friendships, or her Jewish heritage. Polacco enjoys her work very much. As she noted in *Firetalking*, her autobiography, "I am lucky . . . so very lucky! I love my life. Can you imagine doing what you love every day? . . . My thoughts boil in my head. They catch the air and fly. The images and stories come back with fury and energy. . . . My heart sings whenever I am drawing."

CRITIC'S CORNER

Thunder Cake was a Booklist Editors' Choice, a Notable Children's Trade Book in Language Arts, and an IRA Teacher's Choice Book. Nonetheless, reviews were mixed. Publishers Weekly, for instance, noted: "Although the book's concept is good, it does not fulfill its promise. The story is poorly paced: the storm approaches rapidly, but does not break for several pages as Polacco crams in details, including a lengthy pause while the cake bakes. The illustrations are less than appealing: both characters' faces are chalky white, draining them of life. Many of the barnyard animals are drawn out of proportion--Grandmother is almost the same size as a cow she milks, geese are as tall as people. Considering how many children are afraid of thunder, it is a shame Thunder Cake is not a stronger effort.

Nonetheless, many readers reacted with more enthusiasm. Reviewer M. Allen Greenbaum said: "I'm a big fan of author/illustrator Patricia Polacco, and this book is one of the best of her incredible catalogue: It contains all the essential ingredients that go into a 'Polacco.' She returns here to her Michigan childhood, and her loving memories of her grandmother 'Babushka.' Polacco's detailed reminiscence describes how Babushka helped her overcome a fear of thunderstorms. We identify with the frightened young heroine partly because Polacco so convincingly describes the power and noise of a Midwestern thunderstorm. Gradually, Polacco shows how Babushka's patient, strong doses of hugs, distraction, reassurance, and the promise of a special treat gave her the self-confidence to face and surmount her fear. Analyze this too deeply and you'll recognize some basic child-rearing techniques, but Polacco infuses these with so much warmth that they seem to spring, sui generis, from some old folk wisdom held by Babushkas everywhere. The result is a genuinely exciting and lovingly told story enlivened by the fact that it is true."

OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

Meteor! (1987) Rechenka's Eggs (1988). Boat Ride with Lillian Two Blossom (1988) Casey at the Bat (1988) The Keeping Quilt (1998 Uncle Vova's Tree (1989) Babushka's Doll (1990) Just Plain Fancy (1990)

Some Birthday! (1991)

Appelemando's Dreams (1991)

Chicken Sunday (1992)

Mrs. Katz and Tush (1992)

Picnic at Mudsock Meadow (1992)

The Bee Tree (1993)

Babushka Baba Yaga (1993)

My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother (1994)

Pink and Say (1994)

Firetalking (1994)

Tikvah Means Hope (1994)

Babushka's Mother Goose (1995)

My Ol' Man (1995)

The Trees of the Dancing Goats (1996)

Aunt Chip and the Great Triple Creek Dam Affair (1996)

I Can Hear the Sun: A Modern Myth (1996)

In Enzo's Splendid Gardens (1997)

Uncle Isaaco (1997)

Mrs. Mack (1998)

Thank You, Mr. Falker (1998)

Welcome Comfort (1999)

Luba and the Wren (1999.

The Calhoun Club (2000)

The Butterfly (2000)

Betty Doll (2001)

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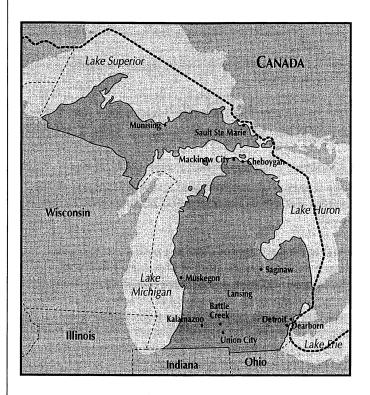
Children's Literature Review, Volume 40, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1996, pp. 175-201.

Polacco, Patricia, *Firetalking*, Richard C. Owen (Katonah, NY), 1994.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING

Until she was five years old, Polacco lived with her maternal grandmother on a farm in Union City, Michigan. Writing on her Web site, Polacco recalled that living on the farm in Union City "was the most magical time of my life . . . and that my Babushka and other grandparents were some of the most inspirational people in my life. . . . I would say that these relationships with my grandparents have most definitely influenced my life and work. . . . Personally, I feel that this is the most valuable experience of my life . . . having the wonder of knowing both children and elderly people."

The farm is central to the book because its isolation makes the storm all the more fierce. Nonetheless, as the little girl and her grandmother walk around the farm gathering the ingredients they need for their Thunder Cake, the little girl grows comfortable with the routine of nature. She and grandma milk the cow, gather tomatoes and strawberries, and visit the outlying dry shed. The little girl learns that nature can be fierce and kind, and that people have to adjust to their surroundings.



GENERAL OBJECTIVES

- 1. To understand the book's title
- 2. To analyze thunder and lightning
- 3. To explore reasons why people fear storms
- 4. To recognize the importance of setting
- 5. To assess Grandma's personality
- To recognize the book's theme and the lessons that it teaches
- 7. To enjoy the pictures
- 8. To find examples of bravery
- 9. To explore aspects of child psychology
- 10. To describe the author's use of science

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- 1. To appreciate the love between Grandma and the little girl
- 2. To probe the symbolism of a "Thunder Cake"
- 3. To analyze the wisdom and patience that comes with maturity
- 4. To understand how Grandma teaches her granddaughter to overcome her fear of storms
- 5. To appreciate the beautiful artwork
- 6. To analyze how the art and text work together to tell the story
- 7. To calculate the time it will take for a storm to arrive
- 8. To analyze why storms are dangerous and inspire fear
- 9. To learn about life on a farm
- 10. To understand the lessons about love that the little girl learns

LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of Patricia Polacco's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

visuals Since *Thunder Cake* is a picture book, the visuals are an integral part of the story. Here, the visuals and text blend seamlessly to tell the story of a little girl learning to overcome her fear of thunderstorms. The colors are effective, particularly the bright primaries. The pictures are very detailed, too, shown by the web of fine lines on Grandma's face and the patterns in her clothing.

point of view the position from which a story is told. In *Thunder Cake*, Polacco uses the third-person point of view. As a result, readers are standing outside the story and getting a panoramic view of events. This makes the approach of the storm even more suspenseful and dramatic.

tone the writer's attitude toward his or her subject matter. For example, the tone can be angry, bitter, sad, or frightening. Although thunderstorms are a fierce natural occurrence, Polacco chooses instead a sweet and gentle tone to help all readers overcome their fear of thunderstorms.

CROSS-CURRICULAR SOURCES

Books

Stan and Jan Berenstain, The Berenstain Bears and the Bad Dream

Paulette Bourgeois, Franklin and the Thunderstorm Ashley Bryan, The Story of Lightning and Thunder Ed Emberley, Go Away, Big Green Monster! H.J. Hutchins, One Dark Night Gina Mayer, Just a Thunderstorm Mecer Mayer, There's a Nightmare in My Closet Cornelia Maude Spelman, When I Feel Scared John Trent, There's a Duck in My Closet

Martin Waddell, Can't You Sleep, Little Bear?

DVDs, Videos

Spoken Arts has released a series of videos based on Polacco's books:

Thunder Cake (1991)

Rechenka's Eggs (1991)

Chicken Sunday (1992)

The Keeping Quilt (1993)

Aunt Chip and the Great Triple Creek Dam Affair (1996)

Pink and Say (1996)

Thank You, Mr. Falker (1999)

Audiotapes

Chicken Sunday (1993) Just Plain Fancy (1994) Casey at the Bat (1994) The Keeping Quilt (1998) Thunder Cake (1999)

Internet

Patricia Polacco Web site http://www.patriciapolacco.com/ Meet Patricia Polacco www.eduplace.com/kids/hmr/mtai/polacco.html

THEMES AND MOTIFS

A study of the central issues and situations in Patricia Polacco's *Thunder Cake* should include these aspects:

Themes

- cleverness
- · bright colors
- courage
- thunderstorms
- lightning
- fear
- cake
- love
- farms
- illustrations

Motifs

- · being afraid of thunderstorms
- · hiding under the bed
- · facing your fears
- learning about thunder and lightning
- loving and trusting your grandmother
- · appreciating beautiful artwork
- · counting one-to-ten
- · telling a story in pictures and words
- · learning how to bake a cake
- · exploring life on a farm

MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each.

- 1. This is the story of how my grandma—my Babushka—helped me overcome my fear of thunderstorms.
 - (In a brief introduction, the author explains that the story is based on her own experiences as a very young child living on her grandmother's farm in Michigan. Nonetheless, the story is far more than autobiographical. It applies to anyone –male or female, young or old--who tries to overcome a crippling fear.)
- 2. "This is Thunder Cake baking weather, all right."

(When a thunder storm approaches, Grandma bakes a cake. This scene shows that Grandma, as with most savvy farmers, can predict the weather accurately by scanning the sky. As a result, weather holds little fear for her because she is attuned to nature and prepared to take sensible precautions when it threatens. We also see this in the picture, as Grandma shades her eyes and studies the approaching black clouds.)

- 3. "Child, you come out from under that bed." (The little girl is so afraid of thunderstorms that she hides under the bed when she hears any thunder.)
- 4. "When you see lightning, start counting...real slow."

(In addition to helping her granddaughter overcome her fear of storms, Grandma teaches her granddaughter how to gauge the storm's position. This useful knowledge also helps the little girl become more comfortable with nature.)

- 5. "Now let's gather all the things we need."
 (Gathering the ingredients is as much a part of the process as making the cake itself. Not only does this distract the girl from her fear, but it also teaches her and readers—a lot about farming and the source of many products we buy in supermarkets.)
- Eggs from mean old Nellie Peck Hen. (The little girl has many fears. In addition to thunder and storms, she is afraid of the hen. She is sure the hen will peck her.)
- 7. BOOOOOOOM BA-BABOOOOOM, crashed the thunder. It scared me a lot, but I kept walking with Grandma.

 (We see how the child is learning to deal with her fears, as a result of her grandmother's help.

 Because she loves her grandmother, the little girl does not go scurrying inside and under the bed when she hears thunder. Instead, she keeps walking. She trusts that her grandmother will keep her safe.)
- 8. "I'm here, child," she said. Her voice was steady and soft. "You won't fall."
 (Grandma keeps her granddaughter physically safe, the responsibility of all parents and caretakers. This shows her deep love and caring for her grandchild. It also shows her wisdom.)

- 9. "From where I sit, only a very brave person could have done all them things!" (Grandmother recounts all the brave things that the little girl does. In so doing, she convinces the little girl that she is brave indeed. This also serves as a summary of the book. It is a key element in picture books for young children.)
- 10. She was right. I was brave! (At the end of the book, the little girl has overcome her fear of thunder and thunderstorms. Grandma's Thunder Cake – and her patient love—have done their magic.)

COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

- 1. Where does story take place? (The story takes place on a farm.)
- Who are the two characters? (They are a little girl and her elderly grandmother.)
- 3. How does the little girl react to the approaching storm?

 (She hides under the bed in fear.)
- 4. What is a Thunder Cake? (It is a chocolate cake baked only when a thunder storm is about to strike.)
- 5. What is the secret ingredient in a Thunder Cake? (The secret ingredient is over-ripe tomatoes.)

Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

her gentle reassurance.)

- 6. Why does Grandma want to bake a Thunder Cake?
 (She wants to distract the little girl from her fear of thunder and the approaching storm.)
- 7. How does the little girl change at the end of the story?
 (She is no longer afraid of thunderstorms. She has conquered her fear, thanks to her grandmother's distracting her with the cake as well as
- 8. Why does the writer include the recipe on the last page?

(The recipe will enable readers to make their own Thunder Cake, even when it is not about to storm!)

Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

- 9. What did you like the most about the pictures? (Possible answers: The bright colors and pretty details.)
- 10. Why do you think Patricia Polacco remembered this story and wrote about it so many years later?
 (She loved her grandmother for her kindness and

(She loved her grandmother for her kindness and patience in helping her overcome her fear of thunder and lightning.)

Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

- 11. Draw another picture for this book.
- 12. Write a new title for the book.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Speech/Drama

- 1. Pretend that you are Grandma. Give a speech to convince your granddaughter not to be afraid of thunder.
- 2. Show people how to make a Thunder Cake. Walk around the room pretending to milk a cow, gather eggs, and do all the other things that Grandma and the little girl do.
- 3. Work with a friend. Act out the scene when the little girl gets under the bed. Have one partner get under the bed. Have the other pretend to be grandma and coax her out.
- 4. Pretend that you are a TV weather person. Give a weather report about a big storm in your area.

Art

- 1. Paint or draw a new cover for this book.
- 2. Make an ad for this book. Draw a picture about the book. Write a sentence that tells about the book.
- 3. Draw your favorite cake. Decorate it the way you like.
- 4. The little girl picks tomatoes. Draw a garden that has all the fruits and vegetables that you like the most.

Language Arts

- 1. Pick any page. Write new sentences for the page.
- 2. Write a letter or email to Patricia Polacco. Tell her how much you liked *Thunder Cake*.
- 3. Pretend that you are afraid of thunder. Write a cartoon showing how you could get over your fear. Add word balloons and captions.
- 4. Write a make-believe recipe for Thunder Cake.
- 5. Grandma says the little girl is very brave because she gathered all the ingredients for the Thunder Cake. Write three ways you are brave.

History/Social Studies

- The little girl learns a lot from her grandmother. In real life, Patricia Polacco was very close to her grandmother. Learn about the past from an older woman. She might be a teacher, a family friend, or a neighbor. Ask your "grandma" to tell you what her life was like when she was your age.
- 2. The story is set in Michigan. Draw a map of Michigan. Include at least three big cities.
- 3. The story takes place on a farm. Make a list of animals that live on farms in your state. Make a list of foods that are grown on farms in your state. If you can, visit a near-by farm.
- 4. Imagine you could live on a farm. Tell what you would like to do there. Would you milk the cow? Would you gather the eggs? Write a letter to a friend. Tell about your life on the farm.

Science/Math

- Grandma teaches her granddaughter not to be afraid of thunderstorms, but thunderstorms should not be ignored. They can be dangerous. Make a list of ways to keep yourself safe during a storm. Post this list in the classroom for everyone to read.
- 2. What makes thunder? Find out from a web page or a science book. Tell a friend.

- 3. Explain what makes lightning. Draw pictures to show what causes lightning.
- 4. The little girl counts the time between the lightning and thunder to figure out how far away the storm is. The next time there is a storm, try this. Does it work?
- 5. The story is set in Michigan. Look at a map and find out how many miles Michigan is from your home.

ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

- 1. Tell how the writer shows that the storm is coming closer in some of the pictures.
- 2. Pick your favorite picture in the book. Write some sentences to tell why you like it so much.
- Pretend you could write and draw a book. Pick a subject. Write three sentences to tell what your book will be about.
- 4. Tell why you would like to make a Thunder Cake.

VOCABULARY Draw a picture that shows what each word means.	
. lightning	6. flour
2. horizon	7. trellis
B. recipe	8. tablecloth
'	
l. scurry	9. cake
5. batter	

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Order (20 poin	ts)	numbers on the lines		
Put the events in o	order. Write the	numbers on the lines.		
The storm st	tarts and they	eat the cake.		
Grandma lo	oks at the thick	clouds. She says it time to bake a Thunder Cake.		
They bake tl	ne cake.			
They get some milk from the mean cow, Kick Cow.				
The girl gathers eggs from Nellie Peck Hen. This is the mean chicken.				
Part II: Matching (20 Match the letter to		on. Write the letter in the correct space.		
1. Grandm	na A.	She hides under the bed		
2. tomato	es B.	NOT part of the Thunder Cake		
3. the girl	C.	She runs the farm		
4. thunde	r D.	the secret part of the Thunder Cake		
5. cheese	E.	What the girl fears the most		
Part III: True/False (20 points) Mark these sentences T if they are true or F if they are false.				
1. Grandma teaches her granddaughter how to count to figure out how far away the storm is.				
2. Grandma does not have a recipe for Thunder Cake. It is a make-believe cake.				
3. Chocolate, sugar, and flour are in the dry shed.				
4. They put bananas on top of the cake.				
5. At the end of the story, the girl says that she is brave.				
	·			
Part IV: Essay (40 points) Choose two and answer in complete sentences.				
1. Tell why you liked this book. Write three sentences or more.				
2. Explain how to make a Thunder Cake. Write three sentences or more.				

3. Pick a picture you liked. Tell about it. Write three sentences or more.

4. Tell how the girl changes. Write three sentences or more.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Story Events (20 points)

Circle the two events that are not part of the story.

- 1. Grandma says that a storm is coming. They will make a Thunder Cake.
- 2. Grandma gets the weather report from TV.
- 3. The little girl hears thunder. She hides because she is afraid.
- 4. They drive to the store for the other stuff they need.
- 5. They get eggs from Nellie Peck Hen. They get milk from Kick Cow.
- 6. They bake the cake.
- 7. They eat the cake. The girl is not afraid of thunder any more.

Part II: Fill in the Blank (20 points)

Circle the word to complete each sentence.

- 1. The little girl hides (under the bed, in the closet).
- 2. You see (lightning, thunder). You can count to see how far away the storm is.
- 3. The secret part of Thunder Cake is (spinach, tomatoes).
- 4. The cake also has chocolate, sugar, and (flour, flower).
- 5. They put (strawberries, cream) on top of the cake.

Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements T if they are true or F if they are false.

 1.	Grandma can tell that it is Thunder Cake weather because it is raining very hard
 2.	Grandma finds the recipe and writes the ingredients on a piece of paper.
 3.	They get the Thunder Cake from a bakery. They do not have time to make it.
 4.	Grandma thinks her granddaughter is very brave.
5.	At the end of the story, the little girl is still afraid of thunder and storms.

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Tell why Grandma wanted to make the Thunder Cake. Write three sentences or more.
- 2. Tell how to figure out how far away a storm is. Write three sentences or more.
- 3. List the steps in making the Thunder Cake. Write three sentences or more.
- 4. Tell what happened at the end of the story. Write three sentences or more.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY

- 1. The picture should show a bolt of lightning.
- 2. The picture should show the horizon as a line in the distance.
- 3. The picture should show a list of ingredients and list some steps in making a dish.
- 4. The picture should show someone walking fast
- 5. The picture should show cake batter as a pudding-like mixture in a bowl.
- 6. The picture should show a bag or pile of flour.
- 7. The picture should show a wooden support for flowers or plants.
- 8. The picture should show fabric across a table.
- 9. The picture should show a cake.

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Order (20 points)

- 5 The storm starts and they eat the cake.
- 1 Grandma looks at the thick clouds. She says it time to bake a Thunder Cake.
- 4 They bake the cake.
- 3 They get some milk from the mean cow, Kick
- 2 The girl gathers eggs from Nellie Peck Hen. This is the mean chicken.

Part II: Matching (20 points)

- 1. C
- 2. D
- 3. A
- 4. E
- 5. B

Part III: True/False (20 points)

- 1. T
- 2. F
- 3. T
- 4. F
- 5. T

Part IV: Essay (40 Points)

Answers will vary.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Story Events (20 points)

- 2. Grandma gets the weather report from TV.
- 4. They drive to the store for the other stuff they need.

Part II: Fill in the Blank (20 points)

- 1. under the bed
- 2. lightning
- 3. tomatoes
- 4. flour
- 5. strawberries

Part III: True/False (20 points)

- 1. F
- 2. T
- 3. F
- 4. T
- 5. F

Part IV: Essay (40 Points)

Answers will vary.



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