

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

Lesson in Literature

Historical Fiction

Sarah and the San Francisco Earthquake

1. The San Francisco Earthquake occurred on April 18, 1906.
2. They knew that there was a good chance that their house would catch fire.
3. They stayed in tents outside the city.

Selection Summary

This story, based on a real historical event, tells about the fictional Patrick, a young Irish boy who lives in Boston at the turn of the 20th century. Patrick's chief characteristic in the story is that he loves molasses. In all other respects he is a typical storybook boy, mostly respectful and obedient, the wholesome child of a hardworking Irish longshoreman.

Patrick loves molasses and eats some at every meal, not to mention the licks and tastes he takes between meals. Every Sunday, his father takes him down to the harbor, where he works during the week. Dominating the harbor is the enormous Purity Distilling Company tank of molasses. The tank is as tall as a four-story building and is made of metal. To Patrick, it is the picture of molasses at its best!

One day, Patrick is sent to the store to get the molasses pail refilled. When he is told at the store that they are out of molasses, he sets out for a different store. On the way, he hears an explosion. A moment later, he sees a tidal wave of molasses heading his way. The Purity Distilling Company's molasses tank had exploded and the city was awash in molasses. Patrick makes it safely home, but when he tries to explain to his mother why he is covered in molasses, she accuses him of lying and sends him to bed. He gives up trying to explain what happened when he realizes how outlandish the story sounds. It is not until his father comes home and validates his story that Mama believes him. She realizes Patrick had been telling the truth and offers him, by way of compensation for being so unjustly suspected of lying—an extra helping of molasses!

Getting Started

Read the story aloud from the beginning until the end of page 71. Then read the following questions to your students.

(For more information on aural exercises, see *Getting Started/The Story of the White Sombrero*.)

Lesson in Literature ...

SARAH AND THE SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE

HISTORICAL FICTION

- **Historical fiction** is partly true and partly made up.
- Usually, the setting is described as it really was, and some or all of the characters are made up.
- The writer makes up characters to help the reader feel what it was like to be living at a certain time.
- For historical fiction to be good, the author must do a lot of research about the time period that is being described.

The conversation, clothing, and behavior of the characters must all sound *authentic*—they must be true to life.

THINK ABOUT IT!

1. What was the date of the famous San Francisco Earthquake?
2. Why did the children have to leave their house?
3. Where did the people whose houses had burned down stay for a while?

A grandmother sat in a rocking chair with her cat on her lap. Her six grandchildren were sitting in a circle at her feet on an oval braided rug, sipping mugs of hot chocolate. There was a fire burning in the fireplace. The wood crackled and sparked. "Grandma! Grandma!" they cried. "Tell us a story about San Francisco!" They liked to hear stories from long ago about their hometown. She thought for a moment. "How about a story about a girl named Sarah? She lived a long time ago when my grandma was alive." They all nodded yes. She continued, "Sarah was a very brave young girl. This is her story."

1. How often did Patrick eat molasses?
 - a. He ate it every year on his birthday.
 - b. He ate it three times a day.**
 - c. He ate it on special occasions.
 - d. He ate it as his afternoon treat.
2. Where was the molasses stored?
 - a. It was stored in the fridge.
 - b. It was kept on the windowsill.
 - c. It was stored in the cool basement.
 - d. It was kept in a tin pail.**
3. What happened when Patrick stuck his finger into the pitcher to sneak a lick?
 - a. His finger got stuck.
 - b. His mother had to throw out the entire pitcher of molasses.
 - c. He tipped the pitcher over.**
 - d. A wasp stung his finger.

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

Sarah and her family lived happily in a small house in San Francisco. Very early in the morning on Wednesday, April 18, 1906, she was awakened from her sleep by a jolt. It was as though the ground under the bed was falling away. Sarah was sleeping with her two little sisters. Both of them awoke and tried to hold on to her. Then the shaking stopped. They had had minor earthquakes before.

Then the stronger, more frightening shaking began. Sarah's sisters were crying. Her mother and father were already at work. Her mother was a housekeeper and started working at 4:30 a.m. Her father was a firefighter. He had slept at the firehouse.

Sarah ordered her sisters to lie flat on their stomachs on the bed. She tried to speak calmly. She covered their heads with pillows. Then she lay on top of them and held a pillow over her head. They did this very quickly.

It seemed as though the shaking would never stop. It lasted about a minute, but it seemed like a much longer time to Sarah. It felt like the ground was falling away and she worried that the house might collapse.

Sarah knew from her father that when an earthquake comes, if you are in bed you stay in bed, as long as the bed is not near windows or the outside wall.

The shaking stopped. The children waited to see if there was going to be another big shock. When it did not come, Sarah said, "We must get dressed very quickly!" She stuffed clothing for her family in a basket. Then she gathered together food in a burlap sack: all the bread, cheese, and dried apples the family had. She took a bottle that was filled with water. She was afraid this would

be too heavy, but knew they needed some food. Sarah then thought they better leave the house and try to find their parents.

As they stepped outdoors, they could smell smoke and burning. Father had once said that it would be possible during an earthquake for gas mains to break. Then the gas could catch fire. But, he said, that hadn't happened yet. Now it seemed to have happened. What would happen to their house?

The children walked together in the middle of the road. It was a long walk to where their mother worked. By the time they got there, Sarah could see that parts of the city were on fire. Would her father be all right?

Their mother was still there—although the house she was working in was badly damaged. She ran to them and cried out, "Sarah, I knew I could trust you to come with the girls. I worried that if I set out looking for you, we might not find each other very easily." Mother lifted the burlap bag from Sarah's arms. Inside it she put little cakes and more bread that she had gotten from the people she worked for. Sarah took the clothing basket from her little sisters.

They all headed for the firehouse where they found Father. They later learned that their house had burned to the ground with 25,000 others. Like so many other San Franciscans, that night they began their life in a tent. As they struggled to put up the tent, Mother said, "We must be grateful we are alive and unharmed, and that your father is safe. We will live bravely and happily in a small tent for as long as necessary."

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Target Skill: Understanding and recognizing historical fiction

Learning Strategy: Story structure and summarizing

Common Core Curriculum: RL.3.5; RI.3.9

Genre: Historical Fiction

Vocabulary

molasses (muh LASS us) *n.*: a thick, dark brown syrup produced when sugar is being refined

craving (KRAY ving) *n.*: a strong desire for something

clattered (KLATT'erd) *v.*: made a loud, rattling sound

cobblestones (KAH bl STONES) *n.*: a naturally rounded stone that was used to pave streets

enormous (ih NORR muss) *adj.*: huge

rivets (RIH vets) *n.*: metal pins that go through two or more pieces of metal, holding them together

rumbling (RUM bling) *n.*: a deep, continuous, low sound that is like a soft thunder

chaos (KAY ahss) *n.*: complete confusion

Workbook

Related Pages: 20-25

Answer Key Page: 12

- Where did Papa take Patrick for a walk every Sunday?
 - He took him to a nearby park.
 - He took him to the harbor.**
 - He took him to visit his grandmother.
 - He took him to the molasses factory.
- What were some of the sights that Patrick and his father saw?
 - They saw fields and streams.
 - They saw miles and miles of sugar cane.
 - They saw tall buildings and humming factories.
 - They saw all kinds of boats.**
- What work did Papa do during the week?
 - He was a farmer.
 - He unloaded boxes and barrels from freighters.**
 - He was a blacksmith who put shoes on horses.
 - He worked in a molasses factory.
- What treat did the work horse like?
 - He liked sugar lumps.**
 - He liked hard molasses.
 - He liked a crunchy apple.
 - He liked some sweet hay.
- What did the molasses tank look like?
 - The molasses tank was a round, rubber globe.
 - The molasses tank looked like an oversized fish tank.
 - The molasses tank was like a steel army tank, rolling on wheels.
 - The molasses tank was metal and as tall as a building.**

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Into . . . *Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion*

Because this story is based on a real historical event, now is a good time to talk a bit about history.

The interesting thing about history is that you don't feel like you are making history until it is in the past. That is because while you are living through something, all your energies are focused on survival (or, in the case of something good, enjoyment). For example, during the San Francisco earthquake, one may assume that people were completely occupied with escaping the area, with all the difficult details involved. An individual could have been so preoccupied with the blister on his toe that hurt as he ran down the street, that he never gave a thought to the event in its entirety. In addition, there is no way he could have known what was going on all over San Francisco. Only later could he look at the entire event, with the benefit of both hindsight and more information, and consider its significance.

So, history is the story of what happened as we look back at the events and see them from a distance. At the same time, it is the story of every single individual who lived through it. A good example is a puzzle. On the one hand, a puzzle is made of many separate pieces. On the other hand, when those pieces are all fitted together, we can see one big picture.

In *Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion*, the events actually happened and the time period is authentic. As the students read the story, try to get them to “be there.” Teach them to “live” the history by noticing all the details the author puts in the story to recreate the time period. Ask them to “hear” the explosion, to “feel” the sticky streets, to picture themselves taking a bath in a metal tub in the kitchen.

This story can “sweeten” the learning of history, which some students view as dry and difficult. If they learn to think of an individual's experiences, rather than a set of names and dates, as history, they will enjoy learning about the past.

Eyes On: Historical Fiction

In the *Into* section of the Teacher's Edition, we discussed the fact that history is both the personal stories of many individuals who experienced a single event, and the bird's-eye view of those events that gives us a general understanding of their significance. As time goes by,

Blueprint for Reading

INTO . . . *Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion*

All of us have heard stories about earthquakes or floods or animals escaping from the zoo, but have you ever tried to imagine what it would feel like to actually *be* there? When major events are happening, most people don't even realize that history is being made. They see what is happening right around them, but are not sure what is happening everywhere else. Only later do they find out that they were a part of something important.

When a little red-haired boy named Patrick sees molasses flowing down the street, he knows *something* is happening, but little does he realize how much is happening!



Historical Fiction

When a story is interesting, the first question we usually ask is, “Is it true?” That question is not always easily answered. Some stories are completely true. Others are completely made up. But some are a blend of the two. You have learned that every story has a plot, a setting, and characters. When all three are true, the story is **nonfiction**. When one or more of those elements is made up, the story is **fiction**. For example, if the setting is real, but the plot and characters are made up, the story is fiction.

Sometimes an author knows of a true story and wants to tell it in an exciting way, so the author tells the true story, but makes up some of the characters. That kind of story is called **historical fiction**. It is *historical*, because the events and setting are true. It is *fiction*, because the characters are made up. As you read *Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion*, see if you can separate *fact* from *fiction*.

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the individual experiences are often forgotten and the “historical event” becomes the reality. One speaks of World War II or the Great Depression in very general terms. It takes a historian to uncover stories of individuals who lived through those events and experienced the events in their own unique way. Here is where historical fiction comes in. By inventing a realistic character and placing him in the historical event, the writer can recreate the history as it happened, in all its detail.

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion is a good way to introduce your class to historical fiction. The author spotted a really good story in the history books, so he kept the setting and the plot and invented Patrick and his family to bring the story to life.

What shall you tell your students? The first thing to do is explain the term historical fiction. Show them that the two words seem to be opposites. *Historical* means it really happened and *fiction* means it is made up. In a piece of historical fiction, the overall situation and many of the details are true. Even some of the characters may be true. But usually, the main

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character is either completely made up or a historical figure whose words and actions *in the story* are made up.

The following section may be simplified or only partially used if it is too advanced for your class. It is something, however, that the teacher should know.

Why would an author write historical fiction?

- The author has come across a really *good story* in history and wants to make it come to life. Either the story or the characters or both are real, but they are changed a little to make the story more interesting.
- The author likes *a certain time period* and wants to bring it to life by making up a story and characters that could have happened during that time.
- The author has *a certain person* in history that he admires and wants to write about, so he makes up a story that could have happened to that person.

The work resulting from the above is:

- Story is true but slightly changed, time period is real, and characters are invented.
- Time period is real, story and characters are invented.
- Story is invented, time period is real, main character is true but slightly changed.

For a young reader, distinguishing fact from fiction in a piece of historical fiction may be a difficult task. The strategy for this learning skill is *studying story structure*. How is the story structured? What part of it has the author drawn from real life and what parts has he or she invented?

Think of a photograph. In today's high-tech world, a photographer can take a picture. He can then "photoshop in" a person who wasn't really there. He can airbrush the skin of a person who was there. He can change the background or move things around in it. How much he keeps of what he actually photographed and how much he changes depends on what his goal is. That is how historical fiction works. The author "takes a picture" of a historical event. The picture has a setting and characters. He keeps the setting and some of the characters but "photoshops in" some new characters. By comparing the finished product with the original, the reader, like the viewer of the photograph, can determine what has been changed. The viewer and reader alike may then wish to contemplate what was achieved by these changes.

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

Literary Components

1 Exposition; Beginning: We are introduced to an Irish boy in Boston who loves molasses. The story's main elements have been established.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: In what city did Patrick live?

A: Patrick lived in Boston.

Q: What was Patrick's favorite food?

A: Molasses was his favorite food.

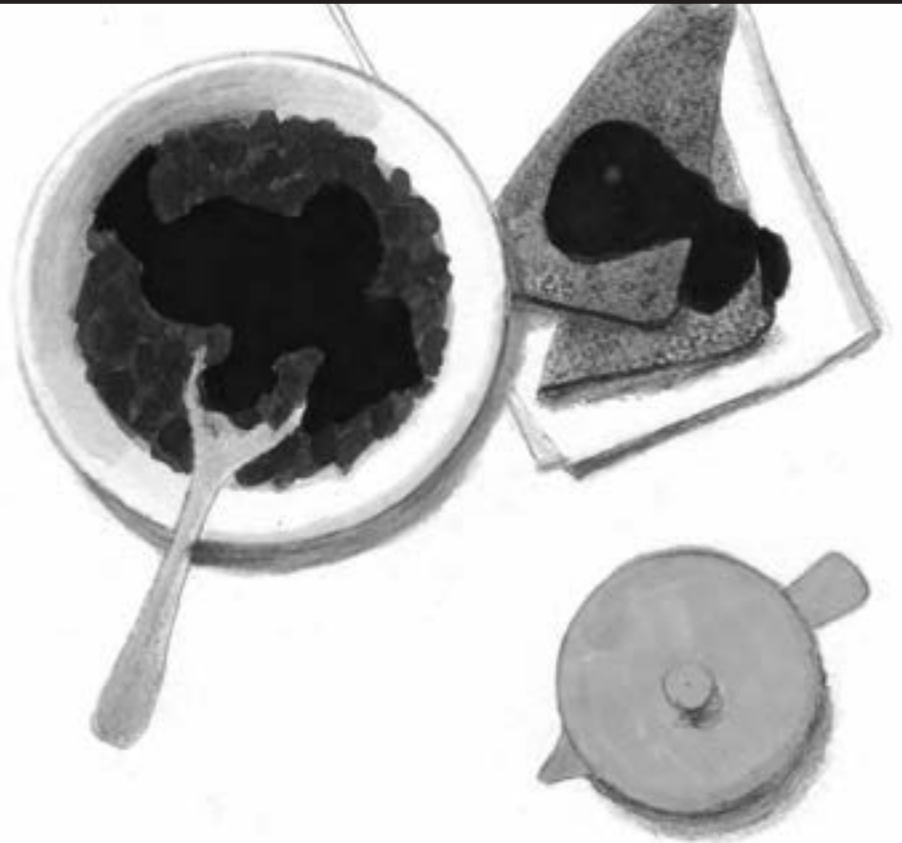
Analytical

Q: Why do you think Patrick liked molasses so much? What does it taste like?

A: Molasses is sweet and it is likely that there were little or no sugary treats for children in Patrick's house.

Q: If Patrick were a child today, what do you think would be his favorite food?

A: Patrick would probably love anything sweet, like candy, chocolate bars, syrup, and ice cream.



There once was a boy named Patrick McGonnigal¹ O'Brien. He had red hair and freckles, and he lived with his mama, his papa, and his two-year-old sister, Mary, in the city of Boston.

1 Now if there was one thing in this wide world that Patrick had a fondness and a craving for, it was molasses. He had molasses on his oatmeal for breakfast. He had molasses on his pancakes for lunch. For supper he had Boston brown bread and baked beans sweetened with molasses.

WORD BANK

craving (KRAY ving) *n.*: a strong desire for something

molasses (muh LASS us) *n.*: a thick, dark brown syrup produced when sugar is being refined

1. *McGonnigal* (muh GON ih gul)

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Still, Patrick had never had enough molasses to satisfy his craving. He was always trying to get another lick. When Mama filled the molasses pitcher from the tin pail, he was right there to run his finger along the edge and lick up the dribbles.

One day when Mama's back was turned, Patrick stuck his finger into the pitcher to sneak a lick. In his hurry he tipped the pitcher over! Mama turned around just as the molasses poured out in a gooey, brown puddle on the tablecloth.

"Patrick McGonnigal O'Brien! See what you've done!" scolded Mama.

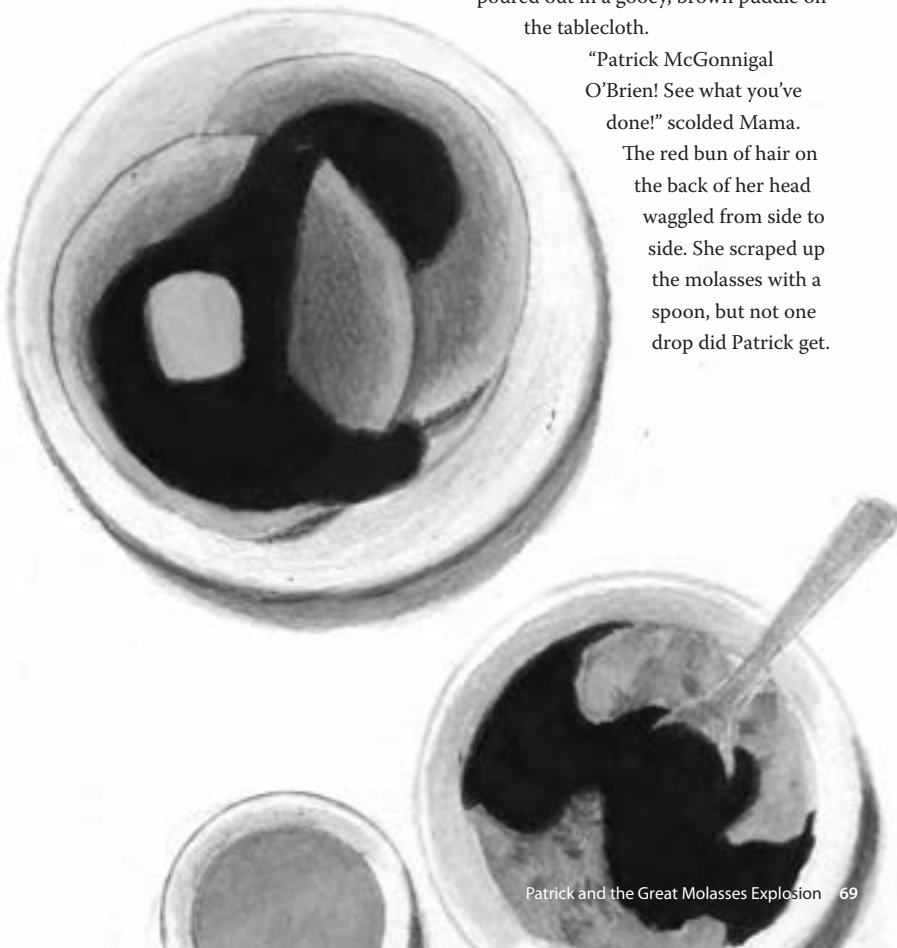
The red bun of hair on the back of her head waggled from side to side. She scraped up the molasses with a spoon, but not one drop did Patrick get.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: What did Patrick do one day that angered his mother?

A: Patrick stuck his finger into the molasses pitcher and it tipped over.



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Literary Components

2 **Setting:** The cobblestone streets humming with activity and the busy harbor create the setting.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: What is a harbor?

A: A harbor is a place on the seashore or ocean's edge where ships dock.

Q: How did most people get around the city?

A: There were horses and buggies and new-fangled automobiles.

Q: Where did Papa work?

A: Papa worked at the harbor loading and unloading ships.

Analytical

Q: About how long ago does this story take place?

A: It takes place about one hundred years ago.

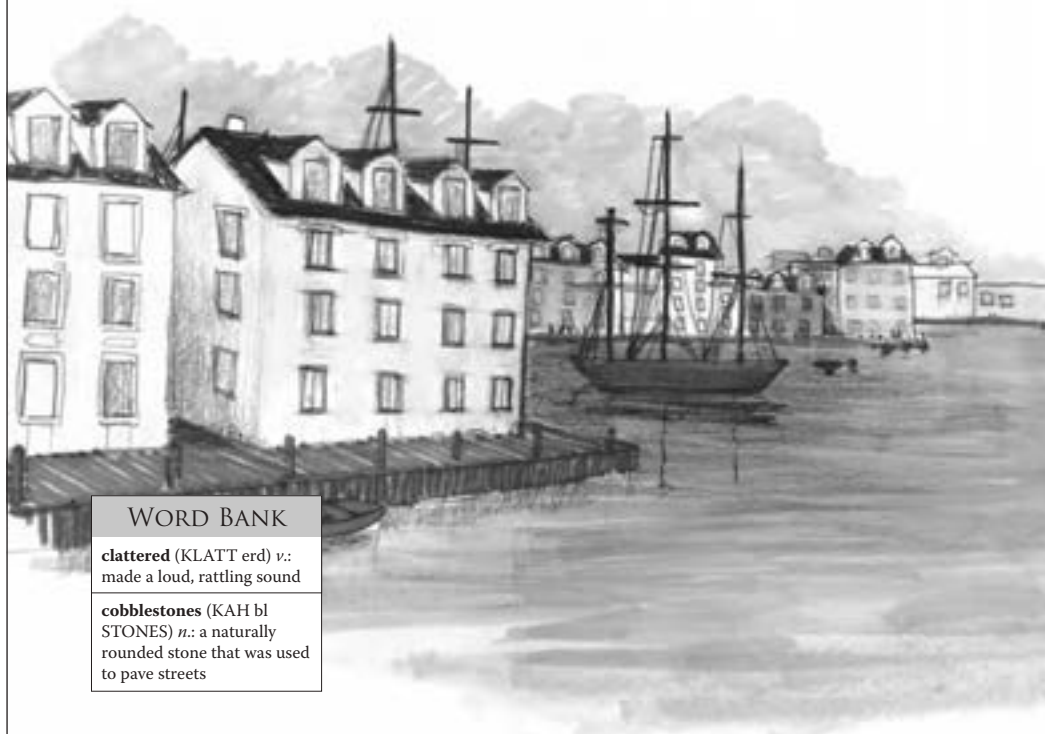
Q: Would you say Boston was a big city for those days? Why or why not?

A: Boston was a big city. Any city where ships arrived and departed would have a lot of hustle and bustle, a lot of sailors and workers, people coming and going, building, buying, selling, dining, and just living!

Every Sunday afternoon Papa took Patrick for a walk down along the harbor to see all the wonderful sights. Horses and buggies clattered over the cobblestones. New-fangled² automobiles tooted their horns. Overhead, a train clacked along the raised tracks.

In the harbor they saw all kinds of boats—freighters, steamboats, tugboats, and sailboats. Together they stood on a freight-loading platform where Papa worked on weekdays. Patrick liked to brag that Papa could load and unload boxes and barrels as fast as the fastest man there, and maybe a wee bit faster.

2. *New-fangled* is an old-fashioned word for modern and complicated.



WORD BANK

clattered (KLATT erd) *v.*: made a loud, rattling sound

cobblestones (KAH bl STONES) *n.*: a naturally rounded stone that was used to pave streets

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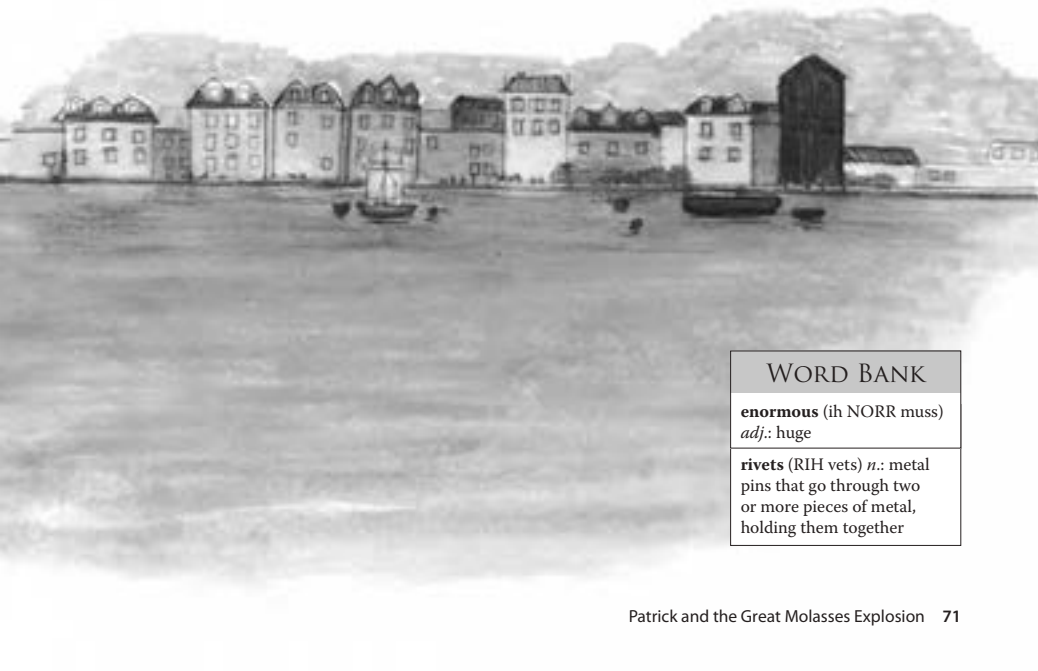
They always stopped in the stable to see the big Belgian work horses that pulled the heavy freight wagons. Now and then Patrick slipped a sugar lump to one of the horses. Papa teased Patrick that the horses liked sugar as much as Patrick liked molasses.

The most wonderful sight of all, however, was a huge, enormous tank as tall as a four-story building. The tank was made of big sheets of metal fastened together with rivets. Patrick could see the large, round heads of the rivets pounded in neat rows along the seams. Painted in big letters on the round sides of the tank were the words, PURITY DISTILLING COMPANY. This giant tank was filled with molasses. Papa had said so.

The very thought of so much molasses made Patrick's mouth water. Sometimes Patrick dreamed that he was seated on the edge of the tank with a giant straw just sucking, sucking, sucking molasses all day long.

3

4



WORD BANK

enormous (ih NORR muss)
adj.: huge

rivets (RIH vets) *n.*: metal pins that go through two or more pieces of metal, holding them together

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Literary Components

3 Setting; Plot: The enormous tank dominates the setting, especially for a boy who loves molasses. It will soon play an important role in the plot, as well.

4 Theme; Humor: We are told innumerable times how much Patrick liked molasses. A bit of humor is injected here when we are told how insatiable his thirst for molasses is.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: What was Patrick's favorite sight?

A: His favorite sight was the huge vat of molasses that read Purity Distilling Company.

Q: What was Patrick's dream?

A: He dreamed that he was seated on the edge of the tank with a giant straw, sucking molasses all day long.

Analytical

Q: Do you think there were really tanks of molasses that were that big?

A: Yes, this part of the story is really true!

Q: Do you have any food that you love as much as Patrick loved molasses?

A: Answers will vary.

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Literary Components

5 Setting: Mr. O'Connor's name and Irish lilt add to the setting of Boston's Irish neighborhood.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: How was molasses sold in those days?

A: People brought pails to the store and the storekeeper filled the pails with molasses.

Q: What did Mama warn Patrick?

A: She warned him not to stick his finger in the pail for a lick or he would not get a single molasses cookie.

One winter day when Patrick arrived home from school for lunch, Mama said, "Eat your soup and crackers, and don't delay. I've a fancy to make oatmeal molasses cookies this afternoon, but the molasses pail is empty. If you hurry, you can get it filled at the corner store before you go back to school."

At the thought of molasses cookies, Patrick's green eyes twinkled. He slurped down his soup as fast as he could. He pulled on his cap, buttoned his jacket, and hooked the wire handle of the empty pail over his fingers.

"Now mind," said Mama, "don't you dare stick your finger in for a lick, or not a single molasses cookie will you have."

The sun was shining, and it was not a very cold day for the middle of January. Patrick ran as fast as he could to Mr. O'Connor's store.

When the storekeeper saw Patrick swinging the molasses pail, he shook

5 his bald head. "Sorry I am to disappoint you, lad, but the



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molasses barrel is empty. I'm getting a new barrel this afternoon. Come back after school, and I'll fill your pail."

Patrick walked slowly out of the store. His mouth was watering for molasses cookies hot from the oven. Then he had an idea. A few blocks farther on was another store—a bigger store. He had never gone there by himself, but he and Papa often passed it on their Sunday walks. The store was near the corner where they turned onto Commercial Street.

He did not have time to go home and ask Mama, but Patrick was sure he could get the molasses and not be late for school. Holding tight to the wire handle, Patrick ran lickety-split. He ran so hard that when he reached the store, he stopped on the doorstep to catch his breath.

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Literary Components

6 Rising Action: Patrick's idea will take him closer to the scene of the explosion.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

- Q:** What did the storekeeper say when Patrick arrived with his pail?
A: He said that he was out of molasses but was getting a new barrel this afternoon.
- Q:** What idea did Patrick have?
A: He thought about a store a few blocks away that might have molasses.
- Q:** Why did Patrick have to hurry?
A: He did not want to be late for school.

Analytical

- Q:** Do you think Patrick's mother would mind if he goes a few blocks further to the bigger store?
A: Answers will vary.

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Literary Components

7 Onomatopoeia: The words “bang,” “boom,” and “whoooosh” make the sounds that they are describing.

8 Climax: The explosion of the tank of molasses is the high point of the story.

9 Descriptive Detail: The image of horses stuck in the molasses brings to life the disastrous results of the explosion.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: What did Patrick hear when he reached the store?

A: He heard a heavy rumbling sound.

Q: What was the sight that made Patrick’s eyes bulge?

A: A great towering wave of smooth, shiny brown molasses was rolling towards him.

Q: What had happened?

A: The Purity Distilling Company’s huge, enormous tank had exploded.

Q: What happened to the people nearby?

A: They were covered in molasses and sticking to the ground.

Q: What sounds could be heard in the city?

A: People were screaming for help, and alarms were sounding.

Analytical

Q: What do you think could have caused the tank to explode?

A: Answers will vary. Perhaps it was overfilled. Perhaps there was a flaw in the tank. Perhaps the air pressure outside was too high or too low.

At that very moment a heavy rumbling sound filled the air. BANG! BANG!

7 BANG! BOOM! BOOM! WH-O-O-O-O-O-SH!

Patrick rushed to the corner. What he saw made his eyes bulge. A great, towering wave of smooth, shiny brown rolled toward him. It looked like ...

8 it looked like ... IT WAS MOLASSES!

The Purity Distilling Company’s huge, enormous tank had E-X-P-L-O-D-E-D!

People covered with molasses ran in all directions. People with their feet stuck

9 fast screamed for help. Horses struggled in the sticky mess. Above all the noise and chaos, three long alarms sounded loudly through the streets.



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All the while the river of molasses rolled toward Patrick. Without stopping to think, he bent down by the corner of the building. Grabbing the lid off his pail, he held it out. The molasses poured into the pail, nearly jerking it from Patrick's hands. He pulled it back and clapped on the lid. The molasses spread up the side street and lapped around Patrick's shoes. **10**

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Literary Components

10 Imagery: The flowing molasses is like a river running down the streets.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: What did Patrick do at the corner of the building?

A: He stopped to fill his pail with molasses.

Analytical

Q: What do you think of Patrick's stopping to fill his pail with molasses? Was he being smart or silly?

A: Answers will vary. Practically speaking, he was being very silly indeed. He should have been running for his life to escape the tidal wave of molasses.

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: What happened when Patrick tried to run?

A: He fell down because his feet were stuck in the molasses.

Q: Who rescued him?

A: A man grabbed him and pulled him to his feet.

Q: What was going on all around Patrick?

A: Around him men shouted, women screamed, and horses neighed. Behind him buildings crashed.



Patrick turned to run, but he lost his footing in the gooey river. Down he went, his hand held tightly onto the pail. As he rolled over, a hand grabbed him.

“Are you all right, boy?” A man with hair as red as Patrick’s smiled down at him. Strong hands pulled him to his feet.

Patrick nodded as he wiped his sticky face with a sticky hand. Before he could even say thank you, the man was gone. Patrick’s shoes, his pants, his jacket, and his cap dripped with molasses. Patrick stamped off, stick—unstick, stick—unstick.

The terribly sweet smell of molasses filled the air. Around him men shouted, women screamed, and horses neighed. Behind him buildings crashed.

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Patrick, however, did not look back. He was too busy licking molasses. Lick-lick. He licked first one hand then the other. Women called to him from their doorsteps. Patrick did not answer. With his thumb, Patrick wiped the molasses from his face. Lick-lick. He walked slowly on, the pail of molasses dangling from one hand. Stick—unstick, lick-lick. Stick—unstick, lick-lick.

Patrick ran his thumb over his jacket. Lick-lick. As he made his way home, Patrick became worried. Not only would Mama think he had taken a lick, but he was going to be late for school. Patrick knew he was in big trouble.



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Literary Components

11 Theme; Humor: Patrick is a comic figure who is still licking molasses even as buildings are crashing down.

12 Foreshadowing: Patrick knows he's in trouble, but he does not yet know what kind of trouble.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

- Q:** What was Patrick doing all the time he was trying to get home?
A: He was licking molasses off of his hands and clothes.
- Q:** What were Patrick's two worries?
A: His first worry was that Mama would think he had taken a lick. His second worry was that he was going to be late for school.

Analytical

- Q:** What do you think Patrick should have been worried about?
A: He should have been worried about the safety of the townspeople and the horses who were all getting stuck in the molasses.
- Q:** Do you think Patrick would be in trouble for being late to school?
A: No. Patrick didn't realize how serious the explosion was. In all probability, none of the students had reached school.

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: Did Mama know what had happened?

A: Absolutely not.

As Patrick started up the back walk, the kitchen door flew open. Mama stared at him. "Patrick McGonnigal O'Brien! What have you done to yourself?"

"I ... I fell in the molasses, Mama." He gave his fingers a quick lick.

"What do you mean? 'Fell in the molasses.' You look as if you had climbed into Mr. O'Connor's barrel and licked it clean!" The red bun on Mama's head waggled back and forth.

Patrick shook his head. "Mr. O'Connor's barrel was empty, so I ran to the store near the corner of Commercial Street. Then I heard a terrible noise. BANG! BANG! BANG! BOOM! BOOM! WH-O-O-O-O-SH!" Patrick waved a sticky fist in the air.

"I ran to look. What do you think? The Purity Distilling Company's great big tank of molasses had popped open! The molasses rolled down the street right at me. I filled my pail and came home as fast as I could."



Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

Mama's face turned bright red. "Patrick McGonnigal O'Brien! 'Tis bad enough that you are covered with molasses and late for school. Now you

13 make matters worse by telling the silliest lie I ever heard!"

"It's true, Mama, every word!" cried Patrick. "I held out my bucket and filled it in the molasses river. If I hadn't fallen down ..."

Mama grabbed him by the ear. "I never saw such a sticky mess nor heard such a tall tale. Come along and not another word out of you." **14**

"But Mama ..." Patrick cried.

"Patrick, I will hear no more stories, and I don't want you waking little Mary. I've had my hands full today already with your sister bumping her head and crying enough tears to make a flood."

"But Mama, there was a flood. A molasses flood."
"Patrick!"

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Literary Components

13 Sub-Theme: A sub-theme of the story is how a boy feels when he is unjustly accused of lying.

14 Characterization: Mama is a typical Irish mother who is warm, strong, and not afraid to discipline an unruly child.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: What did Mama think when Patrick told her what had happened?

A: She thought he was lying.

Q: What does Mama call Patrick's story?

A: She calls it a tall tale.

Analytical

Q: How does it feel when you know you are telling the truth but someone else doesn't believe you?

A: Answers will vary.

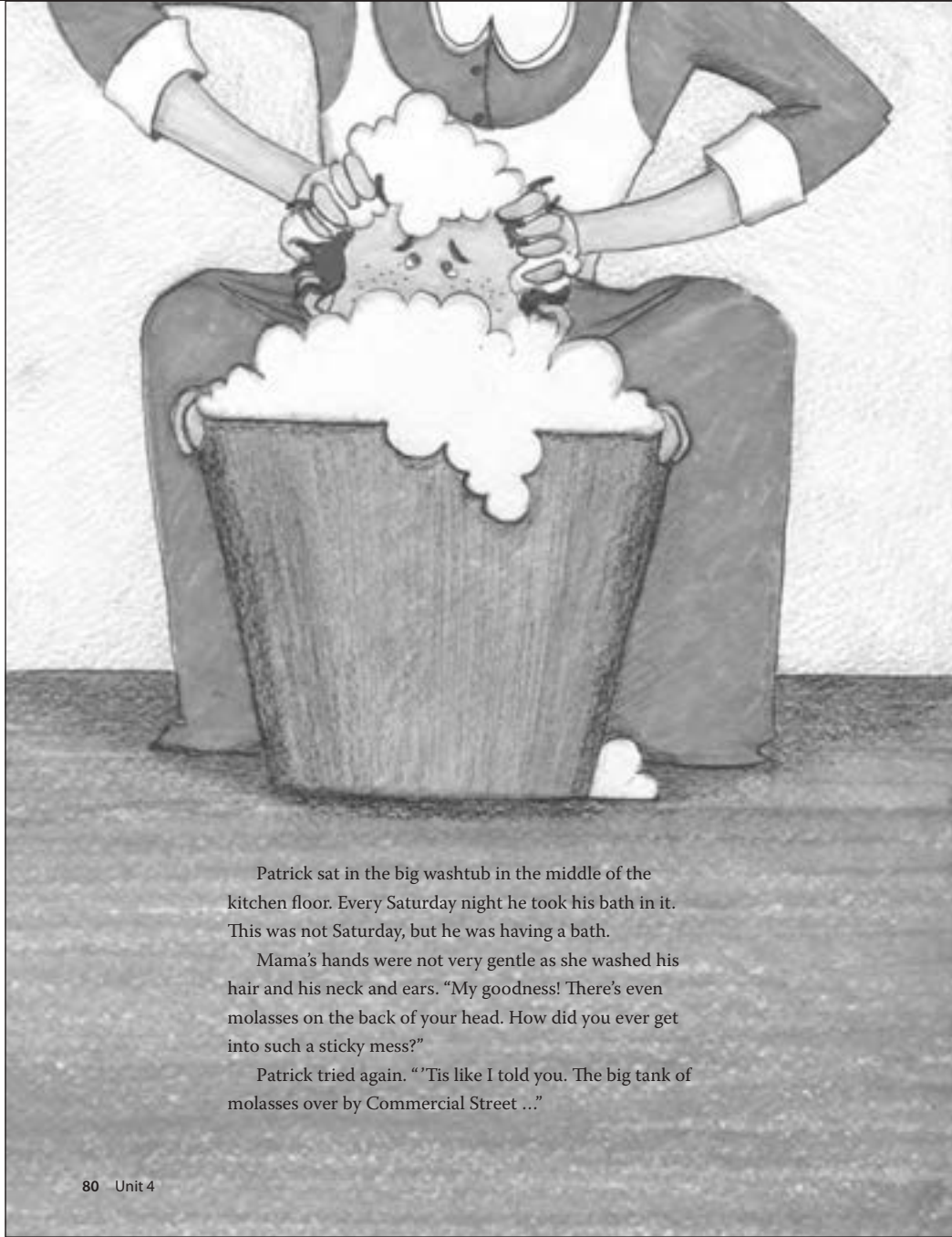
Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: Why was Patrick having a bath?

A: Because he was covered in molasses.

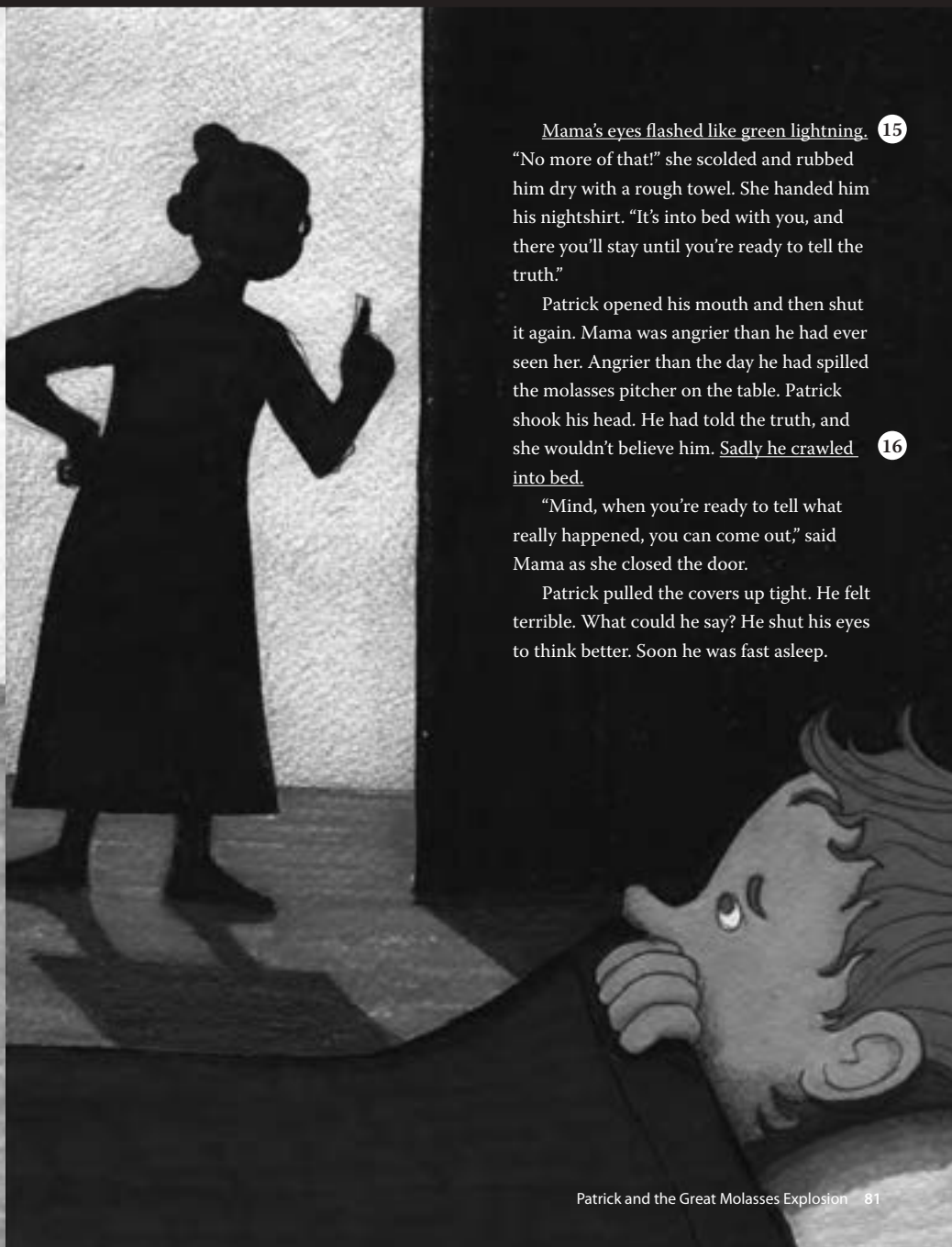


Patrick sat in the big washtub in the middle of the kitchen floor. Every Saturday night he took his bath in it. This was not Saturday, but he was having a bath.

Mama's hands were not very gentle as she washed his hair and his neck and ears. "My goodness! There's even molasses on the back of your head. How did you ever get into such a sticky mess?"

Patrick tried again. "Tis like I told you. The big tank of molasses over by Commercial Street ..."

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion



Mama's eyes flashed like green lightning. **15** "No more of that!" she scolded and rubbed him dry with a rough towel. She handed him his nightshirt. "It's into bed with you, and there you'll stay until you're ready to tell the truth."

Patrick opened his mouth and then shut it again. Mama was angrier than he had ever seen her. Angrier than the day he had spilled the molasses pitcher on the table. Patrick shook his head. He had told the truth, and she wouldn't believe him. **16** Sadly he crawled into bed.

"Mind, when you're ready to tell what really happened, you can come out," said Mama as she closed the door.

Patrick pulled the covers up tight. He felt terrible. What could he say? He shut his eyes to think better. Soon he was fast asleep.

Literary Components

15 **Characterization:** Mama has a hot temper.

16 **Characterization; Sub-Theme:** Patrick feels sad and hopeless when he is unjustly accused of lying.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: What was Patrick's punishment?

A: He had to go to bed and stay there until he was ready to tell the truth.

Q: Why was Patrick sad?

A: Because he knew he had told the truth but Mama wouldn't believe him.

Q: What happened to Patrick after a while?

A: He fell asleep.

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

Literary Components

17 Revelation: Patrick has a flash of insight when his mother refuses to believe him. He understands and forgives her for not believing him.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: What time was it when Patrick awoke?

A: It was close to suppertime.

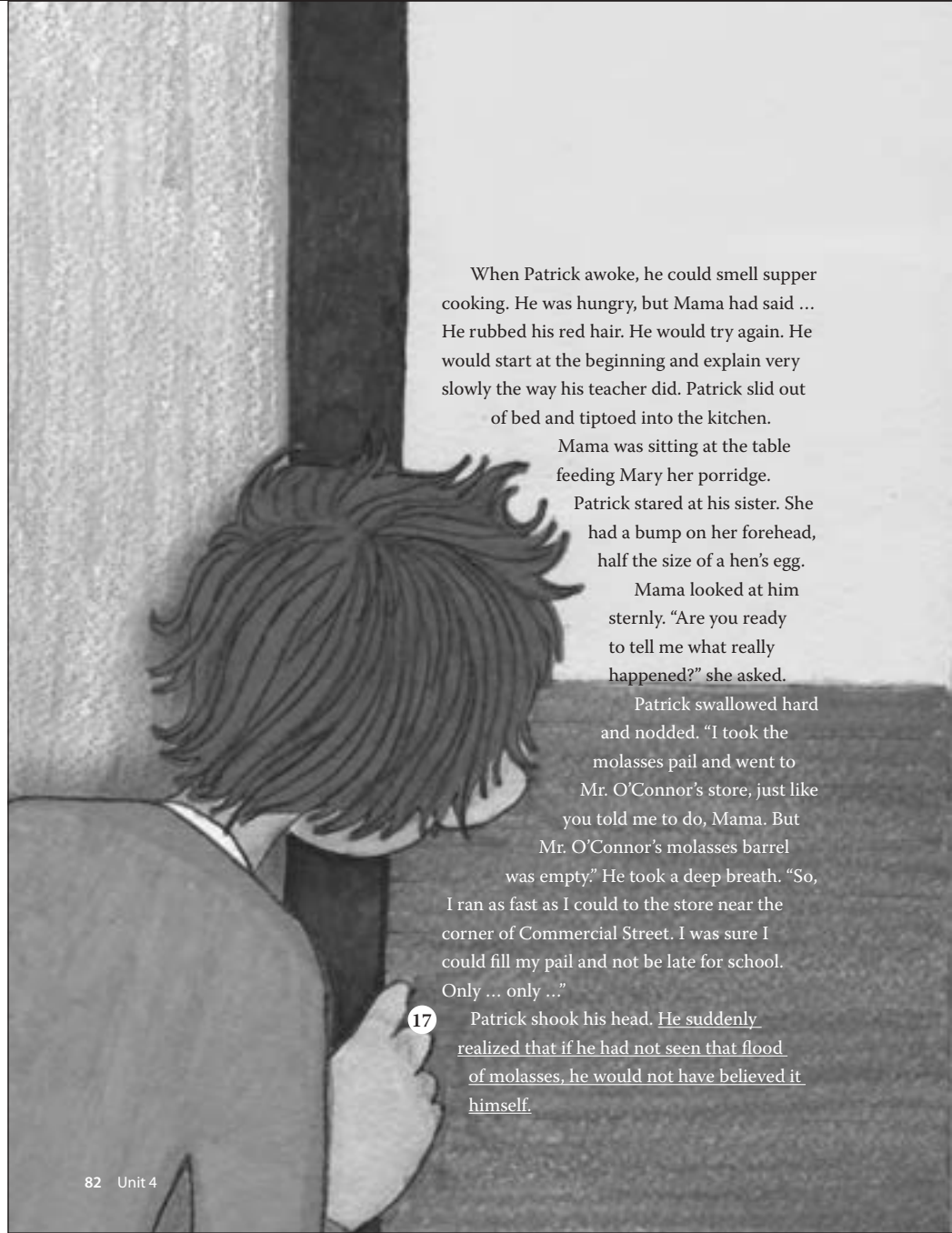
Q: What did Patrick realize as he was telling Mama the story again?

A: He realized that if he had not been there himself, he would not have believed the story.

Analytical

Q: It is interesting that Patrick is not angry at his mother for not believing him. What helps him not feel angry?

A: Patrick tries to look at the story from his mother's point of view. He begins to realize how unbelievable the story sounds, and to understand why she doesn't believe him. This keeps him from feeling too angry.



When Patrick awoke, he could smell supper cooking. He was hungry, but Mama had said ... He rubbed his red hair. He would try again. He would start at the beginning and explain very slowly the way his teacher did. Patrick slid out of bed and tiptoed into the kitchen.

Mama was sitting at the table feeding Mary her porridge.

Patrick stared at his sister. She had a bump on her forehead, half the size of a hen's egg.

Mama looked at him sternly. "Are you ready to tell me what really happened?" she asked.

Patrick swallowed hard and nodded. "I took the molasses pail and went to Mr. O'Connor's store, just like you told me to do, Mama. But Mr. O'Connor's molasses barrel was empty." He took a deep breath. "So, I ran as fast as I could to the store near the corner of Commercial Street. I was sure I could fill my pail and not be late for school. Only ... only ..."

17 Patrick shook his head. He suddenly realized that if he had not seen that flood of molasses, he would not have believed it himself.

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion



"Only what?" insisted Mama.

Patrick looked hard at his mother. "Mama, what would make a great big tank like that pop open?"

Mama shook her head. "It couldn't! That's why your story is so silly."

"But if it did," Patrick continued, "think what an awful mess it would make. Horses and people would get stuck in the molasses."

"Patrick, stop pretending, and tell me how you got in such a mess. Papa will soon be home, and ..."

"Papa! I forgot about Papa!" Patrick's face turned white beneath his freckles. "I wonder where Papa was!"

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Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: What did Mama say would make a tank explode?

A: She said it couldn't explode.

Analytical

Q: What happens when Patrick remembers that Papa isn't home?

A: He suddenly becomes frightened that his father is in danger.

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion



Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

“Papa? Papa’s at ...” Mama stopped short. Before she could say another word, the kitchen door opened, and Papa stepped in. **18** At least Patrick thought it was Papa. From head to foot he was streaked with molasses. His face and hands were copper colored and his black hair and his clothes were all sticky. Papa closed the door behind him, and the heavy sweet smell of molasses filled the kitchen.

Mama gave a loud cry.

Papa stood there, trying to wipe a sticky hand on his sticky trousers. “Did you hear what happened?” he asked.

Mama just stared, as if she could not believe her eyes.

“The Purity Distilling Company tank exploded,” said Papa, “and the tank was filled to the very top. Two million, three hundred and sixty thousand gallons of molasses poured out over the people, the buildings, and the streets.”

Mama gasped, and her green eyes opened wider.

“I was sitting on the loading dock, eating my lunch,” Papa went on. “All of a sudden I heard this terrible rumbling and shots that sounded like a giant machine gun being fired. Only it wasn’t a gun. The rivets that hold the molasses tank together popped off like buttons off my jacket. **19** The next thing I knew, one side of the tank had blown clear into the North Side Park. Fourteen thousand tons of molasses poured out, covering everything in its path—people, horses, wagons, cars, buildings, and even a piece of the raised train track.”

Patrick looked at Mama. Would she tell Papa she didn’t believe him and send him to bed? No. Mama was speechless.

Papa stuck out a sticky shoe. “Have you ever tried walking through molasses? It flowed into buildings and flooded basements. I worked all afternoon helping people and horses get unstuck. People from all over the city helped.”

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Literary Components

18 Turning Point: When Papa steps in, all of Patrick’s problems vanish.

19 Simile: The rivets popped off like buttons off a jacket.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: What does Papa look like when he walks in?

A: He is covered in molasses from head to toe.

Q: How many gallons of molasses had been in the tank?

A: Two million, three hundred and sixty thousand gallons of molasses had been in the tank.

Q: What did the molasses cover?

A: It covered people, horses, wagons, cars, buildings, and even a piece of the raised train track.

Q: What had Papa been doing all afternoon?

A: He had been rescuing people.

Analytical

Q: How do you think Patrick felt when his father explained what had happened?

A: First of all, he probably felt relieved that his father was safe. Then he felt exonerated—he was shown to be innocent. Then he felt validated—that his story was true. He probably also felt a lot of relief that he wouldn’t be punished and happy that, at least for him, things had worked out. He later may have felt anxious about the other people.

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

Literary Components

20 Humor: The readers, and perhaps even Patrick, are heartily sick of molasses.

Guiding the Reading

Literal

Q: Why hadn't Mama heard the explosion?

A: She hadn't heard it because at that exact moment the baby had bumped her head and set up a howl.

Q: How does Mama react toward Patrick when she hears about the explosion?

A: She puts her hand on his shoulder and tells him that he can pour molasses all over his supper.

Q: What does Patrick say?

A: He says that for once he doesn't want any more molasses.

Analytical

Q: Do you think Mama is fair in the way she treats her children?

A: She is fair. Her actions show she is sorry for misjudging Patrick and even offers what she considers a treat to him for having wrongly accused him.

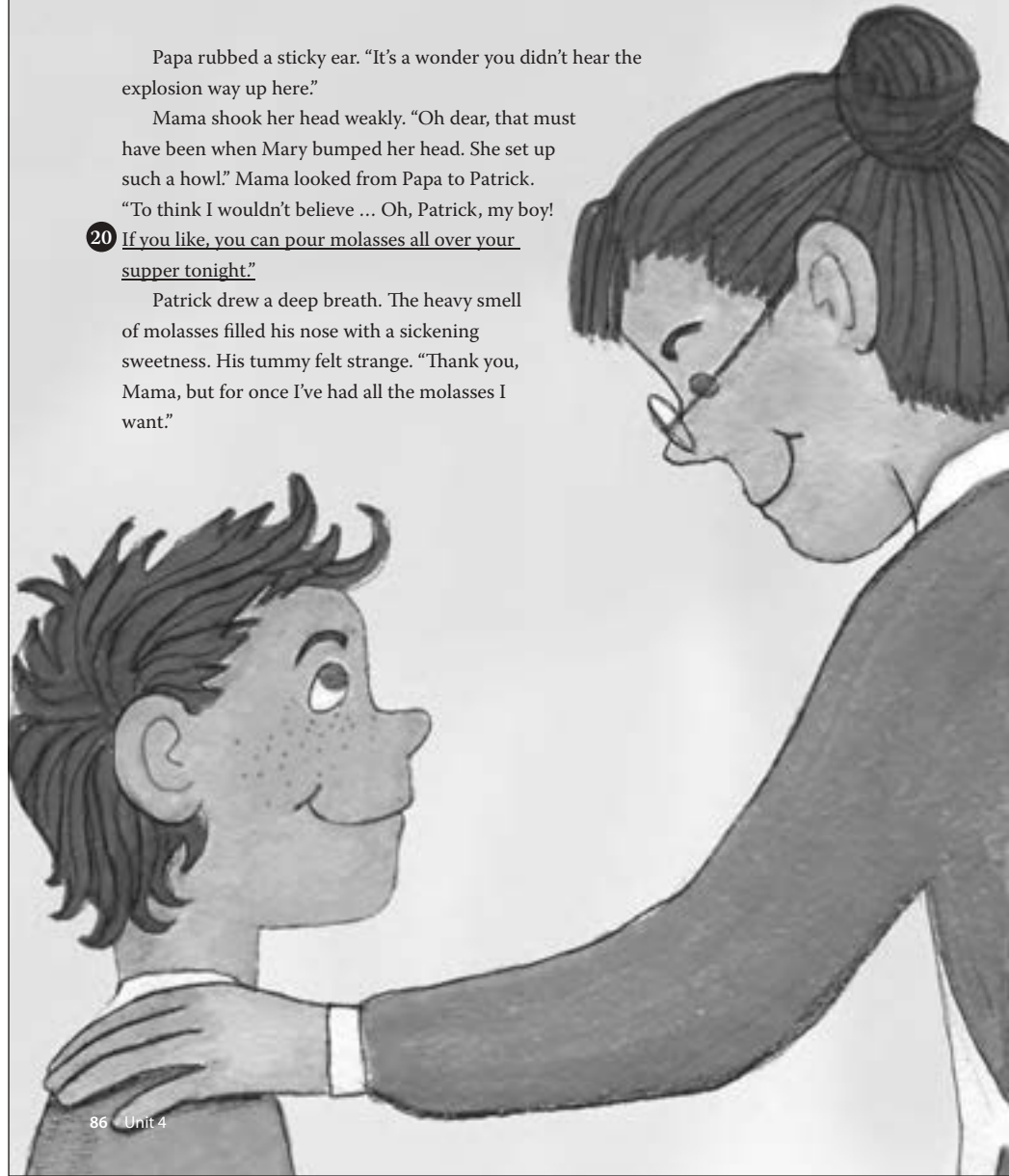
Papa rubbed a sticky ear. "It's a wonder you didn't hear the explosion way up here."

Mama shook her head weakly. "Oh dear, that must have been when Mary bumped her head. She set up such a howl!" Mama looked from Papa to Patrick.

"To think I wouldn't believe ... Oh, Patrick, my boy!

20 If you like, you can pour molasses all over your supper tonight."

Patrick drew a deep breath. The heavy smell of molasses filled his nose with a sickening sweetness. His tummy felt strange. "Thank you, Mama, but for once I've had all the molasses I want."



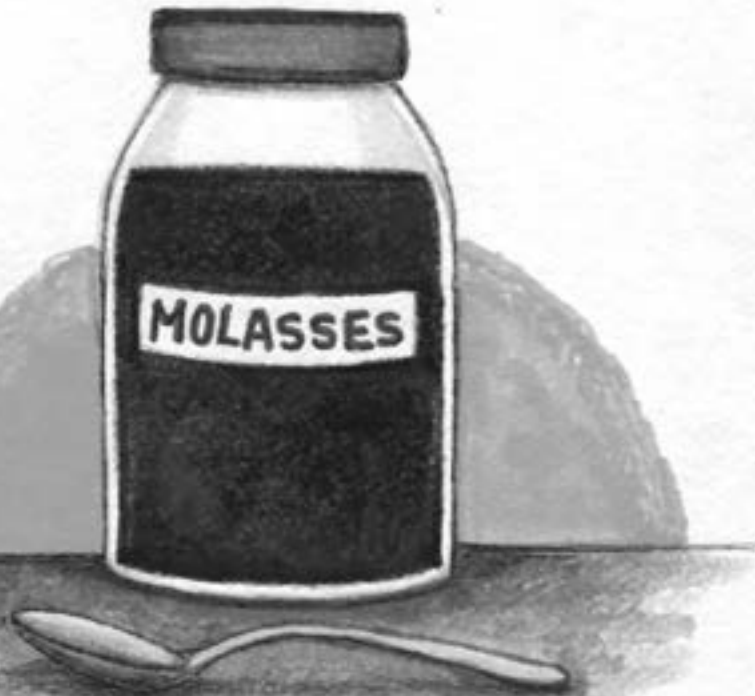
A few facts About Molasses

Molasses is a thick, sweet, sticky syrup, light to dark brown in color, that comes from sugar cane during the manufacture of sugar.

Molasses is mainly used in baking, candy making, and in feed for livestock.

Molasses has been an important product in New England since colonial times when it was shipped in from the West Indies and used to make rum.

Today, molasses is still widely used in Massachusetts in the making of Boston brown bread and Boston baked beans.



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It Really

Oldtimers in Boston say that to this very day you can smell a faint whiff of molasses in the old buildings on Commercial Street. But is that only an oldtimer's tall tale?

The truth, as Patrick's mother would want to have it told, is that on January 15, 1919, a giant storage tank on Commercial Street in Boston's North End exploded. The tank, built by the Purity Distilling Company four years before, was filled with molasses, over 2,000,000 gallons.

When the tank popped, a great brown wave of molasses flooded downtown Boston, sweeping over everything in its path. In some places the molasses was three feet deep. Children on their lunch break from school were knocked over. Pieces of the tank flew in all directions, and one flying chunk of metal is reported to have crashed into the nearby freight house. Houses collapsed under the flood of molasses, and several people as well as horses were killed.

Rescue workers, trucks, and equipment had a difficult time getting through the streets of gooey liquid. Cleanup crews were brought in, but their task seemed almost impossible. Everywhere people walked

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion



Happened

and everything they touched was sticky. Before the great flood ended, 21 people had been killed and 150 injured.

Even after the last brown glob disappeared from Commercial Street, the smell of molasses remained in Boston for a long time. Whether you can still sniff the molasses where it soaked into the cracks and crannies and under the wooden boards back in 1919, you will need to go to Boston and discover for yourself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Both of **Marjorie Stover's** parents were from families of Nebraska pioneers. Even though she was bored in history class in school, she always enjoyed hearing her family's historical stories. Mrs. Stover grew up to marry a history professor and write historical fiction. When she researches a story, she is fascinated by the little details. She finds out what people ate, how they dressed, and even how they talked. These details help her stories come alive.

Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

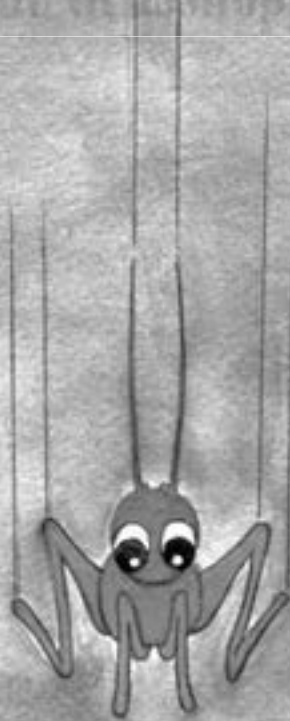
The Grasshopper

Poem tie-in for *Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion*

This is a whimsical poem that uses its shape to convey a feeling. The words of the first sentence go straight down the page, creating the sense of a long shaft. The next two sentences are arranged in a jagged way, reproducing the feeling of “kicking about.” After that, the line in which the grasshopper discovers a rope resembles a rope, and the long climb out of the well is portrayed by the long vertical line of words telling of his climb. It might be fun for your students to write a poem in which the shape expresses an idea. Advise them to keep both the shape and the idea simple.

The Grasshopper

David McCord



Down
a
deep
well
a
grasshopper
fell.

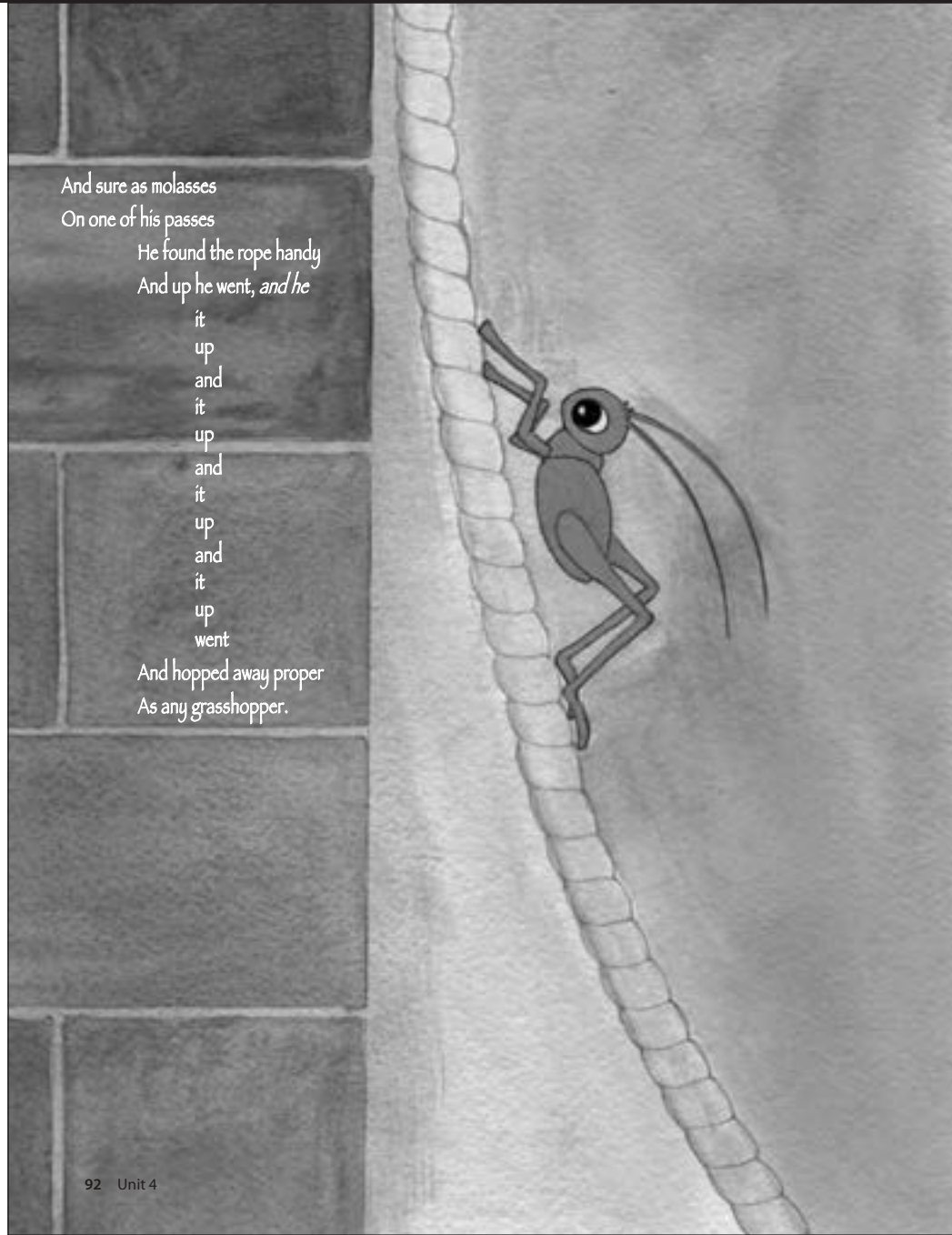
Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

By kicking about
He thought to get out.
 He might have known better,
 For that got him wetter.
To kick round and round
Is the way to get drowned,
 And drowning is what
 I should tell you he got.
 But
 the
 well
 had
 a
 rope
 that
 dangled
 some
 hope.



Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

And sure as molasses
On one of his passes
He found the rope handy
And up he went, *and he*
it
up
and
it
up
and
it
up
and
it
up
went
And hopped away proper
As any grasshopper.



Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

Studying the Selection

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Do you love sugary treats? Would you eat candy and cake at every meal if you could? How many sweets would you have to eat until you wouldn't want any more?

QUICK REVIEW

1. In what city did Patrick live?
2. What did Patrick sometimes dream?
3. What was Mama's reaction when Patrick told her what had happened?
4. When did Mama find out the truth?

FOCUS

5. Why didn't Mama believe Patrick?
6. In historical fiction, some parts of the story are true and some are not. On a paper, write a T for true or an F for fiction for the following examples:
 - a. The setting: Boston in the early 1900s.
 - b. The plot: The explosion of a tank of molasses.
 - c. The characters: Patrick and his family.

CREATING AND WRITING

7. Many people in Boston were affected by the explosion. Depending on where they were and what they were doing, they were affected in different ways. Pretend you are interviewing someone who experienced the explosion. Write down the questions and answers. Ask the person's name and age, and then ask several questions about where the person was during the explosion. Ask whether there was any injury or damage and any other interesting question you can think of. You should have at least three questions and answers in all.
8. Your teacher will divide the class into groups. Each group will be given one section of the story to pantomime, and a few minutes to prepare. Then, your teacher will call upon each group who will act out its part of the story. At the end, the class will have staged the entire story in pantomime.

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Studying the Selection

First Impressions

Discuss sweets and the pleasure they bring. You may wish to add that too many are not good for you, and ask the students about the rules in their homes concerning sweets. Tell them that sugar is a relatively new food, and that a hundred years ago it was not consumed very often. Foods like honey, syrup, and molasses were much more prevalent.

Quick Review

1. Patrick lived in Boston.
2. Patrick sometimes dreamed that he was seated on the edge of the tank with a giant straw just sucking molasses all day long.
3. Mama did not believe Patrick.
4. When Papa came home all covered in molasses and told her about the explosion, she found out the truth.

Focus

5. Mama didn't believe Patrick because the story was so unbelievable. Who could imagine that molasses would be flowing down a street?
6.
 - a. T
 - b. T
 - c. F

Creating and Writing

7. The first two questions will be about the interviewee's name and age. The next four questions should be about what happened and how he or she was affected.
8. If you like, you can supply props and costumes.