

# Blessing's Bead

By Debby Dahl Edwardson

*A Discussion Guide created by Cassandra Reigel Whetstone*

**The Story:** BLESSING'S BEAD is divided into two books. Book 1 tells the story of Nutaaq, an Iñupiaq girl in 1917-1918 who first loses a beloved sister to marriage and then the rest of her family to the Spanish influenza epidemic. Book 2 takes place seventy years later when Nutaaq's great-granddaughter, Blessing, moves from her dysfunctional home in Anchorage to her grandmother's home in Barrow, Alaska. As Blessing adapts to life as an outsider in this polar region she learns about her family history and eventually feels at home with her newfound family and her heritage. *Note:* An Iñupiaq glossary and pronunciation guide is located at the end of the book. Debby Dahl Edwardson writes from her home in Barrow, Alaska, which is the northernmost community in North America. Learn more about her at: <http://www.debbydahledwardson.com/>

## Pre-Reading

1. Show students the cover of the book. Ask "What does this image tell you about the characters in the story?" Tell students that BLESSING'S BEAD is about an Iñupiaq family. The Iñupiaq are the indigenous people of Alaska's North Slope, Northwest and the Bering Strait regions.
2. Show students a map of the Bering Strait. <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/bering.htm>. Explain that the Bering Strait separates Russia and the United States by 58 miles. In the middle of the Strait are two islands, Big Diomedes (in Russia) and Little Diomedes (in United States), which are also on either side of the International Date Line. Explain that these islands are just below the Arctic Circle. Ask, "What would it be like to live in this region of the world? What food sources would be available to you? What type of clothing would you need?"
3. Show students a detailed map of Alaska. <http://www.alaskais.com/akm.htm> Tell students that the story begins in 1917 with an Iñupiaq family traveling to a trade fair at Sheshalik, which is by the Chukchi Sea, ten miles northwest of Kotzebue. Point out the Chukotka peninsula in Russia and explain that Siberian Yupik came from Chukotka to attend the trade fair. Ask, "What sorts of things might you see at that trade fair?" For more information about the trade fairs visit <http://www.akhistorycourse.org/articles/article.php?artID=63>
4. Optional: A look at a modern version of a similar trade fair can be found at: <http://nana-dev.com/index.php?cID=315> (Note that Sisauluk, referred to here, is another spelling for Sheshalik)

## Preview/Controlled Vocabulary for Sheltered Instruction

Book One: lemming, tundra, parka, shaman, reindeer

Book Two: ulu, caribou, blessing, Eskimo, TB (tuberculosis)

## Discussion Questions

### Book One

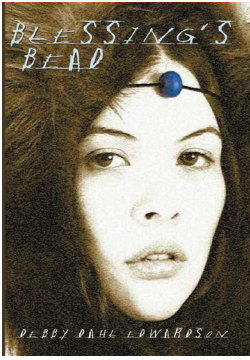
- Nutaaq states, "How glorious it is when summer comes again!" What makes summer so special in this part of the world? Page 3
- During the storytelling at Sheshalik, Uyagak says, "A new way has come with the new people [...]"

Those who fail to follow will die in the cold as if in a parka full of holes.” What is he referring to? Page 14

- Think about the time and place of this chapter. What changes might Nutaaq have witnessed during her lifetime? How would those changes impact the Iñupiaq way of life? Pages 14-15
- Nutaaq says she feels tricked. Why does she feel this way? How would you feel if you were in her situation? Page 25
- What did it mean to say goodbye to a loved one in 1917? How has that changed today? Page 32
- Why does Nutaaq give Manu the bead? Page 51
- Nutaaq says, “One of the boot-sole leaders has come.” Who might she be referring to? Why did he want the remaining villagers to find new spouses and form new families? What would you do if you were in their situation? Pages 53-55

## Book Two

- Read the first few pages of Book One. How does the voice and style of book two compare to book one? What information does the new narrative voice give the reader? Explain that in the first book, Nutaaq seems to speak very good English but she would actually be speaking fluent Iñupiaq. Many of the characters in book two, like Aaka, don’t speak English as well because their first language is Iñupiaq. Pages 61-63
- Blessing describes the foods that Isaac has eaten, (note that “Sailor Boy” is a type of cracker.) She says that, “He don’t remember back to when Mom and me used to have seal oil all the time. Back before Stephan.” What impact do you think Stephan had on their family? Page 79
- How does Blessing know that Aaka is blind, or partially blind? How did Aaka compensate for her visual impairment? Page 82
- Miss Colato teaches the students how to translate Village English into School English. Looking at her examples, what do you see as the similarities and differences between the two types of English? Are there differences between the way you communicate at school and at home or with your friends? Pages 92-93
- Why did Blessing’s mom want the bead to be buried with Grandma Nutaaq? Why did Aaka keep the bead? What did Isaac mean when he said, “Mom wanted to chase death away, right, Aaka?” Page 119 (Consider rereading page 51 to revisit Nutaaq’s feelings about the beads chasing away death.)
- Locate the Bering Strait on a map and tell students that a sea strait is a narrow navigable body of water that connects two larger bodies of waters. Remind students that the border between what was then the Soviet Union and the United States is in the middle of the Bering Strait. Read Aaka’s description of the border on the bottom of page 120. How did the border closing affect the Iñupiaq? Page 120-121
- What does Mom mean when she says, “Maybe it got lost somewhere” referring to her Iñupiaq name? Why do you think Blessing gave the bead to her mom? Where do you think the bead might go to next? Page 166-168
- Why did the author give such careful consideration to the names in this story? Page 172-173



## Blessing's Bead *an activity guide*

### Storytelling and Oral Traditions (Language Arts, Social Studies, Dramatic Arts)

*Materials:* Blessing's Bead; Optional -copies of short stories such as folktales, fairytales, trickster tales, myths, fables, tall tales. A list of Inuit stories can be found here: [http://www.ucan-online.org/legends\\_list.asp?category=1](http://www.ucan-online.org/legends_list.asp?category=1)

*Prep:* None

#### Day One (Compare and Contrast Oral History to History Textbook)

##### Directions

1. Read the chapter titles on page 10, "Unipkaat, Old Stories." Tell students that "unipkaat" is the Iñupiaq word for ancient tales and legends. More recent tales are called "uqaluktuat." An interesting discussion on tales and traditions can be found: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/nam/inu/tte/tte2-000.htm> Note that the article uses the Canadian spelling, *okalugtuak*, instead of the Iñupiaq spelling, *uqaluktuq*
2. Read the first paragraph: Everyone at Sheshalik has stories, even the Siberians. And their stories, as it turns out, are much like ours. The Siberians tell their stories and we tell ours and after a while the words begin to weave themselves together into on story. Our story. The story of our people.
3. Ask, "How was storytelling used by the Iñupiaq and Siberians in this story?"
4. Read the next two paragraphs, starting with "My uncle" and ending with "into the rift." Point out that Saggan is telling the story of when Siberia and Alaska were connected by a land bridge. Explain that oral storytelling has preserved rich, indigenous histories that are often overlooked in traditional history textbooks. Discuss the idea of the geological theory of the land bridge. An animated overview of the Bering Land Bridge theory can be found: [http://www.eckstein.seattleschools.org/elmiller/ss/land\\_bridge/](http://www.eckstein.seattleschools.org/elmiller/ss/land_bridge/) Ask, "What is the difference between a story that is passed down from one generation to the next, and a story that is pieced together, after the fact, from scientific evidence. What are the strengths, weaknesses and uses of each?"
5. Draw a Venn diagram on the board or butcher paper, comparing "Oral Storytelling" and "History Textbooks." Compare and contrast how history is passed down through both methods.

##### Responses might include:

- *Oral Storytelling* –Tells history as remembered in a culture; directed towards people of many ages; serves to inform and entertain; different people take turns telling stories; stories are told by different tellers and may change with the teller; include histories and ideas that are overlooked or ignored elsewhere; may include emotional experience for listener and teller; told as story rather than a third person informational narrative. (Note that in traditional Iñupiaq culture, and some other Native American cultures, some stories were owned or kept by certain families. It was their job to remember the stories and pass them down from generation to generation intact, word for word, because there was a sense that this was history or spiritual ideology and not to be changed.)
- *History Textbooks* –Tells history as agreed upon by large group or educators or other academics or scientists; focus on mainstream history and often ignore indigenous histories (e.g. "Columbus 'discovered' America); usually told as third person narrative enhanced by quotations, photographs, first person narratives; information is revised as textbooks are revised and adopted; the printed story doesn't change.

- *Intersecting Circles* –Designed to teach; tell about our past; provide one perspective of an event to listener.

6. Tell students that they are going to have an opportunity to be a storyteller. Give students one session or homework period to select a story to share. Students may choose a story from their family or culture, retell a scene from *Blessing's Bead*, or use a folktale, fairytale, etc., (see optional materials, above.) If appropriate, consider how these stories might related or intersect with scientific theory or historical account, such as Saggan's story of the land bridge, as noted in step 4. Have students memorize their tales. Consider suggesting a 3-4 minute time limit per story.

### Day Two (Storytelling)

#### Directions

1. Have students practice their stories. Encourage them to personalize stories by adding their own language to describe setting, characters, emotion.
2. Have students practice modulating their voices. Ask them to consider when their voices might be softer or louder in their stories.
3. If time permits, have students practice stories in front of a mirror in the bathroom, classroom, or at home. Have them watch their own bodies while they speak. Encourage students to experiment with hand gestures and body movements. Some students may need to learn the phrase "Less is more" and chose only two or three gestures or movements for their story.

*Closure:* Students perform stories for the class. To make a more comfortable atmosphere, have students sit in a circle. The storyteller may tell the story from their seat, sit on a stool, or stand. (It's not important that the storyteller stand in front of the class, as in a presentation, but it is important that the listeners can see and hear the storyteller.) If time is an issue, have the students sit in groups of smaller circles to tell the stories to the group rather than the class.

*Extension:* Challenge students to select a section from a history or science book and story tell it to younger students. Ask, "How can you make this story engaging for your listener? What are the important elements of this story that you want to convey?"

### **Voice and Perspective in Writing (Literature Analysis, Writing)**

*Materials:* *Blessing's Bead*, writing paper and pencils.

*Prep:* None

#### Directions:

1. Read the first page in Book One and the first page in Book Two.
2. Ask, "What do you notice about the narrative voices in each section? Why would the author want to use two such distinctly different voices in one book?"
3. Discuss how different styles of narrative voice can inform the reader about character, place, and time.
4. Select a story that all students are familiar with, such as something that happened at school, locally, or in the news. Record main events or plot points of story on board.

5. Have students write their own retellings of the story, using the list of events. Remind them to use one writing voice throughout the story.
6. Have students share stories and compare how different voices and perspectives affect how the story comes across to the listener.

*Extension:* Have students retell the story of the Friendship Flight from a different character's perspective. Discuss how perspective impacts our understanding of historical situations and stories.

### **National American Indian Heritage Month: November (Social Studies, Research, Expository Writing)**

*Materials:* Butcher Paper, Access to Internet or Library Research

*Prep:* Draw a chart on butcher paper with three columns. Label the columns What We Know, What We Want to Know and What We've Learned

Directions:

1. Tell students that in 1990, Congress declared that November is National American Indian Heritage Month. Ask, "Why do you think Congress chose November to recognize American Indians?" Consider sharing part of all of the most recent proclamation of National American Indian Heritage Month by the President of the U.S. at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/presidential-proclamation-national-native-american-heritage-month>
2. Ask, "Why is it important to have months or dates that honor specific groups of people?" Discuss the importance of learning about the history and culture of different groups.
3. Ask, "Would it be easy to skip the teaching and learning of subjects that are emotionally charged? How do you feel when you hear that Columbus 'discovered' America? Why do you think some people might like to overlook the history of indigenous peoples in North America?"
4. Discuss what students have learned about Alaska Natives and record key words and phrases in the What We Know Column.
5. Ask, "What else would you like to learn about Alaska Natives?" and record in What We Want to Know column. Discuss what kinds of resources students might use to learn more about the topic, including these websites: <http://www.anchorage.net/821.cfm> and <http://www.uaf.edu/anlc/languages.html> For Older Students: Discuss what types of sources are reliable, and which types of sources they should be wary of using. Native tribes and organizations would typically be reliable sources of information.
6. Give students time to research Alaska Natives, or do the research as a whole class.
7. Record things that the class learned in the What We Learned chart.
8. Have students write a summary paragraph or essay about one group of Alaska Natives.  
*Extension:* Have students work individually or in pairs to learn about different indigenous groups in North and South America. Assign each student or pairing one group from this list: <http://www.native-languages.org/culture-areas.htm>. Have students create a presentation, (oral, visual, PowerPoint, etc.) about what they learn.

## Naming Collage (Art)

*Materials:* blank paper and pencils; tag board or construction paper; variety of collage materials such as magazines catalogs, newspapers, tissue paper, photographs, ribbons, buttons, etc; glue; scissors; markers

*Prep:* Provide collage materials

### Directions

1. Pass out blank paper and pencils.
2. Reread the final three paragraphs in the author's note. Ask, "Why is naming important in this story?"
3. Have students write their name in the center of their paper. Ask students to think about the origins of their names. Does anyone else in their family have their name? Does it have a cultural or linguistic meaning that is important to them? Have they been told why or how they received their name? Give students 10 minutes to write words or draw sketches around their name. If students are stuck, allow them to consult a name book or naming website which offers origins of names.
4. Tell students they are going to make an art project called a collage to illustrate the meaning of their names. Explain that the word "collage" is the name of an art form made popular in the beginning of the 20th century, where items are glued onto a flat surface to make a textured or three-dimensional piece of art. It comes from the French work "coller" which means "to paste" or "to stick."
5. Have students use collage materials to create a piece of art that reflects the meaning of their name. If students are unsure of the meaning, direct them to create a collage that reflects how they feel about their name.
6. Have students place their finished collages on their desks and invite students to do an "Art Walk" and walk around the room to see their classmates' creations.

Modification: If students are uncomfortable with sharing the histories of their own names, have them do the Naming Collage with a character from BLESSING'S BEAD or other story familiar to the class.

*Extension:* Read Nutaaq's description of the blue beads on the bottom of page 8: You can barely imagine a blue of such power, glowing in the lamplight as if lit by an internal magic. Blue the way certain fish are blue in shallow water, their scales flashing blue in the sunlight-a blue like that, only different. A kind of blue none of us have ever seen before. Have students make a collage of the color blue. Encourage them to use printed words or phrases from Nutaaq's description of blue in their art.