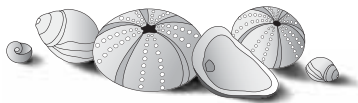


Across the Reach

by Cynthia Furlong Reynolds



Supplemental Writing Activities

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About the Story

Whether we write fiction or nonfiction, writers draw on personal experiences and rely on people we know to help us flesh out a story. That is exceptionally true in the case of *Across the Reach*. These people are my people; their stories are my heritage; their homes are my home; their state has been my family's homeland for either nine or eleven generations, depending on which family line I trace. Everything in this book is so interwoven into my being that it is sometimes difficult to tell what really happened and what might very well have happened. The settings and the characters are all real, with a few erasures and additions.

The descriptions, personalities, relationships, and speech patterns for all the book's main characters are completely true. There has been a strong tradition in my family of naming daughters Elizabeth; my daughter is at least the fifth Elizabeth Henley in our family. Although I am the main character, I borrowed my sister Betsy's name and conveniently "disposed of" three younger sisters to create a lonely only child who needed

to discover the power of relationships. I also changed my age for the convenience of the story; I decided it would be more believable to have two children run away with an elderly lady in the *Leave It To Beaver* days of the 1950s than during the Cold War years of the 1960s.

My grandparents play themselves in the book. The loving, ramrod-straight, *Pirates of Penzance*-playing grandfather with Algonquin ancestors is the Papa who invited me to play duets when I was very little. In her early years, my grandmother was always photographed on the ridgepole of barns, climbing granite cliffs, or preparing to dive into icy waters. In later years she loved to garden, and her plants (as are my mother's and some of my plants) really were rooted—literally and figuratively—in her ancestors' gardens. Esther had many kitchen specialties, but her seventeen grandchildren longingly remember her baked beans, molasses cookies, and strawberry pies. Unfortunately for us, she seldom used recipes, relying on the “feel” of the dough to know when it was precisely perfect.

Across the Reach focuses on Edna Knowlton Henley, my great-grandmother, who started losing her memory shortly after her husband, Frederick, died. In the days when I was a girl, people referred to her illness as senility; later, medical professionals would begin to speak of Alzheimer's. The details of my great-grandmother's early life are all accurate; she was born in the white farmhouse in Sunset to Henry and Sarah Small Knowlton and was courted by a man whose ancestors had lived on islands to the south of Deer Isle, in the Casco Bay. In her nineties, Great-Grammie really did try running home to Sunset—many times; the local policemen knew her well. As a very little girl, I woke up one night to discover my great-grandmother, dressed in a billowy white nightie, trying to pirate a

motorboat in Mr. Sullivan's driveway. In fact, my editor asked me to tame down some of my memories, thinking that readers would never believe the true stories. She was quite a woman—and a remarkable athlete, even very late in life!

Readers who know South Portland and Deer Isle will recognize the landmarks, though the bridge to Portland has been replaced and houses have sprung up around my special cove at the end of Willard Beach. At my mother's suggestion, I moved my grandparents from their home on Davis Street to the land that was once the Henley family compound on Shawmut Street; those houses had all been demolished to make way for World War II shipyards, but the Ferry Village spot has remained special in my family's stories.

"I wonder what would have happened if we had taken Grammie Henley back across the Reach?"

My mother's half-whispered musing is what launched this story. *Across the Reach* tells the story that I *wish* had happened. And that is the beauty of writing—we can borrow from our past and change our future with the flick of a pen or the clatter of a keyboard!

Reading Between the Lines

1. Authors carefully choose **book titles**. *Across the Reach* is a literal title—the children take Great-Grammie Henley across Eggmoggin Reach. But the title is also symbolic. What is another type of crossing Elizabeth does?

2. **Leads** or beginnings to stories are crucial. Can you think of two other ways the author could have begun the book?

3. We relate best to **characters** who are well-rounded, with strengths and weaknesses. List the strengths and weaknesses of Elizabeth, Christopher, Grammie, Papa, and what you learn about Great-Grammie. Do you like the characters? Whom do you relate to the best? Why?

4. We all want to have a special **best friend**. How are Christopher and his family members and home very different from Betsy's other friends? What makes someone a best friend?

5. Elizabeth learns that **people** are not always how they first appear. Mr. Macomb, the “Gang of 5,” Great-Grammie, and even Grammie all have unique stories, and the stories show someone very different from what Betsy sees on the outside. What are their “back stories”? What are your special stories that might make you different on the inside from what people see on the outside?

6. **Setting** is an important element in this story—and setting means **time** as well as **place**. Elizabeth tells us the year is 1957. How many activities and things can you identify that are different from the things you do and use today?

Details rooted in time are important when you’re writing about another period of time. Are there details that surprised you? Appliances, books, or activities that you thought they should have—or were surprised they didn’t have?

Research—even into the tiniest details of a book—is important. Authors want every detail to ring true to the time period. For example, originally, I wanted Great-Aunt Elizabeth to give Betsy a Barbie doll for her birthday because when I was eleven, my Great-Aunt Elizabeth gave me a red-headed Barbie. When I researched the doll, however, I learned that it was first introduced to the public 18 months after Elizabeth’s eleventh birthday, so I had to eliminate Barbie—much to my regret. All of Betsy’s treasures were available to children in 1957. The Girl Scout

cookies she mentions selling have been sold for eighty years. Marshmallow Fluff, which makes marvelous fluff-ernutter sandwiches, has been manufactured in Lynn, Massachusetts, for seventy-five years. Alfred Hitchcock movies were the epitome of scary screen fare; the director produced his first horror movie in 1923.

7. **Place** is crucial to the story. Betsy lives far away from the coast of Maine and finds many traditions, daily rituals, and even the speech different from what is familiar to her. Describe the landscape of South Portland, where her grandparents live, and the landscape of Deer Isle. What details are similar—or very different—from where you live?

8. We all have a special place in our hearts; sometimes it's a real place, sometimes an imaginary place. The Knowlton farm in Sunset was Great-Grammie's **place of the heart**. List the characteristics of the farm that give you feelings, either positive or negative. What is your special place? What does it look like, smell like, feel like, taste like, and what sounds are there?

9. The **theme** is the heart of the story, the “heart message,” or the main idea. *Across the Reach* has a number of themes. What are they?

10. One of the most important **themes** is stated in the very beginning of the book. What is it? Why would the author choose to do that? Can you write another beginning for the book?

11. **Seeing life** through another's eyes is one of the book's themes. Toward the end of the book, Elizabeth sits with Great-Grammie and begins to understand her better. What does she learn and feel? Have you ever tried to see the world through another person's eyes? When? How? What happened?

12. The definition of a **story** is that something has to happen (which you could call *conflict* or *problems*) and someone has to change. A book usually has several conflicts and some pretty big changes. What are the **conflicts** in *Across the Reach*? What **changes** take place? Who will never be the same again?

13. The **rhythm** of a story looks something like a heart monitor. You might also think of it as a mountain to climb. When a problem or conflict arises, the reader's heart beats faster. Can you draw a heart monitor, or mountain, for the story that shows what events help move the story along, what events make our hearts beat faster, and what is the peak event, when excitement and worry are at the highest point of the mountain? Where does the book end? At the top of the mountain? Part way down the mountain? Or at the base?

14. Books can have several different **endings**. Did you expect the ending of *Across the Reach*? How did it make you feel? Can you write two alternative endings to the book?

15. **Death** is a difficult topic. It can be very frightening,

or it can give a family a sense of peace. How did you feel about it? How do you think Betsy's family felt about it?

16. Like hikers in a strange area—or Hansel and Gretel—writers often leave clues about the journey on which they're taking their readers. Did you notice any **clues** about the ending that were planted earlier in the book? If you go back and look, you should find quite a few. What are they?