

# On Our Way to Oyster Bay – Teaching Guide

## About the Book

A moving, fictionalized account of a march that raised awareness about child labor.

Eight-year-old Aidan and his friend Gussie have joined the picket line at the cotton mill to demand the chance to go to school instead of work. But when famous labor reformer Mother Jones arrives, she has an even bolder idea than a strike. She wants to lead them on a march from Pennsylvania all the way to President Theodore Roosevelt's summer home in Oyster Bay, New York!

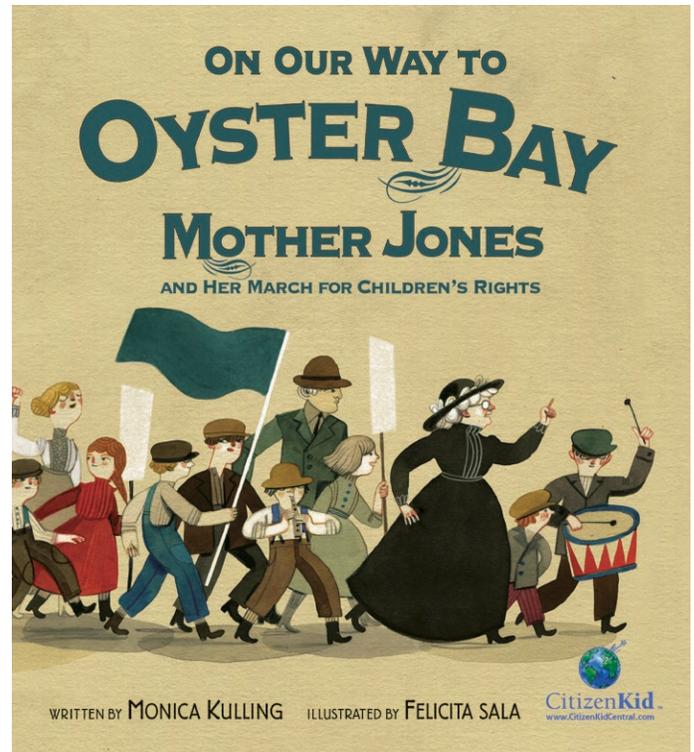
This inspiring tale is a tribute to the extraordinary spirit of Mother Jones, and a testament to the power of standing up for what's right, no matter how old you are.

## About the Author

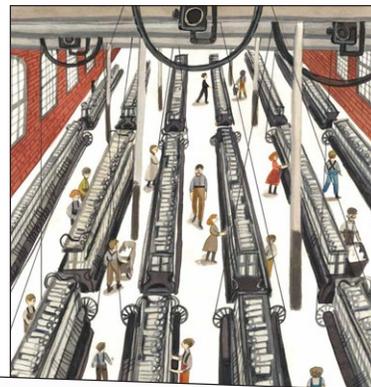
**MONICA KULLING** was born in Vancouver, British Columbia, and grew up in the Fraser Valley, surrounded by mountains. She studied creative writing at the University of Victoria, where her focus was poetry. When Monica enrolled in a course about children's literature, she was immediately hooked. Although she spent years enduring many rejections of her work, her love of writing for young readers never wavered.

## About the Illustrator

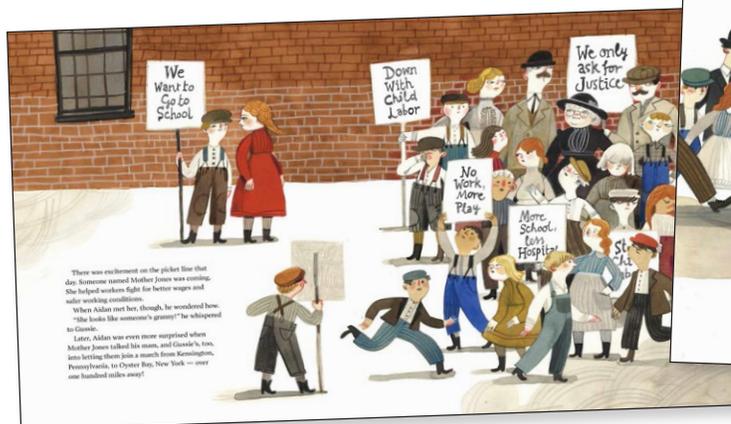
**FELICITA SALA** is a self-taught illustrator. She studied philosophy and languages in Australia, but then decided she wanted to create pictures. Since moving to Italy, she has worked on a few stop-motion animation projects along with her husband, Gianluca, but her passion lies in making picture books. She gets inspired by nature, children, mid-century illustration, folk art and architecture. She lives in Rome with Gianluca and their daughter, Nina.



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Aidan's friend Gussie was a spinner at the mill. When a thread broke, she quickly repaired it by tying the two ends together.  
Knowing Aidan couldn't read, Gussie read his signs to him. "I want to go to school."  
Aidan did want to go to school, but his family needed the money he earned. This was the way things were for many children in sore.



There was even tension on the picket line that day. Someone accused Mother Jones was wanting better working conditions.  
When Aidan met her, though, he wondered how "she looks like someone's granny?" he whispered to Gussie.  
Later, Aidan was even more surprised when Mother Jones talked to his men, and Gussie's, too, since he'd never seen a march from Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania, to Oyster Bay, New York — over one hundred miles away!



In her travels, Mother Jones had met hundreds of children working in factories and mills. Many were missing fingers, some had even lost hands.  
Touched by all she had seen, Mother Jones wanted to end child labor. But what could she do? Why, organize a children's march and bring the message right to President Theodore Roosevelt at his summer home in Oyster Bay, of course!

A few days after arriving in Kensington, Mother Jones gathered two hundred workers, including an excited Aidan, Gussie and dozens of other children. They marched out of town playing flutes, beating drums and waving flags.  
Mother Jones was leading the way to Oyster Bay!

# On Our Way to Oyster Bay – Teaching Guide

## Goals

- Understanding the genre of historical fiction
- Differentiating between fact and fiction in historical fiction

## Overview

After reading *On Our Way to Oyster Bay: Mother Jones and Her March for Children's Rights* by Monica Kulling, students will engage in a discussion about the genre of literature called historical fiction. Together the class will discuss the book, important vocabulary terms, the historical time period in which the book is set and various inferences a close reader should make as they read the book. Then students will differentiate between facts and fictional details in the book, and work in small groups to confirm some of the facts presented in the book. Finally, they will experiment with writing their own short historical fiction based on research and fact-finding activities.

## Essential Questions

- What is historical fiction?
- How do authors mix fact and fiction to create a fictional account of the real world?
- What roles do historical figures play in historical fiction? What role do fictional characters play?
- Why does historical fiction depend on research?

## Outcomes

- Students will be able to define the subgenre of literature called historical fiction.
- Students will be able to differentiate between facts and fictional details.
- Students will work cooperatively to confirm facts presented in the book.
- Students will write their own short historical stories.

## Common Core State Standards

### ELA Grades 4–5

- Key Ideas and Details: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- Key Ideas and Details: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3 Describe in depth a character, setting or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words or actions).
- Craft and Structure: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.

### ELA History/Social Studies Grades 6–8

The following standards are not assessed at this grade level, but can prepare students to relate historical fiction to their understanding of historical events.

- Key Ideas and Details: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
- Craft and Structure: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.
- Craft and Structure: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.5 Describe how a text presents information (e.g., sequentially, comparatively, causally).
- Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.8 Distinguish among fact, opinion and reasoned judgment in a text.

# On Our Way to Oyster Bay – Teaching Guide

## Lesson Activities

### DISCUSSION

Engage students in a discussion about historical fiction. Distinguish it from realistic fiction by explaining that many events in historical fiction actually did happen, while events in realistic fiction could happen today but are not based on historical fact. Read the title and the first page of *On Our Way to Oyster Bay: Mother Jones and Her March for Children's Rights* aloud to students and ask: Is this historical fiction? Point out the clue in the last sentence on page 3 for anyone who might doubt it: "That is the way things were for many children in 1903."

### ACTIVITY 1: WHOLE GROUP

Explain that to best understand the story about Mother Jones, you will define some vocabulary terms and provide some context about the historical time period discussed in the book.

It is important that the students know Mother Jones was a real person. Explain that they will read more about her when the story is over — there is a brief biography of Mother Jones on page 30.

Tell students that as you read the book as a group, you will stop to make sure everyone understands these words. Say: *While some of these words are used today, some are less common now than they were in the early 1900s. You've already heard a few of them, just in the first page of the book.*

Write the following words on the board before reading pages 4–5 of the book aloud to students. Once you have read those pages, explain the definitions of the words below.

- **Loom:** A machine used to weave cloth.
- **Bobbin:** Something used to hold thread or wire. Nowadays, you might see a small bobbin of thread on a sewing machine. But in 1903, the bobbins in the mill were bigger. They held the cloth that the mill's looms churned out.
- **Doffer:** This word is based on the verb "doff," which means to take off, or lift. If you heard it today, it might be someone saying they had "doffed their hat," but that sounds old-fashioned, doesn't it? A doffer, in 1903, was someone whose job was to lift a full bobbin off a loom.
- **Spinner:** Quote the book to define this word: "When a thread broke, she quickly repaired it by tying the two ends together." What do students think a spinner was?
- **Strike:** When workers agree not to work as a protest of the poor conditions. Today, a strike may occur when a company doesn't pay workers enough money, or when it offers poor health insurance. In 1903, strikes happened when conditions were unsafe for workers.
- **Picket line:** Instead of going to work, workers on strike form a picket line outside the building. They hold signs explaining the problem. The hope is that when people see the picket line, the company will be pressured to make changes.

Grabbing a sign, eight-year-old Aidan joined the other striking cotton mill workers. He was a doffer. For twelve hours, six days a week, he and other boys removed full bobbins from the clacking spinning frames. Aidan's friend Gussie was a spinner at the mill. When a thread broke, she quickly repaired it by tying the two ends together. Knowing Aidan couldn't read, Gussie read his sign to him: "It says, 'We Want to Go to School.'" Aidan did want to go to school, but his family needed the money he earned. This was the way things were for many children in 1903.



There was excitement on the picket line that day. Someone named Mother Jones was coming. She helped workers fight for better wages and safer working conditions. When Aidan met her, though, he wondered how. "She looks like someone's granny!" he whispered to Gussie. Later, Aidan was even more surprised when Mother Jones talked his mom, and Gussie's, too, into letting them join a march from Kensington, Pennsylvania, to Oyster Bay, New York — over one hundred miles away!

Ask students to look closely at the picture on pages 4–5. Have volunteers read the slogans on the signs. Ask: *How would you feel if you walked by that picket line? How might you feel once you realized those children were working instead of going to school?*

# On Our Way to Oyster Bay – Teaching Guide

## DISCUSSION

Read aloud from page 6 to 11. Explain that in 1903, there were no laws about children attending school as there are now. Many children from impoverished families had to work to help their families buy food and clothing. Ask (and answer) any questions students may have about child labor before discussing the following details from the book.

Say: *We can learn a great deal about the historical time period from books like this one. In order to do so, however, we have to keep our eyes and ears open and make sure we're active readers. One of the most important skills of an active reader is making inferences.*

Point out the following details from the story, going through page by page. Help students make the necessary inferences to understand the story.

- On page 6, Kulling writes that Mother Jones had met children who were missing fingers or even hands. What might have caused that to happen to these children?
  - Children were exposed to dangerous working conditions that sometimes resulted in accidents. Think about what we have learned about Gussie's and Aidan's jobs. Aidan removed bobbins from "clacking power looms." Gussie must quickly repair threads. These details on page 3 help us understand the reference to children's lost fingers and hands on page 6. Some children's hands were probably caught in those clacking looms.
- What does it mean when Kulling writes on page 9 that "the first day of the march seemed like it would never end"?
  - Aidan and Gussie are used to working hard. But they are not used to walking many miles each day. Their legs were probably very tired!
- On page 11, Kulling writes that Mother Jones read to them with a "soothing Irish lilt." What can you guess about where Mother Jones was from? What is a "lilt"?
  - Mother Jones was an immigrant from Ireland. We will read a more detailed biography of her on page 30, after the story is over. But you hear about important details from Mother Jones's life right here, in the middle of the story itself. These details help bring Mother Jones's character to life. You can almost hear her accent, can't you?

Read the rest of the book aloud to the class, stopping if students have questions or want to point out other important details.

## ACTIVITY 2: SMALL GROUPS

Split the class into two to four groups, depending on class size. One (or two) of the groups will review the book in search of historical facts they think they could confirm really happened. One (or two) of the groups will review the book in search of fictional details they think Kulling added to tell a good story.

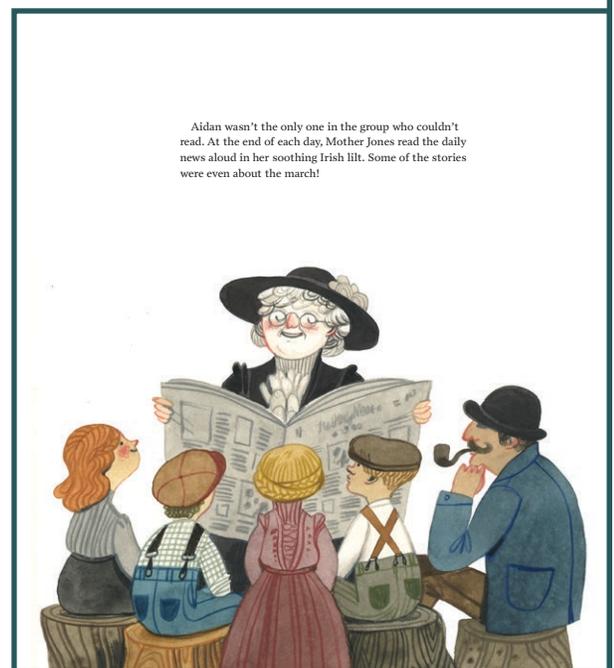
Explain: *Facts can be proven to be true or to have really happened by reading other sources, such as historical texts or newspaper and encyclopedia articles. Fictional details are added to embellish the story and provide it with an interesting plot and characters. The fictional details are what make this a storybook and not a history textbook.*

Provide the group(s) finding FACTS with paper and pencils, and ask them to make a list of everything they think they could prove really happened. Some examples of facts from the book are listed below. Share this list with students *after* they have found some (or all, or more than these) on their own:

- There was bad weather during the march
- The group slept in a meeting hall one night
- Children worked in mills and factories
- The march happened in July of 1903
- The mayor of New York City wouldn't let them parade or speak at Madison Square Garden
- Roosevelt refused to speak with them
- The marchers made a difference



In her travels, Mother Jones had met hundreds of children working in factories and mills. Many were missing fingers; some had even lost hands.  
"Troubled by all she had seen, Mother Jones wanted to end child labor. But what could she do? Why, organize a children's march and bring the message right to President Theodore Roosevelt at his summer home in Oyster Bay, of course!"



Aidan wasn't the only one in the group who couldn't read. At the end of each day, Mother Jones read the daily news aloud in her soothing Irish lilt. Some of the stories were even about the march!

# On Our Way to Oyster Bay – Teaching Guide

Provide the group(s) finding FICTIONAL DETAILS with a paper and pencil, and ask them to make a list of the characters, events and details they think Kulling invented in order to tell a good story. Some examples of fictional details are below. Share this list with students *after* they have found some (or all, or more than these) on their own:

- Gussie and Aidan are made-up characters
- The details about what Gussie and Aidan did on the train
- That Gussie was confused or surprised by the Coney Island announcement
- That Aidan said “it’s not fair” when the president didn’t come out
- That Aidan would eventually learn to read

After each group has had enough time to come up with a list of three or four details, bring the groups back together and take notes on the board. Draw a line to divide the board in half and write FACTS on one side and FICTIONS on the other. Ask for volunteers to say what they found and why they think their example is a fact or a piece of fiction.

Once you have a good list of examples on the board, explain that students will work together to do research and confirm some of the details listed under FACTS. Say: *By the end of our activities, you will get some experience writing fiction based on an historical fact, so pay attention to how Kulling weaves the two together.*

Note: Jot down all the historical facts you listed on the board before erasing them. You will need them for the next activities. Now read the biography of Mother Jones on page 30 aloud to the class. Discuss how the details from that biography add to (or distract from) the story Kulling tells in the pages of the book.

## ACTIVITY 3: SMALL GROUPS

Write each historical fact that the class found onto an index card. How many are there? Divide the class into that many small groups, making sure to mix up groupings from the previous activity. Hand each group one of the index cards with a fact written on it. Say: *Now you will work with your groups to confirm if the detail written on the index card really happened. Pay careful attention to what you learn in this activity, because it will come in handy during the next one.*

Provide students with research materials. These include, but are not limited to, computers with internet access; encyclopedias; sources about the protest march against child labor (July of 1903) that you have gathered from the school or local library; and the autobiography of Mother Jones, which is available at this website:

<https://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/jones/index.html>

Instruct students to talk about the fact written on their index card as a small group. They should come up with some questions to ask (and answer, if they can) about that topic.

- The students confirming that children worked in mills and factories might ask, “Where were mills and factories with children workers located?” or “How many children worked in a typical mill in the 1900s?” or “What were some common injuries child workers suffered in mills and factories?”
- The students confirming that the march took place may ask, “How long did it take Mother Jones and her group to walk from Philadelphia to New York?” or “What inspired Mother Jones to lead the protest?”
- The students confirming that President Roosevelt refused to meet with the protesters might ask, “How did Mother Jones respond when President Roosevelt didn’t appear?” or “What did President Roosevelt think about child labor?”

Students will need help coming up with key word searches for the internet or terms to look up in the indices of books. Some examples are:

- Mother Jones (although caution students about the magazine of the same name; this won’t give them the right information for this activity)
- President Theodore Roosevelt
- Child labor laws early 1900s
- Mother Jones sleeps in meeting hall
- Weather during Mother Jones child labor march
- Mother Jones march New York City
- Public reactions to Mother Jones march 1903

### Who Was Mother Jones?

On Our Way to Oyster Bay is based on a real person and a real event on July 2, 1903. Mary Harris “Mother” Jones organized a protest march to demand an end to child labor. About two hundred adults and dozens of children walked with her from Philadelphia to New York City. Along the way, Mother Jones gave speeches and showed the crowds what working in factories and mills was doing to children, some as young as five years old. Aidan and Gussie are imagined characters that represent two of those children.

The march ended in New York City on July 23. Mother Jones, along with a few of the marchers, continued on to President Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt’s summer home on Long Island. After all their efforts, the president refused to meet with them. Although this angered the marchers, Mother Jones was satisfied that their protest had brought the issue to the attention of the nation. And in a few years’ time, official laws against child labor were passed in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York.

Mother Jones began her life as Mary Harris in Ireland in 1830; she immigrated with her family to Toronto, Canada, when she was fourteen. Later, Mary became a teacher in Michigan before marrying a man named George E. Jones. After suffering a number of tragedies, including the loss of her husband and four children to yellow fever and later her home and business in the Great Chicago Fire in 1879, Mary Harris Jones turned her pain into a passion for the rights of miners and their families. In June 1892, after she addressed a

union convention, the miners began affectionately calling her “Mother.” Barely five feet tall, Mother Jones was a powerful speaker who held in life it was. She devoted all to black. She added years to her actual age — perhaps to seem more motherly and less threatening to the people in power. For the considerably rich, or those whose wealth was gained through the hard work of the less fortunate, Mother Jones was, as the newspapers called her, “the most dangerous woman in America.” For workers, however, she was a woman to celebrate. After her death in 1913, she was buried “with her boys” in the Union Miners Cemetery in Mount Olive, Illinois, where in 1926 the miners raised money to build a lasting memorial in her honor.

### Child Labor Today

Mother Jones’s march for children’s rights may have happened over a hundred years ago, but child labor is not yet a thing of the past. Today, many millions of children around the world work in jobs that are harmful to their growth and development.

Child labor doesn’t mean doing chores, such as making your bed or doing the dishes. It means work that children should not be doing because they are either too young or the work is dangerous and the conditions harsh. Children forced into labor can work such long hours, they are denied access to an education, as well.

Today, there are child laborers working in agriculture (for example, fish farming or harvesting cocoa beans used to make chocolate), manufacturing (for example, carpet weaving or



# On Our Way to Oyster Bay – Teaching Guide

Say: *Once you have found one or two sources that confirm your fact is true, raise your hand.* Go around the room and review students' documentation. Ask if they learned anything else interesting in the articles and stories they read.

Gather the whole group together and discuss the research process. Have students share their experiences, and whether they found it easy or difficult to confirm that certain details from the book are historical facts.

## ACTIVITY 4: INDEPENDENT ACTIVITY

### Creative Writing Exercise

Come back together as a large group and lead the class in discussion about the role of research in historical fiction. Ask: *How do you think this genre of fiction depends on research differently than, say, realistic fiction or folk tales do?*

Explain that each student will use the research they conducted in Activity 3 to draft a story of their own. Students can invent new characters or use the ones from Kulling's book. Their stories will likely be set in 1903, around the time of the march Kulling wrote about. But if students did research into Mother Jones's life or Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, their stories might take place a little earlier or later. In every case, students should tell a story with a plot, characters and a setting that includes the historical fact they have just researched.

### Helpful Starting Places:

If students don't know where to begin, have them start by drawing a picture. Say: *Where did your fact take place? Draw that setting. Then imagine what people were in it. Draw them, too. What are they saying to each other? What are they thinking? What problem do they need to solve? Now, write an opening paragraph that describes those characters' feelings and the problem they face.*

Or if students can't imagine what other characters to invent, have them pretend they are living in 1903. Say: *Read your fact again. Think about what you learned about that fact when you did research. Now imagine that you are living in 1903 and the fact you researched is happening to you. Write an opening paragraph using the first person (I, we, us) and tell the reader what you're doing, what problem you're facing or what you hope to accomplish.*

When students have completed their rough drafts, encourage those who would like to share their stories to read them aloud to the class. When students have finished their reading, point out the ways in which they succeeded in weaving together historical fact with fictional details.



When they arrived, three thousand people were gathered in the town's public park waiting to hear Mother Jones speak.

"All these people care about us!" said an astounded Aidan.

Gussie was so amazed she could only nod. Mother Jones spoke with force. "These children work twelve hours a day, six days a week. They work while other children go to school, play games and enjoy life."

Inspired, and maybe a bit humbled, many of the townspeople offered their support and places to stay.