



Classroom Guide for **SKY DANCERS**

written by **Connie Ann Kirk**

illustrated by **Christy Hale**

Reading Levels

*Reading Level: Grades 3-4

Interest Level: Grades K-4

Guided Reading Level: P

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.4/.5

Lexile™ Measure: AD870

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Environment/Nature, New York City History, Architecture, Family Traditions, Fathers and Sons, Mohawk Indians, Native American History, Occupations

Synopsis

John Cloud's father is a steelworker building skyscrapers in New York City, far away from their home upstate New York on the Mohawk Reservation. Between weekends John Cloud misses Papa and longs to visit him in the city. One day Mama agrees to take him there. New York City turns out to be busy and noisy, but what really astonishes John Cloud—and makes him proud—is seeing Papa “dancing” along the high steel cross beams of the Empire State Building.

As John Cloud struggles with his own fears, seeing his father working in such a brave way inspires him. With his father's encouragement, John Cloud realizes he too can climb to great heights.

This story is based on a little known part of Native American history and the Mohawks' contribution to modern architecture.

Background

This historical fiction story was inspired by the Mohawk steelworkers who worked on the construction of many landmark buildings and bridges in New York. During the 1930s and 1940s, Mohawk construction workers helped build the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, the George Washington Bridge, and Rockefeller

Center. During that time many of these Mohawk workers created a community in Brooklyn called Little Caughnawaga, where they lived during the week. On weekends, they traveled home to reservations in upstate New York and Canada. Mohawk steelworkers also worked on the construction of the United Nations Assembly building and the World Trade Center.

In 2001, after the World Trade Center towers were attacked and collapsed, relatives and descendants of the steelworkers who originally built the towers returned to help clear debris from the site of the buildings that their elders had helped to build.

For additional background, you may refer to the Author's Note on the last page of the book.

Teaching Tip

You may wish to use *Sky Dancers* during your celebration of Native American Heritage Month in November.

BEFORE READING**Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing the book to students, you may wish to develop background and promote anticipation by posting questions such as the following:

1. Have you ever taken a very exciting trip? Where did you go? Who or what did you see? What was the best part?
2. What is the tallest building you have ever seen? How do you think such a tall building was built? How would you feel about working so high up in the air?
3. When you needed courage to accomplish a task, did someone encourage you? How? Were you able to complete the task? How did you feel about that?
4. Have you ever been really proud of a family member or friend for something he or she accomplished? How did you let the person know? Did the person's achievement motivate you in any way? How?
5. What kinds of things do you like to do when you are outside? What is your favorite thing to explore in nature?

Exploring the Book

Hold the book so students can see both the front and back covers. Ask them to compare and contrast what they see. Then ask students what they think a Sky Dancer might be. Discuss their ideas.

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book interior: title page, dedications, illustrations, author's note.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to find out about John Cloud and his family, and what the boy finds out when he visits his father at work in New York City.

VOCABULARY

Write the following words and phrases on the chalkboard and have students make a two-column worksheet with the headings "In Nature" and "In a City." Have students write each item in one of the columns based on where they would encounter it most often. (You may wish to add additional words and phrases from the story to the suggested list below.) Then write the words "Urban," "Suburban," and "Rural" on the chalkboard and review with students what the words mean. Have students create a three-column worksheet and reclassify the words and phrases. In this case, students may place each item in more than one category. Discuss students' lists when they are finished.

tree	skyscraper	steelworker	beam	train
geese	crosswalk	cornfield	traffic light	heron
apartment	reservation	dump truck	crane	taxi

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop understanding of the content. Encourage students to refer back to the text and photographs in the book to support their responses.

Literal Comprehension

1. Where does John Cloud like to climb?
2. Why does John Cloud's father live in New York City during the week?
3. Who takes care of John Cloud most of the time?
4. How does John Cloud help his father when his father is home?
5. How does John Cloud feel when his mother says they will visit his father in New York?
6. How does the family get to New York City?
7. In the city, how does John Cloud describe what he sees and hears? How does he know that the man he sees on the steel framework is his father?
8. What do John Cloud and his family do when they spend the night in the apartment?
9. What happens to John Cloud sometime later when he is at home?

10. What are some of the kinds of work John Cloud might do when he grows up?

Extension/Higher Level Thinking
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11. What keeps John Cloud from climbing higher in the tree at the beginning of the story?
12. What does John Cloud see and feel during the train trip to New York City?
13. How does John Cloud feel when he sees his father working on the Empire State Building? Why do you think he feels this way?
14. How do you think John Cloud felt about his trip to New York City? What lessons did he learn from his trip?
15. How does Grandfather feel about New York City? Why do you think he feels that way?
16. At the end of the story, why is John Cloud able to climb higher up the tree?
17. Describe the relationship between John Cloud and his father. What are the positive aspects? What are the negative aspects?
18. Many Mohawk Indians worked in construction building skyscrapers and bridges during the time of this story. Do you think John Cloud will end up doing this when he grows up? Why or why not?

Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for passages in the story that illustrate how close John Cloud was to his family.
- The **Illustrator** might create a tree with “word leaves” that describe John Cloud and a building with “word windows” that describe his father.
- The **Connector** might find other books or articles about the Mohawk steelworkers to share with the group.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group’s reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might look for information about some of the other buildings and bridges that Mohawk steelworkers helped build.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work, if they wish to.

1. What part of the story did you like best? Why?
2. How is John Cloud's life different from yours? Similar to yours?
3. How might the story be different if John Cloud never went to New York City to see his father at work?
4. Imagine you are a book reviewer telling others about *Sky Dancers*. Write a review of the story and rank it on a 5 star system, with five stars being the highest rating and one star being the lowest.
5. Have students look through the book paying attention to John Cloud's facial expressions and body language. Have students note the feeling expressed in each image and the clues they see in the image that indicate the feeling.
6. Have students create a timeline of events in the story with a one to two sentence description of each event. Then ask students to tell which events were the most important in the story and why.
7. Have students explain in a short passage why the story is called *Sky Dancers*.
8. If students have had experience writing plays, have them write a play adaptation of a selection of scenes or the entire story of *Sky Dancers*, complete with dialogue, stage directions, and setting descriptions.

ELL Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners.

1. Assign ELL students to read the story aloud with strong English readers/speakers.

2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on the students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
 - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.
 - Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about a character or central figure in the story.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

Social Studies

1. Have students research the history, traditions, and current day life of the Mohawk Indians, one of the six nations of the Iroquois. Then let small groups of students work together to compare and contrast the Mohawks with one of the other nations of the Iroquois. Invite groups to share their information with the class. Information to get students started can be found online at [The Six Nations of the Iroquois site](#) and the Culture and History page of the [Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe](#) site.
2. Students may be interested in finding out more about some of the bridges and/or buildings Mohawk construction workers helped to build. Students should look for pictures and/or diagrams in addition to facts about the structures.

Science

Students who are interested in building and construction may wish to find out more about how bridges and skyscrapers are built—both the materials and methods used to build the structures and the science that enables the structures to span wide distances and rise to great heights.

Language Arts

Students may enjoy learning some Mohawk words. To start, they can learn to count to five, according to the following chart. A pronunciation guide for the Mohawk words can be found online [here](#).

English	Mohawk
one	Enhskat
two	Tekeni
three	Ahsen
four	Kaye:ri
five	Wisk

Math

1. Have students work with distances and travel times. They can use the average speed of a few methods of transportation to find out how long it would take to travel different distances.
2. Have students work with dimensions of buildings. They can research the height and square feet of buildings and then draw them to scale using inches or centimeters.

Art

Some students may wish to create drawings of their favorite buildings or other structures in your area. These may be realistic renderings or more abstract works using media of their choice. Other students may wish to create a bridge or a building out of Popsicle sticks. Create a display area to showcase students' constructions and drawings.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Connie Ann Kirk has written several nonfiction books for young readers, including *The Mohawks of North America*. A descendant of the Iroquois (Seneca), Kirk was inspired to write this story by her father's carpentry work. She researched extensively the Mohawks' role in building the skyscrapers and bridges of New York City and the history of the Empire State Building. Kirk lives in the Finger Lakes Region of New York State with her husband and their two sons. *Sky Dancers* is her first picture book. To find out more about Connie Ann Kirk, visit her [website](#).

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Christy Hale has illustrated numerous award-winning books for children including *Elizabeti's Doll*, its two sequels, and *Sky Dancers*, all published by Lee & Low Books. *The East-West House: Noguchi's Childhood in Japan* marked Hale's debut as a picture book author. She is also an art educator and has introduced young readers to the lives and works of many artists through *Instructor* magazine's Masterpiece of the Month feature and accompanying workshops. Hale lives with her husband and their daughter in Palo Alto, California. For more information about Christy Hale, visit her [website](#).

Book Information

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RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about *Sky Dancers* at:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/110/hc/sky_dancers

BookTalk with Connie Ann Kirk and Christy Hale:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/kirkhale.mhtml>

Order Information**On the Web:**

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http://www.leeandlow.com/books/110/hc/sky_dancers (secure on-line ordering)

By Phone:

212-779-4400 ext. 25

212-683-1894 fax

By Mail:

Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, NY, NY 10016

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For questions, comments and/or more information
please contact us at general@leeandlow.com