

## **AUTHOR STUDY**

**This strategy involves helping the children to become aware of and to appreciate authors as people: their personal interests, experiences and styles. A collection of a specific author's work is displayed, discussed and enjoyed.**

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### **MATERIALS:**

a collection of different books by the same author (try to have several copies of the same text), information about the author

### **PROCEDURES:**

- The teacher assembles a display of the author's work.
- The teacher might collect and display media clippings about the author, films, posters and stuffed animal characters.
- The teacher reads the author's work during story time or before the children's personal reading time.
- The discussions following reading might include:
  - common patterns or themes in the author's work
  - similarities and differences to works by other authors
  - children's personal responses to the author's work.
- The teacher should provide ample time and opportunity for the children to read the books individually, in partners or small groups.

### **EXTENSIONS:**

- author visit
- write a letter or e-mail to an author
- visit an author's web site
- do an illustrator study and try creating art
- use the illustrator's technique, i.e.: plasticene, cut or torn paper, etc.
- read and respond to interviews with authors

### **RESOURCES:**

- The Author Studies Handbook: Helping Students build Powerful Connections to Literature, New York; Scholastic Professional Books

## Author Study Sample

**Author: EZRA JACK KEATS**

(Jacob Ezra Katz legally changed his name to Ezra Jack Keats to avoid racial discrimination.)

Ezra Jack Keats created a series of children's books that won the hearts of children all over the world. His books have been translated into sixteen languages and made into internationally award-winning films. The list includes:

***Goggles!***, a Caldecott Honor Book

***Hi Cat!***, winner of the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award

***The Little Drummer Boy***, an ALA Notable Book

***Skates***, which brought Keats an invitation as guest of honor at the opening of a children's roller-skating rink in Japan-named for him!

***APT. 3***, Best Books of the Year (SLJ)

Louis' Search

***Regards to the Man in the Moon***

***A Letter to Amy***

***Clementina's Cactus***

***Dreams***

***Jennie's Hat***

***Kitten for a Day***

***Louie***

***Maggie and the Pirate***

***Over in the Meadow***

***Peter's Chair***

***Pet Show***

***Psst! Doggie***

***The Snowy Day***

***The Trip***

***Whistle for Willie***

***John Henry: An American Legend***

There are many more books that he illustrated, but did not write, so watch for his name when you read a new book.

### ON CHOOSING CHARACTERS

Well into a successful career as an artist and illustrator, Keats began to write and illustrate his own children's books because "for ten years, I had been illustrating other people's books, and there was never a black child as the hero. So I resolved that, when I had the confidence to do my own work, my hero would be a black child." With his first book, ***The Snowy Day***, he made good on that promise. It was a simple story about a small black boy who discovers the enchantment of the winter's first snow. ***The Snowy Day***, received the coveted Caldecott Medal, awarded to the "most distinguished American picture book for children", in 1963. "*The Snowy Day* showed me what I was supposed to be doing with my life," Keats said. Many of the Keats collection feature a little boy named Peter. Peter was inspired by an article Keats had clipped from Life magazine in 1940. "Then began an experience that turned my life around – working on a book with a black kid as an hero. None of the manuscripts I'd been illustrating featured any black kids – except for token blacks in the background. My book would have him there simply because he should have been there all along. Years before I had cut from a magazine a strip of photos of a little black boy. I often put them on my studio walls before I'd begun to illustrate children's books. I just loved looking at him. This was the child who would be the hero of my book."

### **Student Activity: Meet Peter**

Students will like to hear how Peter was created, and then try this approach to develop characters of their own. Search through newspapers, magazines, or advertisements to find a character they are 'drawn' to. Try sketching the character in few different everyday 'kid activities'. Make a simple plan for your character. Include a physical description, age, what he is like, what his favorite saying might be, what he likes to do, what he does not like to do.

### **BOOKS FEATURING PETER**

#### **The Snowy Day (1962)**

Keats illustrated other people's books for nearly ten years and was never given a story with a black child as the hero. He resolved that the first book that he wrote would have a black child as the hero and so Peter was born. According to Keats, "The purpose of the book and the subject matter of the book were so strong that my style changed completely. I had never painted that way before. It turned out to be the beginning of a whole new style to me because I was so deeply involved." Keats' commitment to this project was rewarded when he won the prestigious Caldecott Medal in 1963. The title was also chosen as an ALA Notable Book for Children.

#### **Whistle for Willie (1964)**

Peter reappears in the story of a little boy trying to learn how to whistle for his dog the way the older boys do. This is the first appearance of Willie, Peter's dachshund. Keats felt that the choice of a dachshund was a fortunate one, because years later when he did *GOGGLES!* (1969) he needed a dog that could go through a pipe – and only Willie could! This ALA Notable Children's Book was created using Keats' familiar cut paper collage. The resulting cheerful illustrations are full of excitement and movement.

#### **Peter's Chair (1967)**

This book describes Peter's reaction to the birth of his baby sister whose presence seems to threaten his identity as a family member. He tries to hide his favorite chair from his parents, who he fears want to paint it pink for the newborn, only to realize that he no longer can fit into it. It was at this that Keats also realized that Peter was growing up. *Peter's Chair*, written five years after the character first appeared in *The Snowy Day*, is one of five stories that highlight Peter's adventures. Keats used his familiar bright color collage combined with paint for these endearing illustrations.

#### **A Letter to Amy (1968)**

In this episode of the continuing saga of Peter, we share another universal experience of childhood. Peter wants very much to invite Amy to his birthday party, but is afraid of how some of the other boys will react to her presence. Said Keats, "I wanted to show an ordinary human situation, about a boy who has a crush on a girl, and the magic of what it's like in the city when it rains . . . I wanted to reflect the quality of magic which transforms the city in so many ways." Brilliant, variegated pictures show a yellow-slickered Peter against a background of angry skies, sodden buildings, and rain drenched streets.

### **Goggles! (1969)**

Peter's dog, Willie, plays a major role in this tale of how Peter and his friend Archie find a pair of motorcycle goggles, only to be confronted by a gang of older boys with designs of their own on the glasses. *Goggles!* is the story of the triumph of brains over brawn," commented Keats. "In this book I introduced Archie, who is sort of Peter's younger brother in the way he looks after him. I wanted Archie to be a real 'cool cat', a kid who is very smart and talks very little, but that doesn't mean he doesn't know what's going on. In the story, Archie just nods and smiles, but when he has something to say, it's very important; it's a decisive point in the story, makes the story turn right around. He saves everyone as a result. *Goggles!*, the fifth book about Peter, brilliantly portrays the world of a small child in a big city. It was recognized for its excellence by the American Library Association when it was named as a Caldecott Honor Book in 1970. Keats used collage pieces of cloth, newspaper, magazine, and paper combined with paint and colored pencils to create this award winning title.

### **Hi Cat! (1970)**

Archie was on his way to meet Peter when he saw a new cat on the block and said, *Hi, Cat!* He learns to regret his friendliness when the cat disrupts the magic show that he and Peter had planned. Winner of the Boston Globe Horn Book Award for Outstanding Illustrations, *Hi, Cat!* is the sixth book in which Peter appears. The other five show Peter's growth from a little boy to a teenager. Keats used cloth, papers, and paint to create the bright collages for this title.

### **Pet Show (1972)**

The familiar neighborhood kids – Archie, Peter, Susie and Roberto – are back. This time they are excited about the upcoming pet show. Archie's cat disappears right before the big event, so he must produce a quick alternative. His blue ribbon entry, a "germ" in a covered jar, wins "the quietest pet in the show." His cat returns just in time to be awarded a ribbon for being "the cat with the longest whiskers." In this special story, everyone is a winner.

### **Student Activities with the Peter Books**

1. Students can read the various "Peter" books to create a time line based on the apparent age of Peter in the story. From each story select relevant events to mark each age.
2. What is Peter like? With the same character repeated over time, this is a good opportunity to look at how characters develop. Children should be familiar with the seven Peter books. They can try to create ongoing Character Diary. Because there are seven titles, teachers would be able to model several times before the children tried one out on their own.

## **DEVELOPING STORY IDEAS**

In describing his work, Keats explained, "The story comes first, but not in terms of text. I have an image of certain things happening – more of a visual image – and then I hear the characters talking to each other, and the story grows in counterpoint. Sometimes my emphasis is on the pictures and sometimes on the story. However, the pictures do pace the book. As I sketch the children and place them in the various scenes of the story, I hear their conversations, and the book grows. I hang my illustration on my studio wall in rows so that I can see them flow and move in sequence, like a ballet. I guess I'm the choreographer. Keats demonstrates through these ideas that not only do good readers visualize and create sensory images, but so do good writers.

Children can use the sensory images to create text for the picture. A natural follow-up would be to read their own texts, then the children could compare the two pieces. An art project could involve the children creating their own vivid picture. (Keats style: use bold colors, simple shapes, and varied textures in his illustrations. He often combined patterned papers and cloths with paints to make striking illustrations.) They could have a try at creating their own sensory graph, and paragraph using their own images or create a series of pictures where the main character is in varied scenes. The pictures then tell the story.

### **Dear Mr. Keats**

Letters pour in, full of advice for Keat's fictional characters, news about their pets and problems, admiration, and love. They recognized him as one of their own. "Dear Mr. Keats," one child wrote. "We like you because you have a mind of a child." He admitted as much about himself. When asked about the greatest source of material for his books, Keats replied, "Well, as an editor of mine once said, I'm an ex-kid."

Ezra Jack Keats died in June 1983 at the age of sixty-seven. It wouldn't be practical to write a letter to him, but children could write their thoughts and feelings for this author in reviews for their school library, the local public library and local book stores.

## **THE REALITY OF KIDS AND KEATS**

Ezra Jack Keats portrays real neighborhoods with a diversity of people. He started illustrating other authors' books. He was bothered by the stories that he was illustrating. They were often boring. He didn't see stories with kids acting like real kids. He decided that if he ever wrote a book, it would be about things that children really do. Because Keats wrote of the things that real kids do, this is an excellent opportunity to model, share and discuss text to self connections.