

Witnesses of Birth

Imagining the Beginning of a Character

Grade Level: 4th

Time Frame: 1 hr.

Genre: Poetry and fiction

Objective: Students will learn about figurative language and imaginative story telling by imagining a character's birth as inspired by Ofelia Zepeda's poem "Birth Witness".

Prior Knowledge and Skills: Familiarity with sensory detail.

Required Materials: "Birth Witness" by Ofelia Zepeda

Sequence of Activities:

Introduction and Warm-up (10 min)

Welcome the class and explain that today we are going to create a character and imagine the day they were born. What is a character? What are some examples? (Harry Potter is a character, for example. Who else?)

Tell them that first you want to share with them a poem called "Birth Witness" written by Ofelia Zepeda. Share with them a little information about the author, as well. (She is a poet, she is from the Tohono O'odham tribe in southern Arizona, and she studies the Tohono O'odham language.) Read the poem "Birth Witness." Invite them to draw the images they hear as you read the poem. Alternatively, print a copy for each student and have them highlight lines that they find humorous, surprising, or beautiful.

"Birth Witness" Literary Model (20 min)

After you read, ask them for some images they drew or remembered. Ask them, "What is a witness?" Share some ideas yourself: a witness is someone who sees something and can say that it actually happened. Then write the following structure on the white board (or prepare it as a handout). Note that the italicized parts get written into the poem:

My mother gave birth to me in _____.
{Describe a place. Write a few lines about it. What sounds were there? What colors? What did the surroundings look like?}

She remembers it was _____ {what was the weather?}

She knew it was _____ {what time of year?}

{LEAVE A SPACE HERE}

Who was there to witness my birth?

{List witnesses and imagine what they were doing. Remind the children that it doesn't have to be all people. Were there plants or animals? Landforms, like a mountain or lake? Was it noisy or silent?}

Write a collaborative poem using this structure. Ask for place suggestions to kick off the poem. Ask them to imagine with you as you ask questions and they give ideas. Note that the structure above somewhat mirrors the structure of "Birth Witness." Write it in first person, and explain to the children that you are writing the story as if *you* were the character, as if you were sitting inside their head telling the story from *their* point of view.

Individual Writing (30 min)

Prepare a hat or bowl full of slips of paper with place names written on them. There should be a variety of place types: scenery and physical structures. See a suggested list below. Ask each student to pick a piece of paper at random. This is where their character was born. Now tell them to write about the birth of their character. Give them a list of questions they can use: Who was there during the birth? What did the place look like? What time of year? What was the weather? Are there any sounds going on? Were there brothers or sisters around? What did they say?

They should write it in the first person. Explain that for this story they are pretending to be their character. They should use "I" and "my." Give plenty of time for writing. For those who finish early, invite them to illustrate this place and the witnesses.

Places (My mother gave birth to me in _____) :

in the Sonoran desert
in the mountains
in a log cabin
in a mansion
underground in a burrow
in a spaceship
in the back of a van
in a field of poppies
on a boat
in the ocean
in a room made of windows
in a barn
in a purple house
in the woods
in the rainforest

in the Arctic
on an island
in a deep cave

Sharing (5-10 min)

Invite volunteers to read their poems aloud if time.

Excerpt:

“Birth Witness”

Ofelia Zepeda

My mother gave birth to me
in an old wooden row house
in the cotton field.
She remembers it was windy.
Around one in the afternoon.
The tin roof rattled, a piece uplifted
from the wooden frame, quivered and flapped
as she gave birth.
She knew it was March.
A windy afternoon in the cotton fields of Arizona.

She also used to say I was baptized standing up.
“It doesn’t count,” the woman behind the glass window tells me,
“if you were not baptized the same year you were born,
the baptismal certificate cannot be used to verify your birth.”
“You need affidavits,” she said.
“Your older siblings, you have some don’t you?
They have to be old enough to have a memory
of your birth.
Can they vouch for you?”
Who was there to witness my birth?
Who was there with my mother?
Was it my big sister?
Would my mother have let a teenager watch her giving birth?
Was it my father?
I can imagine my father assisting her with her babies.
My aunts?
Who was there when I breathed my first breath?
Took in those dry particles from the cotton fields.
Who knew then that I would need witnesses of my birth?
The stars were there in the sky.
The wind was there.
The sun was there.
The pollen of spring was floating and sensed me being born.
They are silent witnesses.