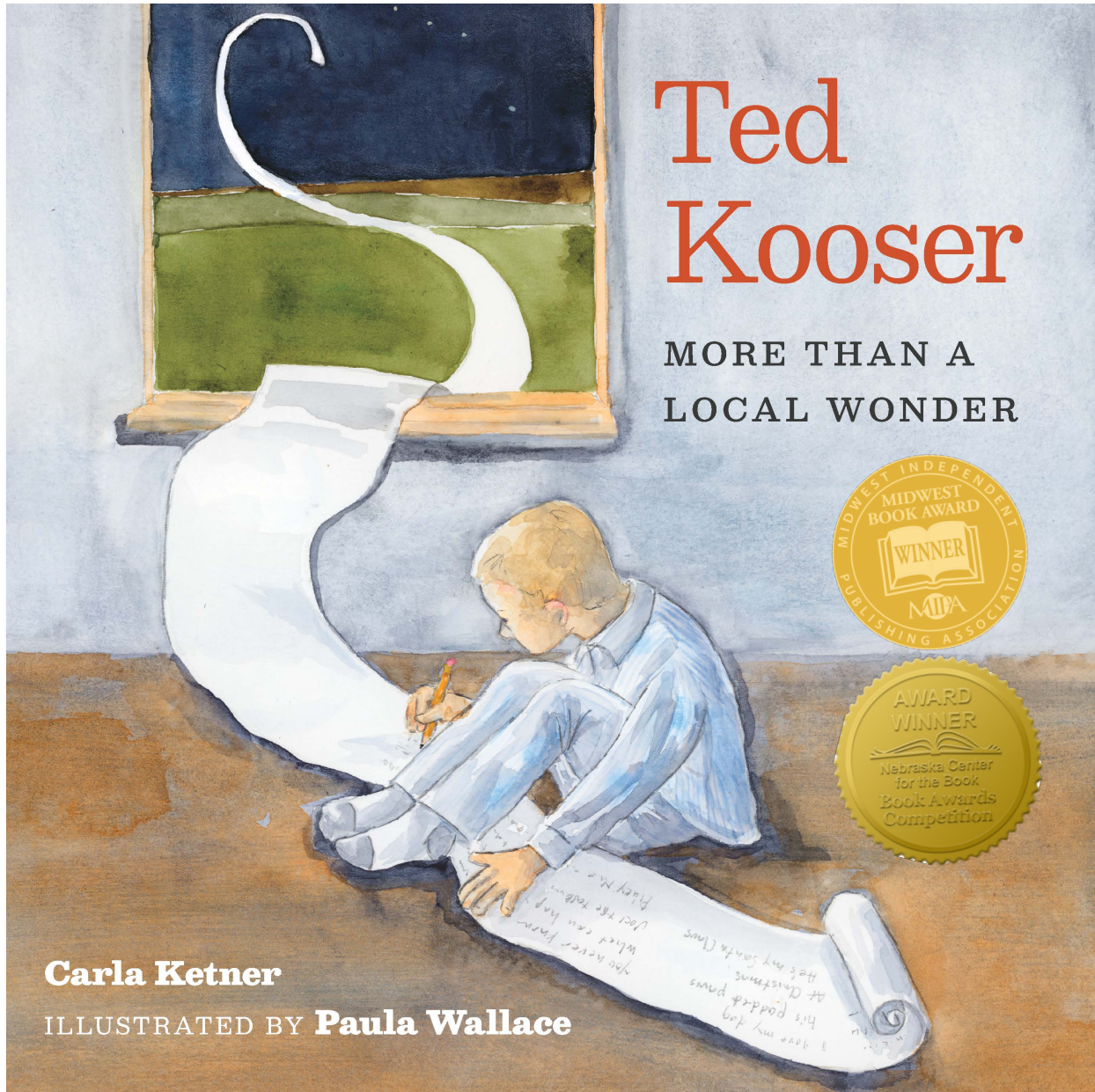


DISCUSSION GUIDE

Ted Kooser: More than a Local Wonder

Written by Carla Ketner

Illustrated by Paula Wallace



Carla Ketner

ILLUSTRATED BY **Paula Wallace**



ABOUT THE BOOK



Long before Ted Kooser won a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, served as the U.S. Poet Laureate, and wrote award-winning books for children, he was an unathletic child growing up in Iowa, yearning to fit in. Young Teddy found solace in stories, and one specific book, Robert McCloskey’s *Lentil*, inspired him to become a writer. As a child and later, while working in the insurance industry, Ted honed his craft and unique style as he wrote about the people and places of the rural Midwest. *Ted Kooser: More Than a Local Wonder* celebrates the power of stories and of finding oneself through words.

INTRODUCTION

Ted Kooser is well-known and respected in the Midwest and beyond as a poet, essayist, and children’s author. A Lincoln, Nebraska, elementary school is named after him. His picture book *Mr. Posey’s New Glasses* was awarded a CBC Children’s Choice Book of the Year Honor. His book of poetry for children, *Marshmallow Clouds*, received starred reviews from all major children’s book review sources and won the CLPE Children’s Poetry Award.

Ted Kooser: More than a Local Wonder is a book to be read aloud and enjoyed with children ages 5-8 and read independently by older elementary school-aged children. It addresses universal themes of identity, persistence, and accepting ourselves, even when we don’t fit the norm. All children need books that encourage them to pursue their dreams and be who they want to be. The brief text portrays a great living poet in a way that allows children to see themselves doing what Ted did—pursuing something about which they are passionate, working hard, and finding their own way to shine. An author’s note provides more information on Ted’s life and resources for further reading.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is a biography?
2. What did you learn about Ted Kooser from *Ted Kooser: More than a Local Wonder*? What was he like when he was your age?
3. How did Ted Kooser go from being a little boy who didn’t fit in with his peers to becoming an award-winning poet and author? Is there anything you love doing enough to practice it as much as Ted practiced writing?

4. What events and emotions that Ted Kooser experienced as a child have you also experienced? Could you relate to Ted Kooser's story? In what ways? How was his life different from yours?
5. Why do you think the illustrator used watercolors and soft, natural colors for the book? Make a list of words that describe the book's illustrations. Would those words also describe Ted Kooser? List some words that describe you. What kind of illustrations would be best for a book about you?
6. What is the theme of the book? What message do you think the author wants readers to take from Ted Kooser's story?
7. A biography highlights significant aspects of the subject's life, the subject's achievements, who they are as a person and the things they're passionate about. What would be included if someone were to write a biography about you?
8. The author used figures of speech and lyrical and poetic language to tell this story. Why do you think she did that? Find examples in the text of metaphors and other poetic devices. Are there any lines you particularly like?
9. How do you feel about poetry? Does knowing more about Ted Kooser make you more interested in reading his poetry or other poetry? More interested in writing poetry?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Make a list of things that Ted Kooser is passionate about. Then make a list of things you are passionate about. Draw an outline of a person and fill it in with your passions. You can write them, draw them, cut out pictures and glue them onto your paper, or find some other way to represent them. If you don't want to use an outline of a person, find another creative way to represent your passion(s), one that reflects who you are and what you want to say about yourself.
2. Books have the power to comfort, inspire, teach, entertain, build empathy, and much more. Ted Kooser found inspiration in the book *Lentil* by Robert McCloskey. Read the book. Why do you think it inspired him? Ted saw the person he wanted to be reflected in that book. What book or books have affected you strongly? In what ways? Share those books with others. Write a letter to the author telling them how their book impacted you.
3. Read some of Ted Kooser's poetry. You can begin with the poems included in the back of *Ted Kooser: More than a Local Wonder* or those in his book *Marshmallow Clouds: Two Poets at Play among Figures of Speech*. Read and enjoy them, and then choose a few favorites. Re-read them, searching for poetic devices such as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, metaphor and simile. What do you notice about the poems' form? Find

and read poems by many different poets. Choose a few favorites. How are they similar to Ted Kooser's? How are they different? Why do you like them? What emotions did they evoke in you? Write your own poems, using some of the poetic devices you identified in the poetry you read and enjoyed. If you're comfortable doing so, share your poems with others. Poetry is meant to be read aloud and shared!

4. In addition to his poetry, essays, and children's books, Ted Kooser is the author of two books about writing, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual* and *Writing Brave and Free*. Older students and teachers can read these two reference books and apply the advice they contain to their own and their students' poetry writing.
5. There are many good quality, informative biographies for children of all ages. Think about people you are interested in knowing more about—musicians, writers, athletes, politicians, activists, people from your home state and others. Find and read a biography (or more than one) about that person. Share what you learned.
6. Writing a biography requires a great deal of research and in-depth study of the subject's life. Everything included in a biography must be factual and true. See the references listed in the back of *Ted Kooser: More than a Local Wonder*. What types of sources did the author use? Think of someone you want to know more about. What are some sources of information about that person? Find three different types of sources and make a list of at least five facts about the person. Try to find a common theme or message that runs through your person's life. How do your facts reflect that theme? Find a way to share what you've learned about your subject, either in writing, an oral presentation, or some other format that makes sense for you and for the person you are studying.

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Sources of information about Ted Kooser for *Ted Kooser: More than a Local Wonder*

Kooser, Ted. Interview. By Carla Ketner. 16 July 2019.

Kooser, Ted. *Lights on a Ground of Darkness*, Bison Books, 2009.

Kooser, Ted. *Local Wonders: Seasons in the Bohemian Alps*, Bison Books, 2002.

Pitsch, Luan. "Ted Kooser's Bright Lens." *The Pilgrimer*, 13 Feb. 2015, <http://thepilgrimer.com/stories/ted-kooser/>.

Stillwell, Mary K. *The Life and Poetry of Ted Kooser*, Bison Books, 2013.

Ted Kooser's writing reference books

Kooser, Ted. *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets*, Bison Books, 2005.

Kooser, Ted. *Writing Brave and Free: Encouraging Words for People who Want to Start Writing*, Bison Books, 2006.

Ted Kooser's books for children

Kooser, Ted. *Bag in the Wind*, Candlewick Press, 2010.

Kooser, Ted. *Bell in the Bridge*, Candlewick Press, 2016.

Kooser, Ted. *House Held Up by Trees*, Candlewick Press, 2012.

Kooser, Ted. *Mr. Posey's New Glasses*, Candlewick Press, 2019.

Kooser, Ted, and Wanek, Connie. *Marshmallow Clouds: Two Poets at Play among Figures of Speech*, Candlewick Press, 2022.

Kooser, Ted. *Seven Skies All at Once*, Candlewick Press, 2025.

Poetry for children

Archer, Micha. *Daniel Finds a Poem*, Nancy Paulsen Books, 2016.

Janeczko, Paul. *Where I Live: Poems About My Home, My Street, and My Town*, Candlewick, 2023.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *Everything Comes Next: Collected and New Poems*, Greenwillow Books, 2020.

Yolen, Jane. *In and Out the Window*, Philomel, 2024.

Karla Wendelin's website on writing poetry with children includes reviews of notable books of poetry and other resources at <https://prairiesunshine.net/poetrystudio/index.html>.

Biographies for children

Hegedus, Bethany. *Hard Work but it's Worth It: The Life of Jimmy Carter*, Balzer + Bray, 2020.

Reynolds, Jason. *There Was a Party for Langston*, Atheneum, 2023.

Who Was/Is series, Penguin Workshop.

PRIASE FOR TED KOOSER: MORE THAN A LOCAL WONDER

- ◇ Winner of the 2024 MIPA Midwest Book Award, Paterson Prize for Books for Young People and Nebraska Book Award
- ◇ “A tender book celebrating the beloved American poet Ted Kooser, thoughtfully written by Carla Ketner and lovingly illustrated by Paula Wallace, may encourage a whole new crop of young writers. Pay attention to your close places, listen to your people, find what feeds your imagination—a joyous yes!”—Naomi Shihab Nye, Young People’s Poet Laureate emeritus, the Poetry Foundation
- ◇ “Carla Ketner’s captivating, lyrical style beautifully illustrates Ted Kooser’s life from small-town misfit to U.S. Poet Laureate with grace, wonder, and, above all, heart.”—Jill Esbaum, author of *Little Kids First Big Book of How*
- ◇ “As a boy, Ted Kooser did not know that the stories he heard about beloved people and places would someday lead him to finding his own voice as a writer. This lyrical picture book biography with luminous watercolor art shows younger readers how patience and persistence can help dreams come true.”—Karla Wendelin, children’s poetry blogger and former professor of children’s literature at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln
- ◇ “*Ted Kooser: More Than a Local Wonder* tells the tale of young Teddy, who from the Midwestern fields and skies, builds a world of words: poems and stories. The threads of Teddy’s childhood in Carla Ketner’s nimble free verse weave into a fine quilt as adult Ted is named U.S. Poet Laureate. . . . Delicate and rich illustrations by Paula Wallace compliment the text and readers both new and familiar with Kooser’s work will find themselves at home, filling in their own empty spaces with the wonder of words.”—Bethany Hegedus, founder of the Writing Barn and award-winning author of *Rise! From Caged Bird to Poet of the People*, *Maya Angelou*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carla Ketner, a former elementary school teacher and instructor of college-level children’s literature courses, owned and managed Ted Kooser’s hometown bookstore in Seward, Nebraska, for twenty years. When not reading or writing she is likely to be walking her grand dog, looking up the names of local wildflowers, baking anything that lists chocolate as an ingredient, or traveling with friends and family. She and her husband live in eastern Nebraska and have two grown sons.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Paula Wallace is an artist and illustrator, spending most days in her studio at the Hot Shops Art Center in Omaha, Nebraska. She has helped many authors tell their stories with her illustrations and has written and illustrated her own books, including *Choose Your Days* (Nebraska Children’s Picture Book Award winner) and *Mr. Reginald and the Bunnies*.