

Reading *Ballet for Martha*

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SUMMARY

During this activity, you and your child will actively read *Ballet for Martha: Making Appalachian Spring* using the suggested reading strategies.

WHY

Children's picture books can be great windows into how people have lived and worked together in the past. This book highlights the wonderful things people can do by cooperating and collaborating.

TIME

- 30 minutes or more, depending on your child's interest and which reading strategies you choose

RECOMMENDED AGE GROUP

This activity will work best for children in kindergarten to 4th grades.

CHALLENGE WORDS

- **Angular**: sharp-cornered; lacking smoothness or grace
- **Ballet**: an art form that uses dancing, music, and scenery to tell a story or express a theme
- **Choreographer**: an artist who arranges dances, including the body movements and characters
- **Collaboration**: working with others
- **Composer**: one that composes; especially: a person who writes music
- **Gesture**: a movement of the body or limbs that expresses or emphasizes an idea or a feeling
- **Imitation**: an exact copy
- **Interpret**: to bring out the meaning of by performing
- **Melody**: a series of musical tones arranged to give a pleasing effect
- **Severe**: serious in feeling or manner
- **Suspense**: excitement caused by wondering what will happen

More information at <http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/dance/>.

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YOU NEED

- *Ballet for Martha: Making Appalachian Spring* by Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan, illustrated by Brian Floca
- Step Back in Time sheets (*attached*)
- This reading guide

PARENT PREPARATION

- Consider reading the notes on the attached Step Back in Time sheets.
- If you have time, preview some of the reading suggestions below. Pick just a few suggestions that look interesting and appropriate for you and your child.

BEFORE YOU READ

- Talk about the title and the front cover of the book. Have you ever heard the word “ballet?” Talk about its meaning. Do you know anyone who dances ballet? Who are the people on the cover and what are they doing?

DURING READING

- As you read, listen for all of the people who are involved in creating this work of art. (Choreographer, composer, artist, dancers, musicians)

Tip If you are especially interested in how dancers get ready to perform a dance, visit the Kennedy Center’s journal of a Martha Graham Company dancer (<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/multimedia/series/AEMicrosites/martha-graham.aspx>).

This book doesn’t even list everyone who helped make this work of art! People also helped make the costumes, run the stage lights, advertise the performance, and pay all of the artists. For more on the many jobs related to performing arts, read the related book *How Does the Show Go On: An Introduction to the Theatre*.

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DURING READING (CONTINUED)

- As you read, take a close look at the illustrations:
 - As you read page 19, take a close look at the set pieces described in the words. Then look at the illustrations. Match the words to the pictures. Then, as you read pages 25–43, look for those set pieces again. Also look in the photographs in this guide to look for those set pieces.
 - As you read pages 8–11, 14–16 or 26–39, look closely at the illustrations of the dancers. Can you make those shapes with your body? With each shape, ask yourself: What are the important parts of this shape? What movements might have come before or after this shape? Does this shape make you think of any specific feeling or emotion?

AFTER READING

- Listen to a clip of the music or watch a portion of the dance. Was it what you were expecting?
 - *Appalachian Spring* is a very famous piece of music. In this video, a school orchestra performs part of the song (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/fromthetop/video/season-2/213.php>). Under the video player, click on the lowest option, which says “Interlochen Arts Academy Chamber Orchestra” in small letters. The first minute of the video gives some explanation about the song, but the students start playing music around 1:05.
 - The dance *Appalachian Spring* lasts more than 20 minutes. This video will begin toward the middle of the dance. Martha Graham is the woman who dances with the man in this video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91y-NEdTj-g>).
- Talk together about collaboration and cooperation. What ways did these people cooperate to make this artwork? (listened to each other, gave useful advice and ideas, asked for help, were patient and trusting with each other) Do you always like to work with other people to get things done? Describe a time when you worked with a team or group. What can be hard about working together? What can be good about working together?

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For more information, visit the National Museum of American History website <http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/dance/>.

Martha Graham (1894–1991) was a dancer and **choreographer** who had a big impact on modern dance. She performed dance for over 60 years and **choreographed** more than 180 works. In fact, she was 75 years old when she danced in her last performance!

People did not always enjoy Miss Graham’s dances, since she often told stories about people that weren’t happy and her dances were more about telling stories than about being pretty to watch. But by the end of her career, many important people from around the world gave her awards.

For Martha Graham, dance was a way to share the feelings that have been a part of stories from many different cultures. Through her dances, she told stories about America, ancient Greece, and the Bible. But she tried not to tell these stories through **mime**, and instead focused on sharing the feelings of the characters. This idea of showing feelings through **abstract** shapes was important to many sculptors, painters, and other artists whose art is considered “modern.”

Martha Graham’s **collaboration** with other artists, such as sculptor Isamu Noguchi and composer Aaron Copland, showed her interest in using many kinds of art to tell a story, not just using one kind of art as a decoration for another.

Miss Graham was an especially important leader in modern dance because she made a way to describe her dance style so it could be taught to students. Many of the students she worked with became famous later on and many dancers still study her style today.



Martha Graham and her partner Erick Hawkins, posing in costume and on a set piece from *Appalachian Spring* [Library of Congress]

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Her dance style focused on the idea of breathing, with breathing in (contraction) and breathing out (release) as the two important opposites in the ways our bodies move. Her style is powerful, sharp, and sometimes sudden, instead of being soft and flowing like some dance.

She was also interested in American **folkdance** and traditional American Indian dances and used ideas from those dances to tell her stories. Miss Graham once said, "We must look to America to bring forth an art as powerful as America itself." At the same time Miss Graham was thinking about American traditions for her art, other artists were also inspired by the idea of using traditional American art styles and themes, with examples like Grandma Moses' paintings and musical theater by Rogers and Hammerstein.

These are some very simple ways of comparing ballet and modern dance.

	Ballet	Modern Dance
When?	Started around 1600s	Started around 1920s and 1930s
Where?	Mostly developed in Europe	Mostly developed in America
For Example?	<i>The Nutcracker</i>	<i>Appalachian Spring</i>

Abstract: using elements of form (as color, line, or texture) with little or no attempt at creating a realistic picture

Choreography: the art of arranging dances (A choreographer is an artist who arranges dances.)

Collaboration: working with others

Folkdance: a traditional dance that was started by common people from specific a region or country

Mime: acting out the movements and gestures used by a person in a specific situation or while doing a specific thing

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Read the “Reading Guide” sheets for step-by-step instructions.

OBJECTIVES

The students will be better able to:

- Read for understanding.
- Describe the artistic collaboration behind *Appalachian Spring*.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE CRITERIA

- Asks questions and offers personal opinions.
- Contributes appropriate ideas and listens to others.
- Discussion demonstrates an understanding of the historical content.

STANDARDS

NCHS History Standards

K-4 Historical Thinking Standards

- 2H. Draw upon the visual data presented in photographs, paintings, cartoons, and architectural drawings.
- 5A. Identify problems and dilemmas.
- 5B. Analyze the interests, values, and points of view.

K-4 Historical Content Standards

- 1B. The student understands the different ways people of diverse racial, religious, and ethnic groups, and of various national origins have transmitted their beliefs and values.
- 6A. The student understands folklore and other cultural contributions from various regions of the United States and how they help form a national heritage.

IRA/NCTE Language Arts Standards

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the

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workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

National Standards for Arts Education (K-4)

Dance, Standard 7: Making connections between dance and other disciplines

21st-Century Skills

Learning and Innovation Skills

- Communication and Collaboration