



# Classroom Guide

Title: **Kate Shelley and the Midnight Express**

Author: **Margaret K. Wetterer**

Illustrator: **Karen Ritz**

**Theme:** Trains transport people and goods from one place to another.

**Program Summary:** This is a true story of 15-year-old Kate who bravely rushed out into a storm and saved two men as well as preventing hundreds of other lives from being lost. LeVar explores Amtrak's Coast Starlight train and sees how trains are maintained at the train yard before boarding the Coast Starlight to travel along the California coastline. Viewers tour the engineer's cab, find out what an engineer does, and watch film clips of early trains.

## **Topics for Discussion:**

Invite students to share their experiences riding on trains, including traveling on a passenger train, sightseeing on an excursion train, using an overhead train or subway in the city, and the like.

Before viewing the program, discuss the concept of a "hero." Ask students to identify present-day people who are heroes and explain why they are heroic. Invite students to tell who their heroes are. Discuss the fact that heroes are not always famous people.

Discuss what it means to be brave. Ask students to talk about a situation in which they were especially brave. What helped them be brave?

Discuss Kate Shelley's actions. Why did she risk her safety to go to the train station? How did she overcome her fear of the dark and of crossing the railroad trestle? Ask students to put themselves in Kate's place and describe what they would have done in those same circumstances.

## **Curriculum Extension Activities:**

Have the class set up a train information station in the classroom. Cut cereal boxes of different sizes in half and use the bottom half for train cars. Cardboard rolls glued or taped to the bottoms of the boxes can serve as wheels. Arrange the boxes in a train. Brainstorm with students different types of information they want to learn about trains and have them make labels for the cars accordingly. For example, the cars might be labeled as follows: "History of Trains," "What Trains Carry," "Railroad Jobs," etc. After students have watched the program and read more about trains, they can write important facts they want to remember on small pieces of paper and put them in the appropriate train cars.



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As a culminating activity for the study described above, use the collected information to assemble a train museum. Before the class gets started, discuss what may be found in a museum and how it is arranged. Have small groups each assume the responsibility for one of the train cars and decide how to organize and display the information. They might use posters, murals, charts, books they have written, models, audiotapes, etc., to present what they have learned. Online resources might provide additional material, as in the form of downloadable photographs. (Check copyright information on websites before downloading. It is usually considered “fair use” if the material stays within the classroom or school and is not reproduced for distribution by any means.)

Several railroad terms were mentioned in the program. The students’ research will likely yield much more specialized railroad vocabulary. Have the class make a dictionary of train words. Discuss how dictionaries are organized, and have students make pages containing a word, its definition, and an illustration. Include the dictionary in the museum display.

If possible, take the class on a field trip to a train station. Notice the different workers at the station and on the train. Tour the different cars on a train, including the engine.

Kate Shelley’s actions became almost legendary. Work with the library media specialist and locate other legends and songs associated with trains and the railroad. Casey Jones and John Henry are both linked to railroads in stories. Obtain some of these legends and read them to the class. Sing songs, such as “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad” and “Morningtown Ride.”

Start a bulletin board about young people who are heroes. Have students search newspapers and magazines for pictures and articles about children and teenagers who have performed heroic deeds. As these pieces are added to the board, discuss why these young people are heroes.

Brainstorm a list of different types of transportation. Have students categorize the forms into “Land Transportation,” “Water Transportation,” and “Air Transportation.” Use the categories as an opportunity to distinguish similar forms, such as discussing the difference between a “canoe,” a “rowboat,” a “kayak,” a “yacht,” and the like.

A telegraph was used to pass information in the story. Locate a copy of the Morse Code (a series of dots and dashes in various combinations that represent each letter of the alphabet) and display it. Have students figure out their names in Morse Code. Obtain



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several flashlights, darken the room, and have partners click the flashlights quickly (for dots) and slowly (for dashes) to transmit their names to each other. Discuss different means of communication that might be used today to transmit news of danger.

*Kate Shelley and the Midnight Express* is a biography. It is a special type of biography—"slice-of-life"—that tells about an event or a small portion of a person's life. Discuss biography as a type of literature. Ask students what types of information they expect to find in a biography. With the help of the library media specialist, locate other picture book biographies for students to examine to see if their assumptions about the content were correct.

## **Book Reviews:**

*The Little Engine That Could* by Watty Piper, illustrated by George and Doris Hauman

*The Polar Express* by Chris Van Allsburg

## **Supplementary Booklist:**

*Freight Train* by Donald Crews

*Trains* by Gail Gibbons

*A Ride in the Crummy* by Gary Hines, illustrated by Anna Grossnickle Hines

*John Henry* by Julius Lester, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney

*She's Been Working on the Railroad* by Nancy Smiler Levinson, photos by Shirley Burman

*Train Song* by Diane Siebert, illustrated by Mike Wimmer

*The Real McCoy: The Life of an African-American Inventor* by Wendy Towle, illustrated by Wil Clay

## **Related Themes:**

- courage
- floods
- famous women in history



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## **Related Reading Rainbow Programs:**

- Program #110 — Ruth Law Thrills a Nation
- Program #37 — Keep the Lights Burning, Abbie
- Program #86 — Come a Tide

**About the Author:** Margaret K. Wetterer has written several books for children, including three fairy tales based on Irish folklore. She was a teacher who spent part of her childhood in Ireland.

**About the Illustrator:** Karen Ritz has enjoyed drawing since she was a young girl. She has a degree in children's literature from the University of Minnesota.