

The Banana-Leaf Ball – Teaching Guide (GRADES 3-4)

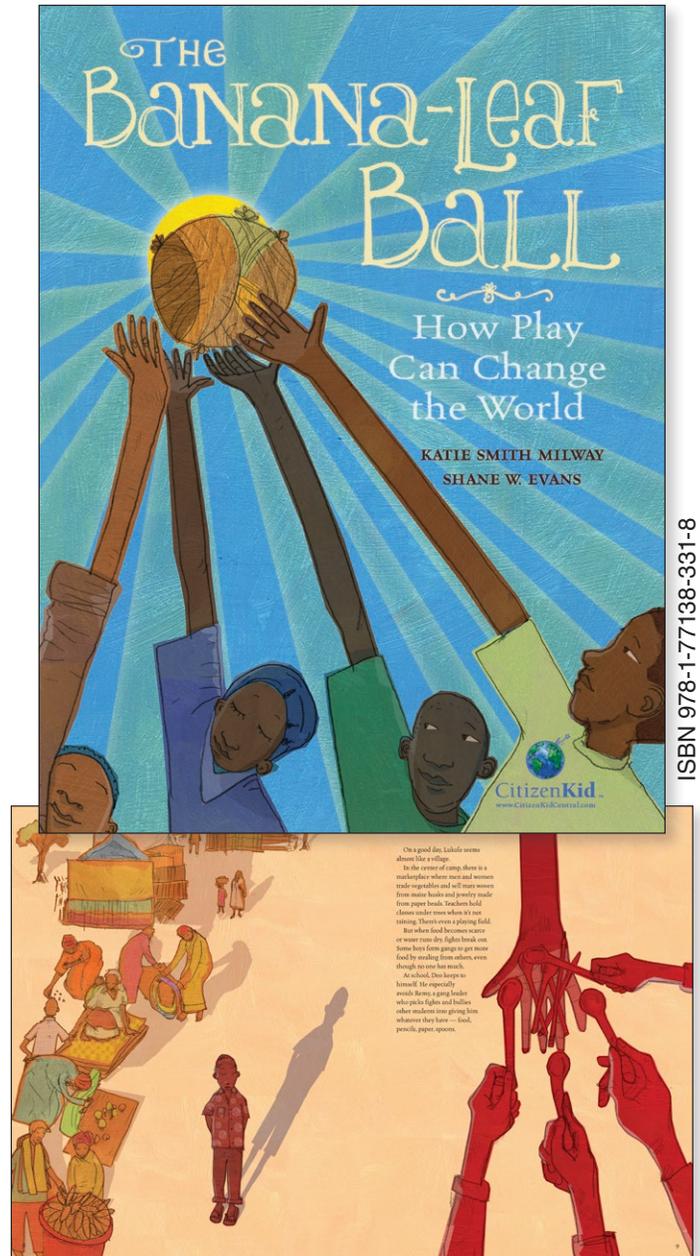
About the Book

One terrible night, Deo and his family are forced to flee their home in Burundi. Eventually, Deo finds himself alone in Lukole, a refugee camp in neighboring Tanzania. Resources in the camp are scarce, so bullies have formed gangs to steal what they can. One gang leader, a boy named Remy, begins targeting Deo. Lonely and homesick, Deo finds comfort in making a banana-leaf ball, the kind he and his friends used to play with. Then one day, a coach arrives and gathers some of the children for a soccer game. Out on the playing field, things begin to change for Deo, Remy and the others.

Today, almost 60 million people are refugees, many of them living in temporary camps around the world. *The Banana-Leaf Ball* is the hopeful story of how sport and play can help children overcome their differences and foster feelings of trust, confidence and belonging in order to drive social change and build peaceful communities.

About the Author

Award-winning author **KATIE SMITH MILWAY** is on a quest to bring world issues and stories about youth who are agents of change to elementary- and middle-school children. With this goal in mind, she has written a number of CitizenKid titles, including *One Hen: How One Small Loan Made a Big Difference*; *The Good Garden: How One Family Went from Hunger to Having Enough*; and *Mimi's Village: And How Basic Health Care Transformed It*. Katie is also a partner in Boston with nonprofit and philanthropy advisor The Bridgespan Group and has served on the boards of World Vision US, The Veritas Forum, America SCORES Boston, One Hen, Inc. and Anna B. Stearns Foundation. She lives with her husband and three children in Wellesley, Massachusetts.



About the Illustrator

SHANE W. EVANS is the illustrator of more than thirty picture books for children, including the critically acclaimed *Olu's Dream*, *Underground* and *We March*, which he also wrote. He has received numerous awards and honors for his work, including the Coretta Scott King – John Steptoe Award for New Talent, the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children and the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award. A passionate and curious world traveler, his home base is in Kansas City, Missouri, where he runs Dream Studio, a community art space.

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Goals

- Understanding the genre of historical fiction
- Understanding that fiction can bridge divides between people

Overview

After reading *The Banana-Leaf Ball: How Play Can Change the World* by Katie Smith Milway, students will engage in a discussion about the genre of literature called *historical fiction*.

Much of this story is based on the experiences of Benjamin Nzobonankira from Burundi, a country in East Africa. In 1993, ten-year-old Benjamin and his family had to flee their home when conflict broke out. For months he traveled through the forest, at times surviving on rainwater, wild fruits and leaves. Like Deo, Benjamin eventually became separated from his entire family.

After a long and very difficult journey, Benjamin finally found himself in Lukole — the setting for *The Banana-Leaf Ball* — in a refugee camp run by the United Nations, an organization made up of many countries working to improve human rights and reduce conflict. In Lukole, Benjamin was overjoyed to be reunited with his father and some cousins, though grief-stricken that his mother and sister did not survive their escape.

Although comfortable compared to other camps, Lukole had its troubles with gangs and a lack of resources, and Benjamin still wished for stability and safety. But life there got better for Benjamin in 2001 when a coach from Right To Play arrived. Right To Play is an organization that uses sport and play to educate and empower children and youth to overcome the effects of poverty, disease and conflict. They believe play can teach children how to protect themselves from disease, encourage them to attend and stay in school and model ways to resolve conflict to create a peaceful community.

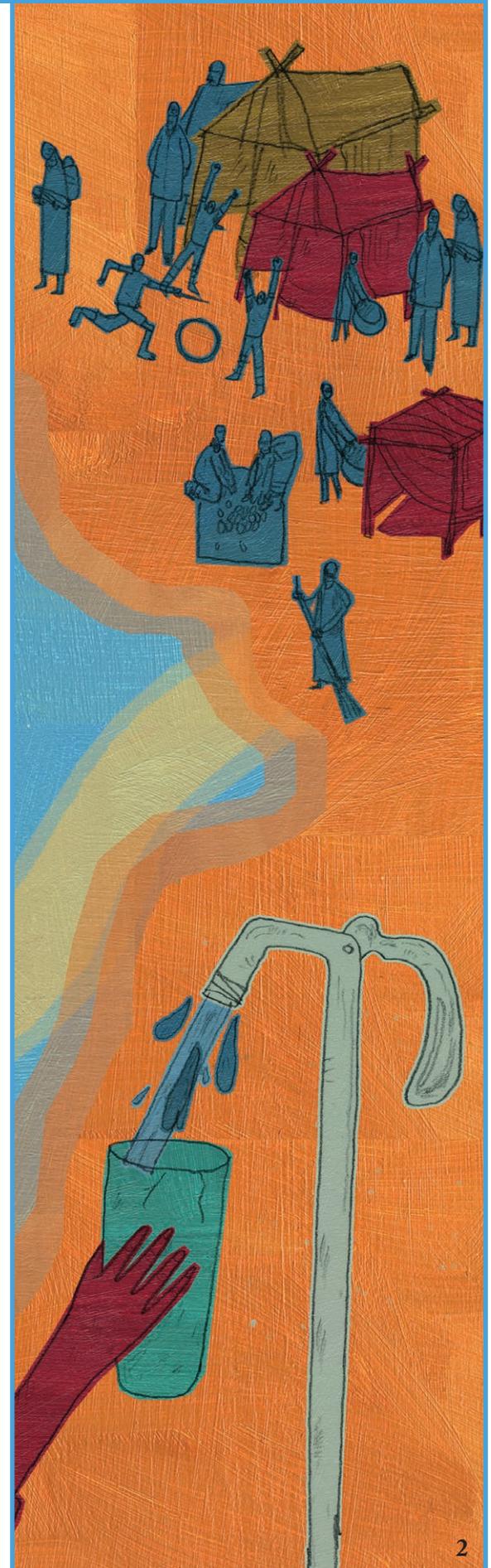
Together your class will discuss the book, the situation that gave rise to the events in it and the importance of empathy in reading and in life. Finally, they will work together to make balls from found objects and write about their experiences.

Essential Questions

- What is fiction?
- Why do we tell stories?
- How can stories — like play — change the world?

This Guide Will Help Students

- Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
- Recount stories, including fables, folktales and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.
- Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.
- Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (e.g., opposition of good and evil) and patterns of events (e.g., the quest) in stories, myths and traditional literature from different cultures.



Lesson Activities

ACTIVITY 1: WHOLE GROUP

Materials:

- Photos or images of people’s faces from books, magazines or the internet.

Discussion

Engage students in a discussion about the different types of fiction. Explain that sometimes fiction tells a story about something that could happen today or in the recent past. In this case, we know that parts of *The Banana-Leaf Ball* really did happen to Benjamin Nzobonankira, a man who is alive today. Point students to pages 28–29 and let them know that they can learn more about “A Real Deo” when they have finished reading this story.

Now return to the beginning of the book, read aloud from pages 4–7 and ask students how they think this book might differ from other examples of historical fiction they have read. Engage students in a discussion about how history is not just what happened hundreds of years ago, but sometimes what happened ten, fifteen or twenty years ago.

Say: *This story feels like it could take place today. It includes important events that happened in the small East African country of Burundi in the very recent past. Burundi has had periods of civil war, and in this story we learn about how one boy got separated from his family at the outbreak of such a war.*

Explain to students that a refugee camp is a place set up for people displaced by war. While people are safe from the war once they get to the camp, they don’t have many belongings, and there are few resources in such places. People can’t work or earn money in a traditional way and they must make many things they were previously able to buy, including shelter, food and toys. Say: *Deo is a fictional character, but he is based on a real boy.*

Explain that to best understand the story about Deo, students will learn about empathy. Say: *Empathy is what happens when we understand another person’s feelings. Empathy helps us to be good friends, students and members of our families. We all use empathy every day.*

Spend five minutes talking with the group about facial expressions. Using images of people from picture books, magazines or the internet, ask students to call out what emotion the person is feeling. When all of the students say the same word at once, ask them how it makes them feel to be in agreement with their classmates.

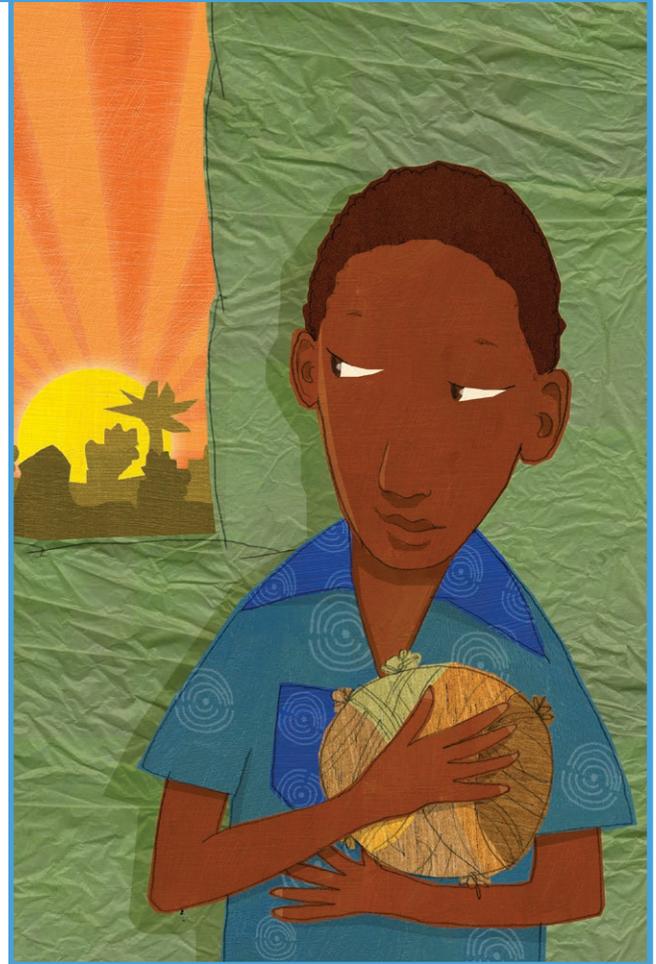
Say: *You will need empathy to understand what Deo goes through in this book. Are you ready to put yourself in his shoes?*

Ask students to look closely at the illustration on pages 8–9. Have volunteers read the paragraphs on page 9 aloud. After a student reads about the center of the camp, ask: *How would you feel living in a place like that?* After a student reads the next paragraph, ask: *Why do you think some children formed gangs?* After a student reads the final paragraph on the page, ask: *How do you think Deo feels? Why do you think he keeps to himself? How would you feel in his shoes?*

Read the rest of the book aloud to the class, stopping if students have questions or to point out important details. Then lead a group discussion about Deo, Remy and the events of the story. Focus your conversation on empathy, and encourage students to continue to put themselves in the shoes of the characters in the book.

Some questions to structure your discussion include:

- Why does Deo stay inside to make a banana-leaf ball on page 11?
- Why does Remy show Deo how he is using the twine on page 12?
- Why do you think the coach divided the teams up into Shirts and Skins? How does team division work where you live? Why might it be different at a refugee camp?
- What happens on page 20 that gets Deo to empathize with Remy?
- How can being part of a team help you feel less lonely?



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ACTIVITY 2: SMALL GROUPS

Materials:

- Plastic bags from grocery stores or shopping centers. You will need plenty; encourage children to bring them in from home.

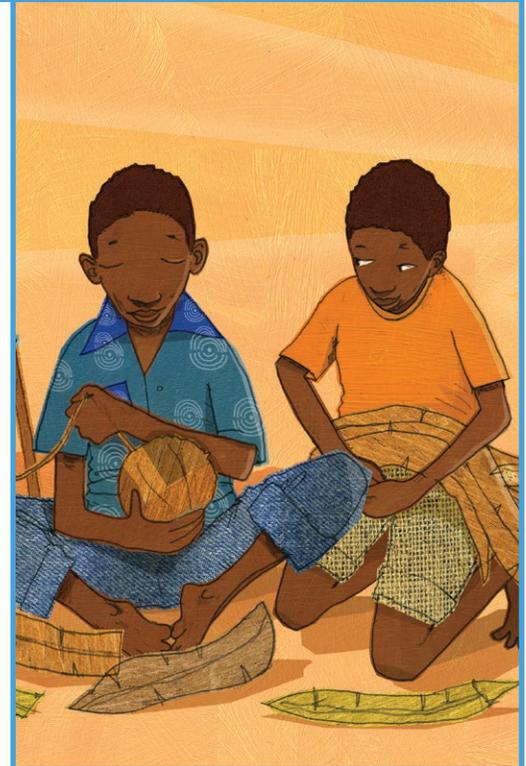
Split the class into groups of three. Provide each group with a pile of plastic bags. Instruct them to work together to make a ball from the plastic bags. Don't give students any other materials, but encourage them to figure out ways to tie long ends of the bags around the bulkier portions in order to make them somewhat round.

Give students plenty of time and space for this activity, and let them have fun with it. Encourage them to play with their balls once the activity is complete, even going outside for a game if the weather allows.

Discussion

Return to the group and ask students to discuss their experiences making and playing with plastic-bag balls. Ask them:

- How were these balls the same as the balls you use on the playground every day?
- How were they different?
- What was it like to work with your group to make the ball?
- Did you use teamwork? Did you need to use empathy in order to work well together?
- What else might you be able to make a ball out of?



ACTIVITY 3: INDEPENDENT ACTIVITY

Writing Exercise

Now ask students to write a journal entry, a letter or a short story about their experiences making plastic-bag balls. Encourage students to describe both their process making the balls and their feelings about the balls they made. Can they imagine what it would be like to live in a place that doesn't have many balls or other toys? How would they feel if they had to make their own? Proud, or sad or maybe both?

Helpful Starting Places:

If students don't know where to begin, have them start by drawing a picture. Say: *What does your plastic-bag ball feel like, how does it look, what steps did you take to make it?*

Another helpful starting place is to write about the experience in a letter to someone the student loves.

Have students start with these sentence frames:

Dear _____ (Grandma, Mom, Dad, cousin, friend, etc.),

Today I made a ball out of plastic bags.

I thought about children who don't have any toys. This made me feel _____.

To make the ball, we started out by _____.

After making the ball, I felt _____.

When students have completed their letters, journal entries or stories, encourage those who would like to share to read them aloud to the class.

WRAP UP

Ask students to discuss the essential questions set out at the beginning of this lesson.

- What is fiction?
- Why do we tell stories?
- How can stories — like play — change the world?