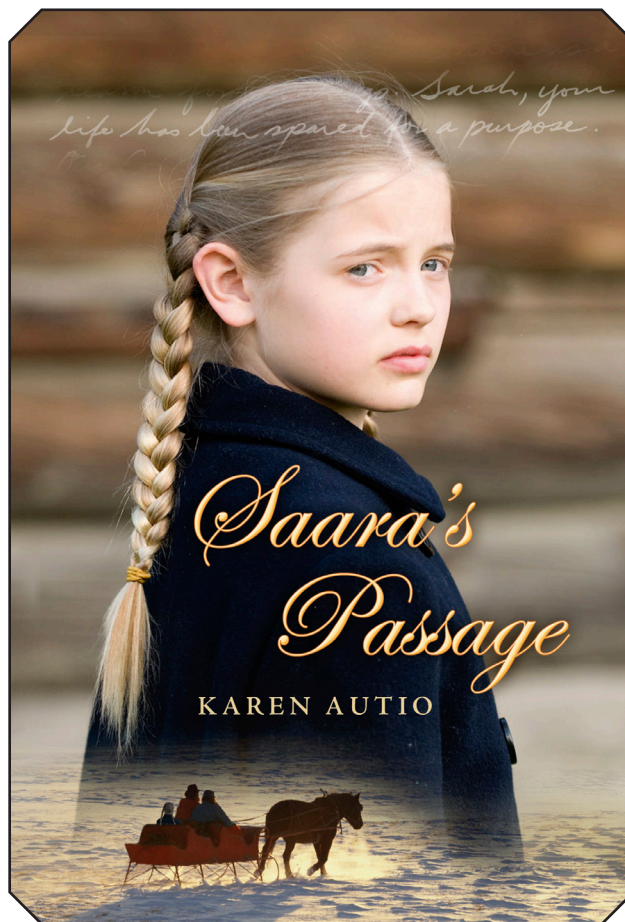


Teachers' Guide



Saara's Passage

Karen Autio

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AGES 10+

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BACKGROUND

Story Synopsis

*I'd been plagued with one question since the Empress:
"What is the purpose of my life?"*

Saara, the 12-year-old daughter of Finnish immigrants to Canada, is adjusting to life after surviving the shipwreck of the *Empress of Ireland*. She is troubled by recurring nightmares and wonders why she survived and if she has a purpose in life. Meanwhile, her new life carries on in the city of Port Arthur, with friends, a new teacher, and the chance to star in the school play. A great war is also on the horizon, with Canada sure to be involved.

Yet Saara is faced with another crisis at home: her aunt Marja has tuberculosis and must enter the sanatorium in Toronto, leaving her infant daughter Sanni behind. Saara's first challenge of helping with the baby becomes a stepping stone for her to help others, including the handsome Mikko, who shares her love of horses. As Saara begins her teenage years in a world where war and disease have cut short so many lives, she learns to make the most of her own life journey.

In this sequel to *Second Watch*, Saara Mäki continues her passage — not across the Atlantic, but through the shoals and storms of growing up. Her story is Canada's story, as both take up the responsibilities handed to them by circumstances and history.

The Author

When Karen Autio's youngest child entered Grade One in 1998, she decided to pursue her long-held dream of writing for children. She loves to keep company with words, whether as a writer, reader, or calligrapher. She also likes to collect objects with stories, such as a wind-up watch that's older than she is and an antique desk that might have secret compartments. When Karen's Finnish grandmother gave her a silver spoon and told her its tale, Karen had no idea it would lead her into a whole novel's worth of words. She learned that her grandmother's Finnish friends had family members from Port Arthur (now part of Thunder Bay) who died in the wreck of the *Empress of Ireland*. Karen researched the steamship and wove the ship's story into fictional Saara's life in *Second Watch*.

Karen grew up in the Thunder Bay area and now lives in Kelowna, B.C. with her husband and two children. Math and computer science had been Autio's life before she turned to writing in her 40s. Like all dedicated authors, she is planning to write more books, at some point one based on the history of the Okanagan region in British Columbia.

Story Behind the Story

As Karen Autio tells it, a small silver spoon was the inspiration behind her two children's novels about Finnish immigrant life in Canada. The spoon belonged to her grandmother. It had been given to her by a friend, a Finnish woman who claimed it was saved from the *Titanic*. To Karen's amazement, the *Titanic* wasn't the only ship to sink in the woman's family's history. Members of her Finnish immigrant family died in the wreck of the *Empress of Ireland* in the Saint Lawrence River in 1914. The accident was Canada's worst nautical disaster in peacetime, yet Karen realized that hardly anyone remembered the *Empress* shipwreck. She knew there was a story to be told, and her first novel, *Second Watch*, introduces Saara and her family as they travel on the *Empress of Ireland* en route to Finland for a visit.

Saara's Passage continues the saga, with Autio weaving her own family's experiences into a story set at the start of the First World War. On the homefront, the battle against the great killer, tuberculosis, was fought by adults and children alike, and Autio drew on her own grandmother's history as a sanatorium patient for inspiration.

Autio's creative process begins with extensive research on her characters' time period, including local and world history, social customs, and even slang language. When writing *Saara's Passage*, Karen Autio composed the story in linear fashion, and took two writing retreats to immerse herself in her work. She had many rewarding moments during the writing of *Saara's Passage*, especially as Saara grew and began to understand her purpose.

Following in the footsteps of author Eric Wilson, Autio involved two students in her process this time, having them review an early draft of *Saara's Passage*. "Their thoughtful feedback helped improve the book, and their ongoing contact and interest in my writing give me delight."

Historical Context

European Immigration: Find out how the Canadian government attracted immigrants to Canada in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. What were the main challenges for Finnish immigrants? Did the government always represent Canada accurately? Were Finns made welcome by other Canadians?

Have students contact a local ethnic community group and interview members for their own immigration stories.

Have students research the basic causes of the First World War. Was Canada of 1914 a truly independent country, or was Great Britain still in control?

How many Finnish-Canadians (and other ethnic groups) fought in the First World

War? Do you think Canada would still send soldiers to war on England's side today?

Tuberculosis was a major killer at the time Saara's story takes place. Are there any equivalents to tuberculosis in today's world? What effect does tuberculosis have in the current time? (See the Historical Note starting on p. 239.)

Have students research other stories where a character suffers from tuberculosis, also called consumption, phthisis, and TB [Note: One of the Anne of Green Gables books has a character who has consumption.] Students can also research modern books where other diseases (e.g., Spanish Flu or AIDS) are featured, and compare these to older stories.

The Lung Association of Canada has sold fundraising stamps, called seals, every Christmas season since 1908. Have students draw a version from 1914, described on p. 102, or make a modern version.

Questions for Discussion

As students read *Saara's Passage*, have them consider the following discussion points:

Having a purpose in life concerns Saara very much, especially since she survived a major shipwreck. Does Saara's purpose become clear as the story progresses?

What is your purpose in life? Write a letter to yourself when you are old. Describe your plans for the future. What do you hope to accomplish during your lifetime?

Saara says she wants to be famous. Do you think her dream changes by the end of the story? Do you think your life's purpose can change as you grow older?

Is Saara an independent thinker compared to other children of her time? Or is she trapped by circumstance in traditional female roles such as childcare and nursing?

Saara has been a part of history already—she survived the sinking of the *Empress of Ireland*. Do other world events, like the war, affect her life? How is your life affected by current world events?

After reading Autio's description of sanatoriums, imagine that you have been sent to such a place. Write a letter home to your family.

Saara's class is taught how to prevent the spread of tuberculosis. What health precautions are you taught in school today?

You may have heard that “kids today have to grow up faster than ever before.” Consider Saara’s experiences like having to look after a baby and tend house on a farm when she’s only 12. Who do you think must grow up faster — children today or children in the early 1900s? Why?

KEY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Language Arts

Use context clues and word elements to pronounce and make sense of unfamiliar words in the book, such as the following:

- p. 8 homestead
- p. 20 callithumpian
- p. 20 boisterous
- p. 27 euphonium
- p. 29 cheesecloth
- p. 34 boarders
- p. 39 tentatively
- p. 71 elbow grease
- p. 74 spittoon
- p. 84 hemorrhaging
- p. 84 miliary [not military]
- p. 101 perpetually
- p. 158 contortions

Character study: Give three examples of how Saara’s character has changed by the end of the novel.

Social Studies

Describe how Finnish immigrants to Canada were able to keep their culture alive. Compare Finnish Christmas and midsummer celebrations with modern Canadian celebrations.

Traditional Activity: Make Butter

One of Saara’s chores is making butter. Have students pass around a sealed Mason jar containing whipping cream. Students take turns shaking the jar until the cream separates into butter. Pour off the buttermilk, season the butter with salt, and let students spread on small crackers before eating.

Have students choose an everyday item (e.g., a brush, a camera, a baby carriage), then visit the online Eaton’s Fall and Winter 1915-16 mail order catalogue to search for that item. How has that product changed from then until now?

[LINK: <http://tinyurl.com/btlw8v>]

Saara's family receives \$162 from the Canadian Pacific Railway to reimburse them for their tickets on the Empress of Ireland. How much money would they get in today's terms? Go to <http://www.measuringworth.com> for sample data. Note: The consumer price change has \$162 in US dollars in 1914 money worth \$3,466.40 in 2009.

Should passengers have received additional compensation? Organize a debate asking why or why not? How much would have been a reasonable settlement? What arguments might the company have had against providing large settlements to survivors of the disaster?

Science

Describe the human body's various defences against harmful micro-organisms such as the tuberculosis bacillus. Compare tuberculosis treatment in the past and present. What are new drug-resistant TB strains and how are they relevant today?

Personal Planning

Saara writes an essay on her life goals. Later she also writes a list of her accomplishments so far. Have your students write one paragraph in response to Miss Rodger's essay assignment on p. 63, and one on their accomplishments.

Creative Writing

Have students interview an older person (e.g., a grandparent, great aunt, or great uncle) about an adventure or mishap from their childhood, then write a story in the first person about the experience. Leading interview questions might include:

- do you have a scar? how did you get it?
- when and where did the incident take place?
- what did you think, feel, and say during the incident?
- were there other people around? Who were they? What did they say or do?
- what was the long-term impact of the incident?

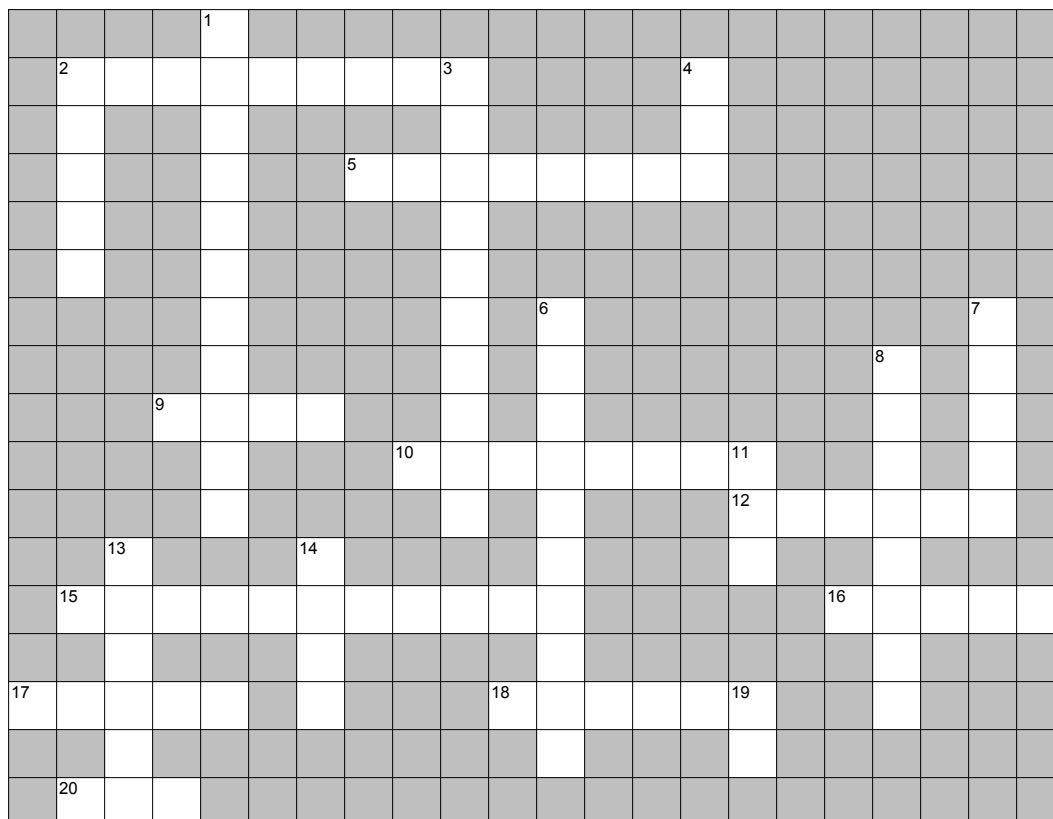
Folk sayings: Saara's mother, and Saara herself, are fond of saying proverbs and folk sayings, one of which is "Fire from a spark; war from a word." Have students create their own folk sayings that are relevant in their world today. Example: "As popular as peanut butter in a playschool" [now that peanuts are considered potentially lethal].

Ethics

Saara reads her aunt's journal entries even though she knows she is wrong to snoop. She eventually apologizes. When (if ever) is it all right to invade someone's privacy like this? Provide examples of when one might justify snooping.

Saara's Aunt Marja promises never to talk about her tuberculosis experience and makes Saara promise never to speak about the shipwreck again. Do you think it is better to ignore tragedy and move on, or to talk about it to get better? Why?

Just for Fun: Crossword Puzzle



EclipseCrossword.com

Crossword Clues

Across

2. Another word for bullets, bombshells, etc.
5. A new breed of workhorse
9. What arrives after nine months of pregnancy
10. Finnish summer celebration
12. You must do this to become a soldier
15. Now a part of Thunder Bay
(2 words, include space)
16. Finnish for "little"
17. Saara- _____ means "Saara-gold"
18. Aedgiva's brother
20. Sticky, sweet stuff spread on toast

Down

1. Home remedy for fever: _____ tea
(two words, include space)
2. Traditional Easter food in Finland
3. Place for substance abusers
4. Weapon that fires bullets
6. If you had TB, you might go here
7. Blanket made from many small pieces of cloth
8. Old name for Canada's July 1st holiday:
_____ Day
11. Done with needle and thread
13. Hauskaa _____ (Merry Christmas)
14. A farmer collects a cow's milk in this
19. Abbreviation for tuberculosis

Websites for Further Research

Canada in the First World War:

www.virtualmuseum.ca/English/Teacher/world_war.html

Tuberculosis:

www.lung.ca

Empress of Ireland:

http://modern-canadian-history.suite101.com/article.cfm/the_empress_of_ireland

Finnish immigration, Finnish culture: Finnish Canadian Society:

<http://www.suomikanadaseura.fi/english/links.html>

www.karenautio.com

www.sononis.com

Answer Key - Crossword Puzzle

Across

2. MUNITIONS

5. CANADIAN

9. BABY

10. JUHANNUS

12. ENLIST

15. PORT ARTHUR

16. PIKKU

17. KULTA

18. RUPERT

20. JAM

Down

1. WILLOW BARK

2. MAMMI

3. SANITARIUM

4. GUN

6. SANATORIUM

7. QUILT

8. DOMINION

11. SEW

13. JOULUA

14. PAIL

19. TB