

The Miracle Worker

a Wheelock Family Theatre Study Guide
prepared by Kimberly Elliott

thanks and applause to
The Yawkey Foundation
sponsor of the student matinee series



200 The Riverway | Boston, MA 02215-4176
box office: 617.879.2300 | www.wheelockfamilytheatre.org

*I wanted to teach you—oh, everything the earth is full of
Helen, everything on it that's ours for a wink and it's gone,
and what we are on it, the—light we bring to it and leave
behind in—words, why you can see five thousand years
back in the light of words, everything we feel, think, know,
and share, in words, so not a soul is in darkness, or done
with, even in the grave. (Annie Sullivan, in *The Miracle Worker*)*

*A flame burns brighter when strong winds are blowing:
it leaps into the shadows, and its fire
gathers more light to push the darkness out.¹
From *City of the Heart*, poems by Robert J. Smithdas,
1966 (first deaf-blind person to earn an advanced degree)*

Imagine yourself imprisoned in a foreign land where no one speaks your language, you understand no one, and everyone assumes you are stupid or recoils from you as if you were possessed of a dread disease or insane. Imagine your rage, imagine your frustration, imagine your inability to communicate your feelings in any other way than to lash out at those who carry on with their lives around you, oblivious to you.

We take a great deal for granted about our day to day lives. Most of us think more about our hair than we do about our fully functioning five senses and our ability to communicate with those around us effortlessly, at any time. We complain a lot: 500 channels and there is nothing on television to watch, a wayward faucet is dripping incessantly, the person sitting next to us on the bus is marinated in Chanel No. 5 at 8:00 a.m., the salsa flame broils our tongue. *The Miracle Worker* by William Gibson, and the truly inspiring tale of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy, makes our world and our petty gripes swerve back into focus.

The Miracle Worker is a remarkable tale of strength, courage, dedication, sheer obstinacy, and love. It is a triumphant ode to human spirit and potential. Most of all, this play is a celebration of a young woman's rebirth into the world around her. Strategically battling and retreating, offering cake, flowers, and water, Annie Sullivan fed Helen Keller the universe through her hands. Following in Helen's lead after many years, the audience is reawakened to the limitless possibilities of being alive when Annie spells "W-A-T-E-R" into Helen's hand.

¹ *Out of the Shadows* by Peter J. Salmon, National Center for Deaf-Blind Youth and Adults, NY: 1970

Discussion Questions: *The Miracle Worker*

Use the following questions to stimulate a discussion of the play with students. You may wish to request that students write brief essays based on various clusters of questions.

- How do different characters in the play view Helen? Pick one character and explore in great detail how you think they view Helen and why you think they feel that way.
- How do you think Helen feels at the beginning of the play? Explain your answer.
- How do you think Helen feels at the end of the play? Explain your answer.
- Why do you think Helen tips her sister out of the cradle?
- Are keys important in *The Miracle Worker*? Explain your answer.
- If you were Helen, how would you want other people to treat you?
- Do you think too much love can be as dangerous as hate? Explain your answer.
- How were the deaf and blind viewed historically?
- What happened to Annie's brother? How does Annie feel about what happened to him? How would you feel if the same thing happened to someone you love?
- What are the first three adjectives that come to your mind to describe each of the main characters in the play?
- Who is The Miracle Worker and why is he or she a "miracle worker"?
- The actress who plays Helen Keller has few lines with which to communicate her character to you. What are some of the non-verbal ways in which she might communicate Helen's thoughts and feelings and make the character of Helen come to life for you?
- What do you think would be hard about playing the role of Helen?
- How do you usually let people know when you are angry? Do you think the way you express your anger would be different if you were deaf and blind? Explain your answer.
- Have you ever ignored or avoided a person who is deaf, blind, or deaf-blind because you do not know how to relate to him or her? Explain your answer.
- Do you, or could you, have a friend who is deaf, blind, or deaf-blind? Explain your answer.

Reading Suggestions: Helen Keller

A Picture Book of Helen Keller – David A. Adler, ill. John Alexandra Wallner (JP)

Helen Keller – Lois Markham (J)

The Courage of Helen Keller – Francene Sabin (J)

Helen Keller: Toward the Light – Stewart Graff (J)

Helen Keller: A Light for the Blind – Kathleen Kudlinski (J)

Helen Keller: Humanitarian – Dennis Wepner (J-YA)

Dear Dr. Bell... Your Friend, Helen Keller – Judith St. George (J-YA)

The Value of Determination: The Story of Helen Keller – Ann Donegan Johnson, ill. Pileggi (J-YA)

Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy – Joseph P. Lash (J-YA)

The Story of My Life – Helen Keller (J-YA)

Helen Keller: Her Socialist Years – Phillip S. Foner (YA)

Research Activity: Asylums

*The asylum? I grew up in such an asylum. The state almshouse. Rats—why my brother Jimmy and I used to play with the rats because we didn't have toys. Maybe you'd like to know what Helen would find there, not on visiting days? (Annie Sullivan in *The Miracle Worker*)*

Have students try to find answers to the following series of questions by researching the history of institutional care for the aged, impoverished, and mentally ill in Massachusetts (keeping in mind that Annie grew up in Massachusetts) and/or the United States.

- What is an almshouse?
- Where there any in Massachusetts?
- How would you describe life for the impoverished individuals, impoverished sick individuals, elderly people with no families, and orphaned children 100 years ago?
- Has life gotten better or worse for these populations of citizens over time? Explain your answer (you may wish to address each of the groups mentioned above separately in your response).
- Who are some of the people who worked to change the system of care for these individuals?
- What are some major periods of change in the United States that affected how the groups mentioned above are treated?

- Do you think we need to change any of our current institutions/facilities for the groups mentioned above? Explain your answer. If yes, how would you change our current institutions/facilities?

Research Activity: Perkins School for the Blind

We had scarcely arrived at the Perkins School for the Blind when I began to make friends with the little blind children. What a joy to talk with other children in my own language. Until then, I had been like a foreigner speaking through an interpreter. In my own school where Laura Bridgman was taught I was in my own country.²

The place where Annie Sullivan received her education and training as a teacher, and where Helen Keller herself studied, is located in Watertown, Massachusetts; students may be excited to learn that the Perkins School is almost in their backyard. Assign students to find answers to the following series of questions by researching Samuel Gridley Howe, the Perkins School for the Blind, and services for the blind and deaf-blind.

- Was the Perkins School for the Blind the first school for the blind in the world? Explain your answer.
- When was the Perkins School founded, by whom, and why?
- Where was the school originally located?
- Who was Samuel Gridley Howe?
- Why did Howe change the name of the school to “The New England Institution for the Blind” from “The New England Asylum for the Blind?”
- How were books for the blind originally created?
- What is a Perkins Braille?
- Who was Laura Bridgman?
- What are some different ways that teachers use to communicate with, and teach, very young deaf-blind children?
- What role do dogs play in the lives of blind people?

² *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller, Bantam Books, U.S.A.: 1990.

Reading Suggestion: Laura Bridgman

Child of the Silent Night – Edith F. Hunter (J)

Reading Suggestions: Working Dogs

Mom’s Best Friend – Sally Hobart Alexander, photos George Ancona (J)

A Guide Dog Goes to School: The Story of a Dog Trained to Lead the Blind – Elizabeth Simpson Smith, ill. Bert Dodson (J)

Connie’s New Eyes – Bernard Wolf (J)

Guide Dogs – Phyllis Raybin Emert (J-YA)

Love in the Lead: The Fifty-Year Miracle of the Seeing Eye Dog – Peter Brock Putnam (YA)

Maggie by My Side – Beverly Butler (YA)

Activities: The Senses

Helen Keller said that her nose helped her to learn much about people. She could deduce the work they engaged in from such things as wood, iron, paint, and drugs clinging to their clothing... “When a person passes quickly from one place to another, I get a scent impression of where he has been—the kitchen, the garden, or the sickroom.” In old country houses Keller could smell layers of odors left by a succession of families, plants, perfumes, and draperies. She said that people had “personality” smells. Infants lacked a personality scent, and adults who lacked a distinctive person scent she seldom found lively or entertaining .³

Encourage students to explore their senses through one or more of the following activities:

- 1) “Take a Taste Test” on page 30, *Looking at Senses* by David Suzuki (with Barbara Hehner)
“Here There and Everywhere” on page 64, *Looking at Senses*
“Two Senses’ Worth” on page 84, *Looking at Senses*
- 2) “Aristotle’s Illusion” on page 10 of *How to Really Fool Yourself: Illusions for All Your Senses* by Vicki Cobb, ill. Leslie Morrill
“The Incredible Shrinking Cube” on page 16 of *How to Really Fool Yourself*
“What’s the Point?” on page 17 of *How to Really Fool Yourself*
“Cold Reality or Hot?” on page 19 of *How to Really Fool Yourself*
“False Sweetness” on page 46 of *How to Really Fool Yourself*

³ *Senses & Sensibilities* by Jillyn Smith, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., U.S.A.: 1990.

3) Modify some of the games included in *Simon Says Is Not the Only Game* (compiled by Bernadette Leary and Margaret von Schneden) for student to play blindfolded and experience their other senses and the world around them in different ways. While playing the games or doing the various exercises, a safe environment should be created by moving chairs, desks, or any sharp objects out of the way or doing the games on a mat in a gymnasium. Once blindfolded, sighted students will not be as aware of their environments because they are used to relying on their vision. Some of the exercises for individual students might work best if you match students in pairs and have each take turns being blindfolded while the other monitors their progress. The following are some suggestions from this book:

- Audiball – page 8
- Find the Sound – page 40
- Follow the Leader – page 41
- Sniff – page 88
- Sound Kit – page 91
- Squirrels in the Trees – page 93

Discussion Questions: The Senses

Once students participate in the above activities, ask them to answer the following series of questions.

- In the activities for which you were blindfolded, what was it like to be without your sight?
- Do you think you paid more attention to your other senses when you were blindfolded? Explain your answer.
- Did you find out anything about your five senses that you did not know before? If so, what?
- What do you think makes you want to eat a piece of chocolate cake the most: taste, smell, hunger, memory, appearance? Explain your answer.
- What is synesthesia?
- What creature has the best sense of hearing?
- Do dogs see the world in the same way that we do? Explain your answer.

Reading Suggestions: The Senses

I Can Tell By Touching – Carolyn Otto, ill. Nadine Bernard Westcott (JP)

Looking at Senses – David Suzuki with Barbara Hehner (J)

How to Really Fool Yourself: Illusions for all Your Senses – Vicki Cobb, ill. Leslie Morrill (J-YA)

Messengers to the Brain: Our Fantastic Five Senses – Paul D. Martin (J)

Activities: Learning New Languages

*My hand is to me what your hearing and sight together are to you... It is the hand that binds me to the world of men and women. If I had made a man, I should certainly have put the brain and the soul in his finger-tips.*⁴

- 1) Teach students the manual alphabet, finger spelling, and sign language. An important point to keep in mind if you decide to do this is expressed well in *Come Sign with Us* by Jan C. Hafer and Robert M. Wilson: “Sign language is fun to learn and fun to teach. Along with the fun, however, comes some responsibility. The responsibility to teach signs accurately is foremost. Whenever possible, find a deaf person or a hearing person who is skilled in sign language to be your sign monitor.” If you decide to engage in these activities (and please do!), a sign monitor can ensure that your class is learning signs correctly and will also help broaden students’ vocabulary.

Starting by teaching students the manual alphabet ABC’s is a good way to launch a course of study on fingerspelling and sign language. Fingerspelling can be done directly onto an individual’s hand (as with deaf-blind individuals, and as with Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan) or into the air. It is not the preferred form of communication for most deaf individuals (sign language is), but it is a primary form of communication with individuals who are deaf-blind.

Have students make a set of flashcards by drawing their own manual alphabet and signed numbers on index cards, or Xeroxing pages and cutting out letters and numbers from a book like *Come Sign with Us*. Have students drill themselves at home and with friends.

- 2) There are several spelling games that students can play, even in the early stages of fingerspelling, that will help them learn.

Once students learn the manual alphabet, they can play “I Spy” or “Letter Link” on page 78 of *Discovering Sign Language* by Laura Green and Eva Barash Dicker. This book also contains more advanced games.

⁴ *Dear Dr. Bell...Your Friend, Helen Keller* by Judith St. George, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, NY: 1992.

Once students learn signed numbers, they can play “Forbidden Seeds” on page 77 of *Discovering Sign Language*.

- 3) Have students learn the Braille alphabet. An excellent resource for this is *Just Enough to Know Better: A Braille Primer*, by Eileen P. Curran. Have them make flashcards. For this, they may choose to make the cards with the appropriate dots using pen and/or they may try to create flashcards with raised dots. In either case, encourage them to run their hands over a piece of Braille writing with their eyes closed to experience what it feels like.
- 4) Have students read (with their eyes, not their fingers) Exercise Eight and Exercise Nine in *Just Enough to Know Better: A Braille Primer*. Then, ask them to write a brief essay exploring their responses to what they read. In addition to their essays, have them answer the following questions related to each piece:

Exercise Eight

- Based on your reading of this piece, do you feel blind people can sometimes be more in tune with their environments than individuals with sight? Explain your answer.
- Do you think Rachel is more in tune with her environment than you are with yours? Explain your answer.
- Have you ever “felt” music?
- When you’re walking down the street, are there noises that you “shut out?” If so, what are those noises?
- For five minutes, sit in a room in your house blindfolded with no noise (no television, radio, stereo, etc.). Was it absolutely quiet? What noises did your ears pick up?

Exercise Nine: A Report Card for the Teacher – Mary Ellen Reihing

- What does the writer mean when she says, “I wish you had helped me to meet blind adults. I was afraid that if I couldn’t find a way to stop being blind, I’d have to go on being a kid forever”?
- Compare the following sentence: “Thank you for never forgetting that blind kids always grow up needing to know more from life than pats on the head from indulgent adults,” with Annie Sullivan’s line from *The Miracle Worker*: “I don’t think Helen’s worst handicap is deafness or blindness, I think it’s your love. And pity.” Are these two quotes related? If so, how? Do they contradict each other? If so, how?
- How would you feel if you were the only sighted student in a school? Everybody but you has their own guide dog and all of your textbooks are in Braille.
- How would you feel if you were the only hearing student in a school? Everybody but you has been speaking sign language since they were very young, and you know no sign language.

- Write a fair and honest report card, in the style of this report card, for one of the teachers you had in a previous grade.

Discussion Questions: Learning New Languages

Some of the answers to the following questions may be a little difficult to locate, but students should be able to do so, with some digging.

- Who invented sign language?
- Who was Thomas Hopkins-Gallaudet?
- Who was Louis Braille?
- Is there only one kind of sign language?
- What is the “combined method”?
- What did Alexander Graham Bell and Gallaudet disagree about?
- What is the “Rochester Method”?
- What is “Total Communication”?
- What is the “Tadoma Method”?

Reading Suggestions: Learning New Languages

Sign Language Fun – Linda Bove (JP)

The Handmade Alphabet – Laura Rankin (JP)

My Signing Book of Numbers – Patricia Bellan Gillen (JP)

Roly Goes Exploring: A Book for Blind and Sighted Children – Phillip Newth (J)

Deaf Child Listened: Thomas Gallaudet, Pioneer in American Education – Anne E. Neimark (J)

A Show of Hands: Say It in Sign Language – Mary Beth Sullivan and Linda Bourke (J-YA)

Come Sign with Us – Jan C. Hafer and Robert M. Wilson (J-YA)

Discovering Sign Language – Laura Greene and Eva Barash Dicker (J-YA)

Finger Spelling Fun – D. A. Adler (J-YA)

Friends Are for Signing: A Story about Sign Language – Tim Jackson (J-YA)

Red Tread Riddles – Allen Jensen and Polly Edman (J-YA)

Louis Braille: Inventor – Jennifer Bryant (J-YA)

Signing Made Easy – Rod R. Butterworth and Mickey Flodin (J-YA)

Just Enough to Know Better: A Braille Primer – Eileen P. Curran (YA)

The Week the World Heard Gallaudet – Jack Gannon (YA)

Pictures in the Air: The Story of the National Theatre of the Deaf – Stephen C. Baldwin (YA)

Activity: Defying Stereotypes

I did not want people to tell me what I should or should not do just because I happened to be different from others. I prefer to compete with seeing and hearing girls... Because they didn't want me at Radcliffe, and as I was stubborn by nature, I chose to override their objections.⁵

Have students choose one of the books listed below to read and answer the following series of questions. Then, have students write a brief essay in which they discuss the book they read as it relates to Helen Keller.

- Were you surprised at all by the book you read? If so, why?
- How do you feel when people doubt that you can do something? Has that ever happened to you? What did you do?

Reading Suggestions: Defying Stereotypes

Mom Can't See Me – Sally Hobart Alexander (J)
Silent Dancer – Bruce Hlibok (J)
Ray Charles – David Ritz (J)
A Cane in Her Hand – Ada B. Litchfield (J)
Mathematician and Computer Scientist, Caryn Navy – Mary Ellen Verheyden-Hilliard (J)
Fastest Woman on Earth – Alida Thacher, ill. Ken Bacher (J-YA)
Taking Hold: My Journey into Blindness – Sally Hobart Alexander (YA)
The Silent Hero: A True Escape Story from World War II – George Shea (YA)
No Limits – Harry C. Cordellos with Janet Wells (YA)
I Didn't Hear the Dragon Roar – Frances M. Parsons (YA)
Blind Courage – Bill Irwin (YA)

Reading Suggestions: Selected Fiction

Down in the Boondocks – Wilson Gage, ill. Glen Rounds (JP)
I Have a Sister, My Sister Is Deaf – Jeanne Whitehouse Peterson, ill. Deborah Ray (JP)
Silent Lotus – Jeanne Lee (JP)
My Hands, My World – Catherine Brighton (JP)
See You Tomorrow, Charles – Miriam Cohen (JP)
The Seeing Stick – Jane Yolen, ill. Remy Charlip and Demetra Maraslis (JP)
Cakes and Miracles: A Purim Tale – Barbra Diamond Goldin, ill. Erika Weihs (JP)
Sound of Sunshine, Sound of Rain – Florence Parry Heides, ill. Kenneth Longtemps (J)

⁵ *Dear Dr. Bell...Your Friend, Helen Keller* by Judith St. George, G.P. Putnam's Sons, NY: 1992.

Naomi Knows It's Springtime – Virginia Kroll (JP)
Lucy's Picture – Nicola Moon, ill. Alex Ayliffe (JP)
Through Grandpa's Eyes – Patricia MacLachlan, ill. Deborah Ray (JP)
Alan and the Baron – Ron Hamilton (JP-J)
A Dance to Still Music – Barbara Corcoran, ill. Charles Robinson (J)
Becky – Karen Hirsch (J)
Annie's World – Nancy Smiler Levinson (J)
The Purple Mouse – Elisabeth MacIntyre (J)
A Place for Grace – Jean Davis Okimoto, ill. Doug Keith (J)
The Gift of the Girl Who Couldn't Hear – Susan Shreve (J)
The Secret in the Dorm Attic – Jean Andrews (J)
Hasta Luego – Jean Andrews (J)
I'm Deaf and It's Okay – Lorraine Aseltine (J)
The Flying Fingers Club – J.F. Andrews (J)
Journey from Peppermint Street – M. De Jong (J)
Knots on a Counting Rope – Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault, ill. Ted Rand (J)
Stargone John – Ellen Kindt McKenzie, ill. William Low (J)
Carver – Ruth Yaffe Radin, ill. Karl Swanson (J)
Seeing in the Dark – Elizabeth Rider Montgomery, ill. Troy Howell (J)
The View Beyond My Father – Mabel Esther Allan (J-YA)
The Seeing Summer – Jeanette Eyerly (J-YA)
The Nothing Place – Eleanor Spence, ill. Geraldine Spence (J-YA)
The Voyage of the Mimi – Bank Street College Project in Science and Math, ed. Lorin Driggs (YA)
Tell Me how the Wind Sounds – Leslie Guccione (YA)
The Swing – E. Hanlon (YA)
A Season of Change – L.L. Hodge (YA)
David in Silence – V. Robinson (YA)
Belonging – V. Scott (YA)

Other Resources

Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths and Adults
111 Middle Neck Road
Sands Point, NY 11050
www.hknc.org

Perkins School for the Blind
175 North Beacon Street
Watertown, MA 02472
www.perkins.org

Our thanks to the Perkins School for the Blind for assistance with this study guide.