

# *Study Guide for* **JAMES** AND THE **GIANT** **PEACH**

*Prepared by Leslie Price for  
The Children's Theatre of Western Springs*

## ***About the Book***

*James and the Giant Peach* was first published in the United States in 1961, and was Roald Dahl's first book for children. Dahl said he got the idea for the book after marveling at the apples hanging on the apple trees near his home. He wondered what would happen if the apple didn't stop growing and just kept getting bigger and bigger. He decided to write a book about a fruit that grew beyond its normal size and, after some consideration, chose the peach to be the subject of the book. Said Dahl, "It's pretty and it's big and it's squishy and you can go into it and it's got a big seed in the middle which you can play with. And so the story started."

Like many of Dahl's other books, *James and the Giant Peach* centers around a child who has been the victim of some very unkind adults. In this case, Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge are the very unpleasant relatives with whom James must live after his parents are eaten by a rhinoceros.

Roald Dahl was fond of getting his young characters out of their bad situations with the aid of a benevolent adult. (Think about Willy Wonka in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the BFG in *The BFG*, and Miss Honey in *Matilda*.) *James and the Giant Peach* is no exception when it comes to this formula. As in the other novels, our hero is assisted by the one adult who somehow seems to understand the trials and tribulations of that child's life. For James Henry Trotter, that special adult takes the form of a mysterious stranger who gives him a bag full of unusual things: crocodile tongues, lizard eyeballs, monkey fingers, and more. Ick! Despite being a rather disgusting concoction, this magic potion is just what James needs to escape his awful living situation and go on the adventure of a lifetime.



*Original cover art for  
James and the Giant Peach*

One final note: *James and the Giant Peach* was written when Roald Dahl's infant son, Theo, was undergoing treatment after being hit by a taxi cab. Dahl said that writing this book helped him get through those difficult months. The book is dedicated to Theo who, like James Henry Trotter, is very much alive.

## ***About the Author***

Roald Dahl was born in Wales in 1916 to Norwegian parents and was named after the polar explorer, Roald Amundsen who was a national hero in Norway at the time. When Dahl was three years old, his sister and father died within months of each other. Although her family still lived in Norway, Mrs. Dahl chose to stay in the United Kingdom and comply with her husband's wish to have his children educated in British schools.

Although the academic education was just fine, Dahl's treatment by adults during his school days was less than stellar. He attended a number of boarding schools over the years and encountered many teachers and authority figures who chose to punish him through very severe means.

Dahl was certainly upset by these traumas. What's more, he was terribly homesick, but he never revealed his unhappiness to his mother. Instead, he wrote her nearly everyday. When she died, Dahl discovered that she'd saved every letter he'd ever written to him.



*Roald Dahl in 1925.*

As an adult, Dahl worked for Shell Petroleum Company and lived in what is now Tanzania. His travels to exotic locales continued throughout his time in the Royal Air Force during World War II. He spent quite a bit of time in Africa and the Middle East. In fact, Dahl endured severe injuries when he was forced to crash land his airplane in the African desert.



*Roald Dahl as an adult.*

After the war, Dahl let his imagination take him on his most memorable adventures. His unpleasant experiences in boarding school served as inspiration for many of the characters we all love today--children whose parents are missing, dead, or uncaring. Like Dahl himself, the children in his books use their cleverness, kindness, and imagination to escape their bad situations and to inspire us all.

Over the years, his list of novels and stories for children grew quite long. Favorites include *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *the BFG*, *Matilda*, *The Twits*, and of course *James and the Giant Peach*.

Roald Dahl died in 1990 at the age of 74. Ever the eccentric, he was buried with pool cues, chocolates, and several pencils. Although he's been gone for nearly two decades, his tales of ingenuity and hope continue to find new audiences and remain old favorites.

## ***About the Show***

The adaptation of *James and the Giant Peach* that you will see at the Children's Theatre of Western Springs was written with Roald Dahl's blessing. Many of the words the actors say during our performance are the exact words you may have read in the book. Like other plays, the characters have conversations and dialogue. In addition to those words, however, our play also uses a narrator who shares the more descriptive parts of the story with the audience.

In theatre, however, a story is not told with words alone. There are actors who share their interpretations of the characters. Those actors are dressing in costumes that will represent each character, and will be performing on a set that looks very much like the inside of a peach.

But wait! There's more! There are adults and students designing lights, sound, makeup, props, and posters. There are folks who are designing displays for our lobby and greeting you as you enter the theatre. There are people behind the scenes making sure every single element of our show is just right so you can have the best experience possible.

All of those people working together is what makes theatre such a unique art-form. It's a collaborative art (which is just a fancy way of saying that everyone involved in the show works with everyone else involved in the show to make it the best production possible.)



*Scenic model for  
James and the Giant Peach*

That kind of collaboration is one of the most important things our actors and backstage folks can learn. Regardless of whether someone decides to become an actor, a teacher, a doctor, or an airplane pilot, they need to know how to work with other folks to do the best job possible.

We hope that you will not only enjoy watching the show, but that you'll take a moment to think about all of the folks who spent their time and energy to make this play such a special one. Like that giant peach, our show has grown into something really great thanks to a little magic and a lot of work.

# Language Arts

## Sticky Situations



Roald Dahl was fond of putting his characters in predicaments of one sort or another. James is stuck inside a peach, Matilda had parents who were mean, and Charlie had a family that just couldn't quite understand or take care of him.

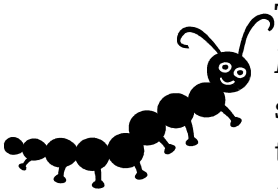
Find some other stories about characters--real or fictional--who have escaped tough situations. How did they escape? Did their stories end up as happily as those of Roald Dahl's characters. Some good books about fictional characters include the *Harry Potter* series as well as the *Series of Unfortunate Events* books. Other books about real life situations include *Abe Lincoln Grows Up*, *Ordinary Genius: The Story of Albert Einstein*, and *Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life*.

## Creature Comforts

Roald Dahl's novels are almost always written from a child's perspective although there is always an abundance of interesting characters in his books. Choose another character who joined James inside of the giant peach, and rewrite part of the story from that creature's perspective. Decide whether the character enjoys the journey and agrees with James' decisions. What is that character doing now? Have fun and see what more you can discover by looking at the tale through another characters eyes.



## Actions speak louder



The Silkworm is present throughout the entire play of *James and the Giant Peach*, yet he doesn't speak a word. Why do you think he's included in the story? He helps the Spider spin the strings that allow the Seagulls to carry the peach across the ocean, but that's about it. What do the Silkworm's actions (or inactions) tell you about the character?

After considering this for a bit, think about all of the ways we communicate that *don't* involve speaking. We nod our heads instead of saying, "Yes." We shake our heads instead of saying, "No." Crossed arms tell us someone isn't very interested in listening. How else do we "speak" without saying anything? Choose a partner and attempt to share an emotion, an idea, or even a story without speaking. Were you able to get your ideas across? How did you do it?

## Laughter and Limericks

Roald Dahl was fond of including silly rhymes and limericks in his novels. Take a look at other writers who use verse in their works. Dr. Seuss, Edward Gorey, and Shel Silverstein are good examples. How does each of them use rhyme to tell a story? Are they always silly? Serious? Unexpected?

# Science

## James and the Giant...Pumpkin?

James' peach grew and grew and grew thanks to the magic of the Little Old Man. In real life, peaches, pumpkins, and other produce grow large and delicious thanks to the tender, loving, care provided by farmers and gardeners.



Do some research on the biggest pumpkin, zucchini, or any other fruit or vegetable of your choice. How big did it get? How does that compare to the average size for that kind of produce? Where did the fruit or vegetable grow, and what was the soil like? Did the gardener or farmer use any special sort of fertilizer?

After you've done some research, try to grow something in your own backyard...or even in a container garden. Does your produce measure up in size? How about in taste?

## Bobbing for...

The giant peach was able to float for quite some time until the Sharks appeared and forced the peach and its inhabitants to take to the air.

Find out how well peaches really float by having a bobbing for peaches contest. Fill a large bucket or tub with water, put it in a space that's water proof (not on the carpet!), and don your raincoat. Hold your hands behind your back and see how many peaches you can grab with your teeth in the span of one minute. Compete with your friends and classmates.

After you've dried off, see what fruits, vegetables, and (waterproof!) objects float. Which ones don't? What do the floating objects have in common? Weight? Size? Shape? What do the non-floating objects have in common?

## Spiders and Earthworms and Bugs, oh my!

James has some interesting friends inside of the Giant Peach. There's an Earthworm, a Ladybug, a Centipede, a Grasshopper, a Glowworm, and a Silkworm. How do the characters compare with real life creepy crawlies?



Create your own bug box following the directions on the next page. Then take a trip to your backyard or playground to see if you can find some earthworms, ladybugs, or other critters. Place them carefully into your bug box and take a closer look. Is the earthworm blind? Does the grasshopper make music of any kind? Does the glowworm have wings?

After you set your bugs, worms, and other creatures free, see if you can find books and articles in the library that tell you even more about these tiny beings and how they live. Some good choices are *Pet Bugs: A Kid's Guide to Catching and Keeping Touchable Insects* by Sally Kneidel, *Everything Bug: What Kids Really Want to Know About Insects and Spiders* by Cherie Winner, and *The Best Book of Bugs* by Claire Llewellyn.

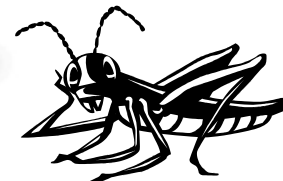
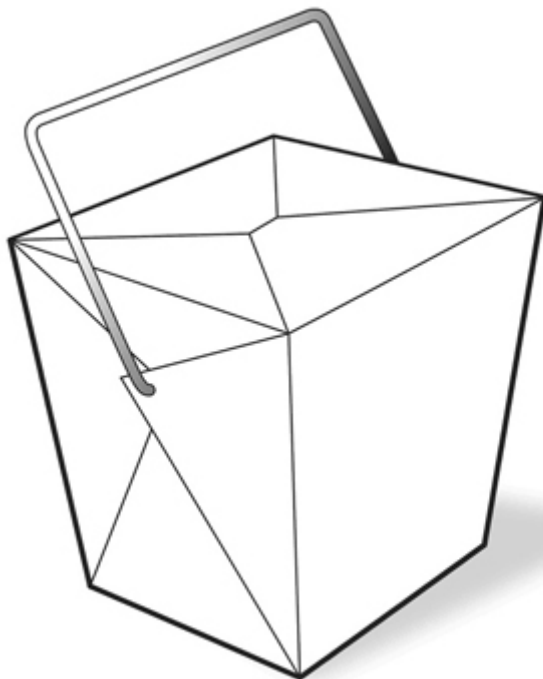
# ***How to Make a Bug Box***

## **Materials:**

clean takeout carton, liter bottle or milk carton  
plastic transparency sheets (typically available at craft stores)  
scissors  
paint in color(s) of choice  
bug-catching net (optional)  
animal field guide

## **Steps:**

1. Make a window in the container with plastic transparency sheets.
2. Cut out a hole in the container and cover it with the plastic.
3. Paint the container, using nontoxic paint that won't harm little guests.
4. To collect bugs in the box, hold the box close and tap them in, or set the box down and let the bug walk in. A net designed for catching bugs also works.
5. Don't allow your children to keep the bug overnight or for several days--they belong in nature.
6. Use an animal field guide to identify the bugs. Avoid poisonous and stinging bugs.



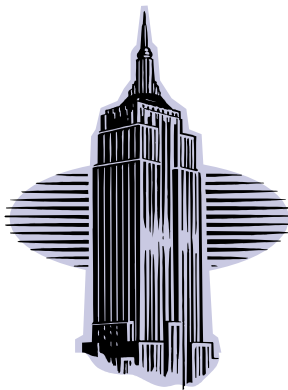
# Social Studies

## Map it

Open up those atlases and see how far James and his friends travelled to get from the coast of the United Kingdom to New York City. Next, figure out how far it is from your home to your grandma's. How far is it to your best friend's house? How far is it to the places you'd most like to visit someday?



## Building an Empire



The peach's journey ends when it lands safely on the needle of the Empire State Building. The Empire State Building was the tallest building in the world when it was completed in 1931.

Take a look into the history of this iconic building. What motivated New York City to build such a big, expensive building in the midst of the Great Depression? How did the Empire State Building manage to eke out just enough height to beat out the Chrysler Building and 40 Wall Street to become the world's tallest building in 1931?

Why do you think Roald Dahl had *James and the Giant Peach* end in New York? Why not Chicago or Paris? Why do you think the Empire State Building remains such an important icon even though it is no longer the world's tallest building and hasn't been for more than 30 years?

## The Country James and the City James

James starts out his adventure while living in the English countryside with Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker. Although his life is filled with hard work and unpleasantness, it is also filled with trees, animals, and fresh air.

Our story ends in the city with James surrounded by skyscrapers, traffic, and lots and lots of people. He still lives near the sea...but this one is polluted.

Make a list of all of the pros and cons of living in the city and the country. Why would someone prefer one over the other? How does life differ if you live in a very rural area as opposed to a big urban area? Which place would you rather live? Why?

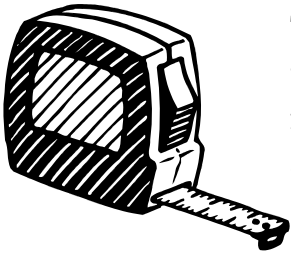


# Mathematics

## Are we there yet?

How long do you think it took the peach and its inhabitants to make the journey across the Atlantic? Take a guess at how fast they were moving and figure out how long it would take to travel across the ocean at that speed.

## How do they measure up?



The critters James meets inside of the peach are much, much, MUCH larger than they are in nature. Compare the actors' sizes to that of the actual insects they play. If you assume that most of the actors are about your own size, how many times bigger are they than their real world counterparts?

# Arts

## You're bugging me!

Make your own version of one of the bugs, worms, or critters that live inside the peach. Be creative in your interpretations. Here are a couple of suggestions:

### Paper bag bugs

- Use scissors to open the front of a grocery bag. Cut a hole in the bottom (for your neck). Next, cut holes in the sides (for your arms). Now it should look a little like a shirt.
- Turn the bag to the back (the part that hasn't been cut open). Use crayons or markers to design your insect. You could even make a collage!

### Critters from your clothes

- Imagine what your bug would wear if he or she were human. What colors, textures, or styles evoke each character's personality.
- Take a look through your closet or browse through a thrift store and see what inspires you.

## Songs of the Centipede

The Centipede is a master at creating songs and poems to entertain his friends on their amazing journey. Most of his rhymes are about things that have happened to him or people he knows. Use an experience from your own life to write a song or a poem. You don't have to write about something as unusual as living inside a peach...everyday events can be entertaining, too!



# Resources

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