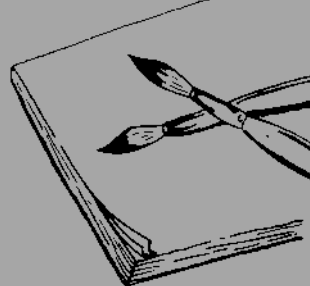


## Setting/Time and Place: Where in the World Are We?



"In the shadowy light of the stronghold everything seemed possible."

—*Bridge to Terabithia*

### **Time: When does the story take place?**

*Bridge to Terabithia* is a contemporary novel, meaning it was written about the current time period. Since it was published more than twenty-five years ago, however, it is not contemporary to today's readers.

We can see that the story is set in the mid-1970s in a number of ways. One of these is through a comment about the "recent" Vietnam War, which actually ended in 1975. Also, during the 1960s and 1970s there was a great deal of protest against the United States' involvement in that war. People who supported the war sometimes called those who opposed it "peaceniks." This is a name that some of the children in the book call Miss Edmunds.

"Hippie," another name Jess's mom and some of the children call Miss Edmunds, also places the book in the 1970s. "Hippie" is a word that was commonly used at that time to describe a person who did not dress and act as most people did, and Miss

Edmunds definitely stood out from the rest of Jess's community. Jess notes that the kids "make fun of Miss Edmunds's lack of lipstick or the cut of her jeans," which made her different from the other women—female teachers or parents—they knew.

Comments about fashion help show when the story takes place. We learn that Miss Edmunds was the only female teacher at Lark Creek Elementary who wore pants. Today it is common for women to wear pants, but at the time the book was written, it was still unusual, especially outside of big cities.

### **Place: Where are we?**

The book is set in a fictional rural Virginia town. Paterson created the town, which she calls Lark Creek, based on her memories of living and teaching sixth grade for one year in rural Lovettsville, Virginia. "I have to know about a place before I write a story that is set in that place," Paterson has said.

What is Lark Creek like? It is a rural, poor, and, in many ways, a narrow-minded place. It is also a place containing great physical beauty, for those willing to see it.

Paterson establishes the rural setting in a number of ways. She begins the book with Jess running in his family's cow field. Milking the cow is one of Jess's chores. Another is picking beans from the bean patch and helping his mother can them. These are all activities that take place in a rural setting.

The author tells us more about the rural setting when she describes Jess's father's long ride back and forth to Washington, D.C., where he works digging and hauling all day. Mr. Aaron's ride is so long because the family lives in the country, many, many miles from the city.

While rural places are not always poor, that is sometimes the case. As Jess tells Leslie, "You can't make a go of a farm nowadays, you know. My dad has to go to Washington to work, or we wouldn't have enough money. . . ." When Leslie tells him that money is not a problem for her family, Jess is surprised. "He did not know people for whom money was not the problem."

It is clear that money is a problem for Jess's family. His house is so small that Jess shares a bedroom with his two younger sisters. Jess's worn sneakers, his one pair of corduroy pants, and his lack of boots show the reader how tight money is. When Jess draws, he uses whatever paper and pencils he can get hold of. But he dreams of more. "Lord, what he wouldn't give for a new pad or real art paper and a set of those marking pens."

As Christmas approaches, the stress of not having enough money puts a strain on the entire family. Jess worries about what he can give Leslie: "His dad had told him he would give him a dollar for each member of the family, but even if he cheated on the family presents, there was no way he could get from that enough to buy Leslie anything worth giving her."

Most people in Lark Creek are as poor as the Aaronses. The lack of money in the town is evident at Jess's school. Lark Creek

Elementary is so crowded that Jess's class of thirty-one students is jammed into a small basement room, music is held in the teachers' room, and there is no gym. In addition, the school is short on supplies, "especially athletic equipment, so all the balls went to the upper grades at recess time after lunch." That's why Jess and the other lower-grade boys take up running during recess: It's a sport that doesn't require any special equipment.

Paterson shows us Lark Creek's prejudices when she tells us how angry Jess's father was when Jess told him he wanted to be an artist when he grew up. "Bunch of old ladies turning my only son into some kind of a—," he said. And even though he stopped on the word, "Jess had gotten the message. It was one you didn't forget."

Jess's family and schoolmates are just as narrow-minded about his friendship with Leslie as they are about his love of drawing. His older sisters call Leslie Jess's "*girl friend*" and his mother says that she is sure Jess's father is "fretting that his only son did nothing but play with girls, and they both were worried about what would come of it."

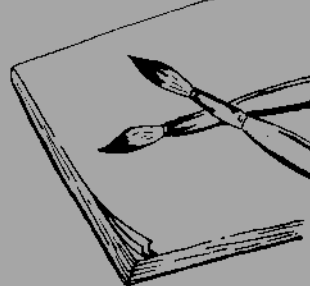
Jess and Leslie cope with the narrowness of the world around them by creating their own imaginary kingdom, where they are king and queen. They build Terabithia's stronghold in the woods beyond the creek behind Leslie's house. While the woods are there for all to enjoy, only Jess and Leslie seem to appreciate their beauty and magic. "As a regular thing, as a permanent place, this was where he would choose to be," Jess thinks of the spot where they build their stronghold. "Here where the dogwood

and redbud played hide and seek between the oaks and evergreens, and the sun flung itself in golden streams through the trees to splash warmly at their feet.”

### **Thinking about the setting**

- What are some of the clues that *Bridge to Terabithia* takes place in a rural community?
- How is Lark Creek like where you live? How is it different?
- Do you think *Bridge to Terabithia* would change much if it were rewritten so that it took place in the early twenty-first century rather than the late twentieth century? Why or why not?

## Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



"For the first time in his life, he got up every morning with something to look forward to. Leslie was more than his friend. She was his other, more exciting self—his way to Terabithia and all the worlds beyond."

—*Bridge to Terabithia*

### **Friendship**

The value of friendship is one of the major themes in *Bridge to Terabithia*. It is through friendship that Jess and Leslie are able to accept themselves, feel a sense of belonging, and grow.

Before Jess meets Leslie, he feels all alone in the world. His father works long hours and is too tired to pay much attention to him when he is home. He has his mother and four sisters, but "sometimes he felt so lonely among all those females." At school, Jess has no real friends, except for Miss Edmunds, the music teacher. So when Leslie moves in, Jess is ripe for friendship.

But initially Jess is not interested in being Leslie's friend. First off, she's a girl. And not only that, she's a girl who "had no notion

of what you did and didn't do," as she proves when she joins the boys for races at recess.

Jess doesn't appreciate Leslie for being herself, despite the fact that he is so often torn between being himself—a sensitive boy who loves to draw—and being what others expect him to be. It isn't until music class that first week of school that Jess reveals his real self and smiles at Leslie in a way that tells her he wants to be friends.

Leslie enriches Jess's life in ways he could never have imagined. She encourages him to use his imagination in ways that go far beyond drawing. She tells Jess stories and lends him books. She believes in him. When Leslie tells Jess, "You should draw a picture of Terabithia for us to hang in the castle," Jess responds, "I can't. . . . I just can't get the poetry of the trees." Leslie reassures him, "Don't worry. You will someday."

In return, Jess gives Leslie the comfort of his friendship, which helps her survive in a world that is far different from the one she left behind. Jess also teaches Leslie about caring for others. When she finds Janice Avery crying in the girls' room and doesn't want to do anything to help her, Jess says, "You're the one who's always telling me I gotta care."

### **Accepting differences**

*Bridge to Terabithia* is also about being different and accepting your differences as well as those of others.

Jess is different from the people around him. He likes to draw and wants to be an artist when he grows up. But many in Jess's community do not respect art; even his father thinks being an artist is not very manly.

In the beginning of the story, Jess tries to hide his differences. In one instance, when Mrs. Myers asks the class to write a paper about their favorite hobby, "Jess had written about football, which he really hated, but he had enough brains to know that if he said drawing, everyone would laugh at him."

But then Jess meets Leslie, who is also different, but is accepting of her differences as well as those of others. Leslie shows her comfort with who she is when she joins the boys for races during recess. Leslie loves to run and doesn't care if only boys have run in the past.

At first, Jess is annoyed by the way Leslie marches to the beat of her own drummer. "Lord," he thinks, "the girl had no notion of what you did and didn't do." It is Miss Edmunds, Jess's "fellow outlaw," who helps Jess accept Leslie, and they both help Jess accept himself. When Miss Edmunds sings "Free to Be . . . You and Me" after meeting Leslie, Jess finds himself smiling at Leslie.

Later, when the two are best friends, Jess must listen to the taunts of his sisters and his schoolmates about having a "*girl* friend." Even his mother and father disapprove of him spending so much time with a girl. But Jess doesn't care. He is learning to accept who he is.

## **Imagination**

The importance of imagination is another theme Paterson weaves into *Bridge to Terabithia*. Without imagination, life can be pretty dreary, which is how Jess's life is before he meets Leslie. Until she arrives in Lark Creek, Jess's only imaginative outlet is drawing. But when Leslie arrives, she uses her imagination, and encourages Jess to use his, to create a magical new world where the two of them can be themselves and so much more.

“He grabbed the end of the rope and swung out toward the other bank with a kind of wild exhilaration and landed gently on his feet, taller and stronger and wiser in that mysterious land.”

This imaginative kingdom is not only a place where Jess and Leslie are taller and stronger, it is also a place where fears are forgotten: “Between the two of them they owned the world and no enemy . . . could ever really defeat them.”

When Leslie dies, Jess wonders if the magic is lost, but discovers that it isn't—it is still inside him. And it is inside May Belle, too, though she may not be aware of it until Jess shows it to her: “He put flowers in her hair and led her across the bridge—the great bridge into Terabithia—which might look to someone with no magic in him like a few planks across a nearly dry gully.”

## **Fear**

Fear and learning to accept one's fears is another important theme in *Bridge to Terabithia*. Before he becomes more self-accepting, Jess is ashamed of his fears. He is afraid to befriend

Leslie, and when he finally does, he is angry at himself for having waited. "He smiled at her. What the heck? There wasn't any reason he couldn't. What was he scared of anyhow? Lord. Sometimes he acted like the original yellow-bellied sapsucker."

When Jess listens to Leslie's scuba diving essay, "he could hardly breathe," because he can't swim and is afraid of the water. Again, he is ashamed. "Lord, he was such a coward. . . . He was worse a baby than Joyce Ann."

And when the creek bed fills with water, Jess becomes afraid to cross it to get to Terabithia. "For Jess the fear of the crossing rose with the height of the creek." He doesn't know what to do. "It wasn't so much that he minded telling Leslie that he was afraid to go; it was that he minded being afraid."

Jess refuses to let fear get the better of him, though. He decides he'll ask Leslie to teach him to swim come summer. "I'll just grab that old terror by the shoulders and shake the daylight's out of it."

But Leslie dies before he can ask her. And Jess wonders if she was scared. "*Did you know you were dying?*" he wonders. "*Were you scared like me?*"

When May Belle tries to follow him over to Terabithia and nearly falls in the creek, Jess rescues her. When May Belle tells him she was scared, he tells her it's okay. "Everybody gets scared sometimes, May Belle. You don't have to be ashamed."

And as Jess looks to the future, he seems to be more at ease with his fears. “As for the terrors ahead—for he did not fool himself that they were all behind him—well, you just have to stand up to your fear and not let it squeeze you white.”

## **Caring for others**

Another theme in *Bridge to Terabithia* relates to the importance of caring for others. We see it especially when Leslie finds Janice Avery crying in the bathroom, and Jess wants to do something to help her. “Lord, what was the matter with him? Janice Avery had given him nothing but trouble, and now he was feeling responsible for her.” Despite Leslie’s initial reluctance, Jess talks her into going back into the girls’ room to try to help Janice.

Miss Edmunds also shows the importance of caring for others. She does this by paying special attention to Jess, encouraging him in his artwork, and taking him to the National Gallery and the Smithsonian.

May Belle shows how much she cares when she tries to follow Jess to Terabithia, even after he hit her in the face. “I just wanted to find you,” she tells him, “so you wouldn’t be so lonesome.”

## **Giving**

The value of giving and giving back is another theme that runs through this book. One of the first and most natural places we see this giving is at Christmastime. Jess wants to give Leslie the perfect gift. “It was not that she would expect something

expensive; it was that he needed to give her something as much as he needed to eat when he was hungry.”

Jess does find the perfect gift for Leslie—a puppy. And she gives him a wonderful gift of paper, brushes, and paint in return.

We also see the value of giving when Jess goes over his budget to give May Belle the Barbie that she wants for Christmas. Later, when Jess thinks about doing something nice for Mrs. Myers, he tells the reader, “Sometimes like the Barbie doll you need to give people something that’s for them, not just something that makes you feel good giving it.”

When Jess realizes all that Leslie has given him, he feels that he must find a way to reciprocate. “It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him in vision and strength.” One way he does this is by building a bridge and leading May Belle into Terabithia.

## **Death**

Another important theme in *Bridge to Terabithia* is death. Jess must learn to accept his best friend’s death, despite feeling that “Leslie could not die any more than he himself could die.”

Jess reacts to the news of Leslie’s death with shock, selfishness, anger, and grief. At first, Jess does not believe his father when he tells him that Leslie has died: “No! I don’t believe you. You’re lying to me!”

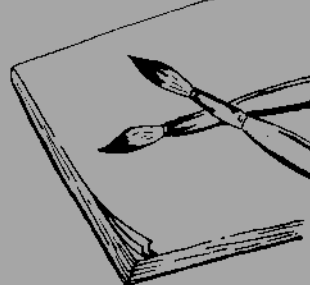
When Jess goes to see Leslie's parents, he finds himself filled with conflicted emotions. He feels briefly elated to think "he was the only person his age he knew whose best friend had died. It made him important." He feels annoyed at all the adults crying around him: "They weren't crying for Leslie. They were crying for themselves." And he feels angry, angry that Leslie's parents brought her here in the first place.

Jess is also angry at Leslie. "She had tricked him. She had made him leave his old self behind and come into her world, and then . . . she had left him stranded there." He flings the paper and paints she had given him for Christmas into the creek, crying out, "I hate her. I hate her. I wish I'd never seen her in my whole life." When his father pulls Jess onto his lap and tells him, "Hell, ain't it," Jess finds it "strangely comforting."

### **Thinking about the themes**

- What do you think is the most important theme in *Bridge to Terabithia*?
- What did Jess and Leslie give to each other in their friendship? What do you have to offer as a friend?
- Why is it important to accept our own differences and those of others?
- How do you feel about your fears? Do you think they are something to be ashamed of? Or do you agree with Jess that "everybody gets scared sometimes. . . . You don't have to be ashamed"?

## Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



**H**ere is a list of the characters in *Bridge to Terabithia*. Following that, there is a brief description of each of the main characters.

Jesse Aarons	a fifth-grade boy
Leslie Burke	the new fifth-grade girl
Daddy/Mr. Aarons	Jess's father
Momma/Mrs. Aarons	Jess's mother
May Belle	Jess's six-year-old sister
Ellie, Brenda, and Joyce Ann	Jess's other sisters
Miss Edmunds	the music teacher
Mrs. Myers	the fifth-grade teacher
Janice Avery	a seventh-grade bully
Prince Terrien	the puppy Jess gives Leslie
Bill Burke	Leslie's father
Judy Burke	Leslie's mother

**Jesse Aarons:** Jesse, also called Jess, the main character in the book, is a ten-year-old boy who feels lost and lonely in a family and community that, for the most part, does not understand him. Jess is artistic, sensitive, fearful, kind, and hardworking.

It is clear from the beginning that Jess wants desperately to belong. He has gotten up every morning all summer to run so

that when he goes back to school he can be the fastest kid in the fifth grade. Being the fastest will win him the approval of his peers; they will stop thinking of Jess as “that crazy little kid that draws all the time.”

Jess also wants to be fastest to win the approval and attention of his father. Jess wants and needs his father’s attention. In a house full of girls—four sisters, two older and two younger, as well as his mother—Jess feels very lonely. The only family member he feels at all close to is May Belle, and she’s not even seven.

What Jess loves to do more than anything else is draw. “Jess drew the way some people drink whiskey. The peace would start at the top of his muddled brain and seep down through his tired and tensed-up body.”

Drawing is Jess’s comfort, but it is also what sets him apart. When he was in first grade and told his father he wanted to be an artist when he grew up, his father was furious. His teachers, all but Miss Edmunds, don’t like his drawing either. Because Jess doesn’t draw traditional subjects—he usually draws animals in crazy predicaments—the teachers complain that he is wasting time, talent, and supplies. Even his mother looks at Jess’s drawing as a waste of time when he should be doing chores. Because Jess is sensitive, these criticisms hurt. He tries to hide his love of drawing from everyone but Miss Edmunds and Leslie.

But Jess’s sensitivity is not limited to his own feelings. He feels sorry for Leslie when she joins his class. “It must be embarrassing to sit in front when you find yourself dressed funny on the first day of school. And you don’t know anybody.”

Jess is also sensitive to the people in his family. He gets “mad at himself for cutting her [May Belle] down,” when he knows she worships him. And Jess tries to make his father feel good about the racing-car set he gave Jess for Christmas.

In addition to being very sensitive, Jess is also fearful. He is afraid of being different, of deep water, of the dark pine forest, and of Janice Avery, among other things. But during the course of the book, Jess learns to stand up and face the “whole mob of foolish little fears running riot inside his gut.”

Jess is also kind. He feels sorry for Janice Avery after he and Leslie send her a love letter and pretend it’s from Willard Hughes. And when Leslie says she found Janice crying in the girls’ room, he talks her into going back in to see what’s wrong with Janice.

Finally, Jess is hardworking. Although his mother calls him lazy, he seems anything but and is often helping around the house. In fact, over the course of just one day, Jess milks Miss Bessie, picks beans and helps his mother can them, then makes himself and his little sisters peanut butter sandwiches for supper. And he does all this after having gotten up early to run.

**Leslie Burke:** Leslie Burke is the other main character in this book. She is friendly, self-confident, a great runner, bright, imaginative, and seemingly fearless.

Leslie is nearly ten when she moves to Lark Creek from Arlington, Virginia. Her parents are both writers, and they moved to Lark Creek because, as Leslie explains, “they decided they were too hooked on money and success, so they bought that old

farm and they're going to farm it and think about what's important." Where Leslie was once surrounded by wealth and open-mindedness, she is now surrounded by poverty and narrow-mindedness.

From the moment we first meet her, we see that Leslie is friendly. She is sitting on a fence watching Jess run. She tells him, "I thought we might as well be friends. There's no one else close by." Though Jess isn't interested in being friends at first, Leslie doesn't give up.

Leslie's self-confidence is also evident from the beginning of the story. She comes to a new school dressed unlike any of the other students and, despite the fact that they all stare at her, she doesn't seem to care. She also has the confidence to join the boys at recess and race with them. When one of the boys tells her, "You can run on up to the hopscotch now," she refuses. "But I won the heat," she says. "I want to run." And run she does, winning the race.

Leslie is smart. She is such a good student that Mrs. Myers has a smile just for her, the "Leslie Burke special." Leslie is also a wonderful writer and storyteller; her scuba diving essay is so good that her words "drew Jess with her under the dark water."

Leslie's intelligence extends to her understanding of people. From the beginning, she recognizes Jess as a good person although he tries not to show it. "You're the only kid in this whole durned school who's worth shooting," she tells him. She knows what makes the school bully, Janice Avery, tick, and is the person to

figure out a satisfying form of revenge after Janice steals May Belle's Twinkies.

Imagination is one of Leslie's greatest gifts. It is the spark of Leslie's imagination that helps her and Jess escape the narrow-mindedness of the people around them and create a whole new world for themselves. They are the rulers of Terabithia, and it is there that they conquer enemies real and imagined; there that they plot revenge against Janice Avery and use sticks to fight off giants.

Finally, Leslie is seemingly fearless. She is not afraid of scuba diving or Janice Avery; of swollen creek beds or dark pine forests. Leslie's fearlessness is an inspiration to Jess.

**May Belle:** May Belle is one of Jess's younger sisters. "She was going on seven, and she worshiped him, which was OK sometimes." May Belle is the only one of his sisters Jess can stand to be around. His two older sisters, Ellie and Brenda, are "cagey girls who managed somehow to have all the fun and leave him and their mother with all the work." His youngest sister, Joyce Ann, "cried if you looked at her cross-eyed." Jess has a soft spot for May Belle. "She was a good kid. He really liked old May Belle."

May Belle looks up to, and looks out for, Jess. She looks up to him and encourages him in his running. She thinks he can do anything, including exact revenge on Janice Avery for stealing her Twinkies. She looks out for him after Leslie dies by trying to

follow him to Terabithia. “I just wanted to find you, so you wouldn’t be so lonesome,” she tells him.

**Daddy/Mr. Aarons:** Jess’s father is a quiet man who works long hours in faraway Washington, D.C., and has little time or energy for his son when he gets home from work. He is an old-fashioned man who has clear ideas regarding what boys and girls, men and women, should do. When Jess tells him he wants to be an artist when he grows up, he is very unhappy, worrying that his son is not manly enough. He worries about Jess spending so much time playing with a girl. He never hugs Jess; the only thing he might say to him all day is, “Mighty late with the milking, aren’t you, son?”

But while he is old-fashioned, Jess’s father is not cold, as he shows when Leslie dies. He goes after Jess when he runs away, and carries him back to the truck. He also follows Jess when he runs down to the creek and throws away all the art supplies Leslie gave him. He pulls Jess onto his lap and comforts him, knowing that his son needs his help to get through such a terrible tragedy.

**Momma/Mrs. Aarons:** Jess’s mother, like his father, has specific ideas of what people should and shouldn’t do; she also has a dread of being treated with disrespect. Her narrow-mindedness is evident in her comments about Miss Edmunds (“Sounds like some kinda hippie.”), Leslie (“tacky clothes,” hair “shorter than a boy’s”), and Leslie’s parents (“hardly more than hippies”). It is also clear in the way she treats Jess’s drawing as unimportant: “Jesse Oliver!” she yells at him. “Whatcha mean lying there in the middle of the floor doing nothing anyway?”

We see one example of Mrs. Aarons’s fear of disrespect after Jess asks if Leslie can go to church with them. “I don’t want no one poking their nose up at my family,” she says.

**Miss Edmunds:** Miss Edmunds is the music teacher at Lark Creek Elementary School. She is young and free-spirited, and Jess is in love with her. More than her “long swishy black hair and blue, blue eyes,” Jess’s love is a result of Miss Edmunds’s encouragement. Miss Edmunds is the only adult who has had something positive to say about his drawings.

The music teacher is a friend to all students, especially those who are different. Upon meeting Leslie, she leads the class in singing “Free to Be . . . You and Me,” encouraging the students to accept themselves as well as one another. It is this song that prompts Jess to smile at Leslie, thus beginning their wonderful friendship.

### **Thinking about the characters**

- How does Jess Aarons grow during the course of the book?
- If someone as different as Leslie Burke moved to your school, how would you treat her? Why? Would you treat her differently after having read *Bridge to Terabithia*?
- Why do you think Jess’s father feels the way he does about Jess’s drawing? Why do he and his wife feel uncomfortable with Jess having a girl for a best friend?