

A SPARK OF IMAGINATION BRIDGES A GAP

“A kite rises against, not with, the wind.”—Hamilton Wright Mabie

Grade Level: 3–5

Time Allocation: 25–30 minutes

Objectives:

Named one of Bank Street College's Best Books of the Year for 2014, *The Kite That Bridged Two Nations* by Alexis O'Neill, illustrated by Terry Widener, tells the story of a plucky kite-loving boy's determination to fly his handmade gingham treasure across the Niagara River. In the winter of 1848, despite challenges and setbacks, Homan Walsh succeeded in anchoring a string from the United States to Canada, spanning 800 feet across the Niagara River, 240 feet above the raging Whirlpool Rapids. The boy won ten dollars in the contest arranged by engineer Charles Ellet, Jr., and his kite string became the first line for a suspension bridge connecting the two countries.

Materials:

- A copy of *The Kite That Bridged Two Nations*
- Props: kite and spool or ball of twine
- A map with detail of the border between Niagara Falls, New York, and Niagara Falls, Ontario
- A photo of the Niagara Suspension Bridge constructed in Niagara Falls, New York, in 1848 (find one at <http://tinyurl.com/pp7vyuf>).

Procedure:

1. Show the kite. Ask who in the group has flown a kite. Ask volunteers to describe their experiences. Discuss: What is fun about flying a kite? What do you need to know and do to keep a kite in the air?
2. Show the book. Read the title.
3. Explain that this story based on true events is set in Niagara Falls, New York. Locate the city on the map. Point out Niagara Falls, Ontario on the Canadian side of the border.
4. Show the photo of the Niagara Suspension Bridge. Explain: Before the bridge was built in 1848, a kite-flying contest was held. A prize would be awarded to the first boy who anchored a kite string between the United States and Canada, across the Niagara River. The distance across the river was 800 feet, spanning roaring rapids—and the contest took place in the winter, amid ice, snow, and brutal winds. Let's read to find out about the boy who won the contest. But before we begin, what questions do you have? List questions on chart paper or a whiteboard.
5. When you get to the word *spars*, pause to point out the spars on the kite.
6. After reading about Walsh naming his kite, pause to discuss why he might have chosen to call it "Union." Discuss the meanings of the word. What was Walsh's goal?
7. Read through the page describing the bonfires. Discuss why Homan's "purpose blazed anew."
8. Read the next page. Note that the word *union* is not capitalized. Discuss.
9. Read through Homan's return home. Ask: What words would you use to describe Homan?
10. Read to the end.
11. Review students' questions from step 4. Explain that this story is based on true events, but the dialogue is imagined. In the back matter, the author explains: "What We Know," "What We Don't Know," and "The Rest of the Story." O'Neill also provides a timeline for the Niagara Suspension Bridge and explains why she chose to tell the story from Homan's point of view. Have students choose one of the unanswered questions on the list or one aspect of the story to research and report back to the class. (For a list of possible topics, see below).



Choose a detail from ***The Kite That Bridged Two Nations*** to research. Gather information and prepare to report to the class.

Possible Choices

- Learn more about the Niagara River.
- Learn more about the natural wonder, Niagara Falls.
- Investigate how rapids are formed.
- Learn about who Charles Ellet, Jr., was.
- Design a handbill or broadside announcing Ellet's contest as it might have looked.
- Investigate the history of the city of Niagara Falls, New York, including what its previous name was.
- In the story, Homan stays with a family in Elgin, a city on the Canadian side of the falls, for eight days while the storm rages. Find out the name of that city today and other names it has had.
- Research the *Maid of the Mist* ferry.
- Learn more about barn door kites.
- Construct a visual timeline of the Niagara Suspension Bridge.
- Learn more about suspension bridges.
- Find and compare archived photos of the Niagara Suspension Bridge, the Railway Suspension Bridge, and the Steel Arch Bridge (renamed Whirlpool Rapids Bridge).
- Learn about Mary Virginia Ellet and the part she played in the story of the Niagara Suspension Bridge.
- Visit the author's website and choose details about the making of this book to share with the class.
- Read the back matter of the book to determine what is factual in the story and what is not.
- Investigate what else was going on in the United States at the time of this story.
- Research the weather in the Niagara region at the time of the story.
- Learn more about Homan Walsh's life.
- Find out where Homan Walsh is buried and research more about the site.
- Learn more about author Alexis O'Neill.
- Find other children's books about aspects of this story or the setting. Compare.