

**PRAIRIE WHISPERS
BY FRANCES ARRINGTON**

**Louisiana Young Readers' Choice Award Nominee 2006
Grades 6-8**

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Title: Prairie Whispers
Author: Frances Arrington
Publisher: Philomel Books, 2003
Pages: 176

Summary

In the 1860s on the South Dakota prairie, Colleen helps deliver her mother's baby, but the baby is too early and too small. Her mother is too ill to know that the baby is stillborn. When Colleen goes to find help for her mother, she discovers that the woman in a nearby covered wagon has also given birth. That infant is well, but the mother, Mrs. O'Brien, knows that she is dying. Mrs. O'Brien tells Colleen that she doesn't trust her husband and begs her to take the baby. Mrs. O'Brien also tells her to take a gold watch and a moneybox. Colleen switches the wagon woman's baby for her mother's dead baby. Colleen meant to tell Ma and Pa the truth about that night, but it never seemed the right moment. When the baby's suspicious father returns, Colleen is driven to lying, hiding and even stealing to protect the baby. The book ends as Colleen is about to tell her parents the truth.

Awards and "Best Book" Lists

Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award Master List 2004 – 2005

Booklist Best of List, Editors Choices 2004

Booklist Top 10 Historical Fiction for Youth 2003

Author's Biography

Frances Arrington was raised in a Hartsville, a small town in South Carolina. After college, she took a cross-country trip and became fascinated with the prairie states and imagined what pioneer life would have been like. Her first novel for middle readers was *Bluestem* that was published in 2000. This novel was set on the open prairie in 1879 and reveals how 11-year old Polly and 9-year old Jessie are forced to fend for themselves after their mother lapses into an irreversible catatonic state. Later, Arrington was inspired by a painting that showed a lone wagon crossing the prairie and this led to the writing of *Prairie*

Whispers. She now lives in Folly Beach, South Carolina where she has been a teacher for 24 years.

Other Titles by Frances Arrington

Bluestem
Stella's Bull

Related Titles

As Far As I Can See: Meg's Prairie Diary by Kate McMullan
Bluestem by Frances Arrington
Going West by Jean Van Leeuwen (Grades 1-4)
Pioneer Girl: Growing Up on the Prairie by Andrea Warren
Prairie Birds: Fragile Splendor in the Great Plains by Paul A. Johnsgard
Prairie Song by Pam Conrad
Prairie Visions: The Life and Times of Solomon Butcher by Pam Conrad
Stories From Where We Live—The Great North American Prairie by Sara St. Antoine and Trudy Nicholson

Classroom Connections

- Ask students to brainstorm why they think American settlers decided to move west in the 1860s. Then have students research the westward movement to determine why American settlers moved west in the 1860s. Have students compare the brainstormed list of reasons to the actual reasons the families moved. Using a Venn diagram, compare/contrast the reasons for the westward movement in the 1860s and the reasons why families move today.
- Writing Exercise: The book ends as Colleen is about to tell her parents the truth about the baby. Have students discuss the following:
 - What will Colleen say?
 - How will her family react?
- This is a good book to develop questions and ethical debates with your students. There are many incidents that provoke the question, "What would you do?" Other questions for discussion:
 - Why did Colleen have to switch the babies? Couldn't she just have taken Bonnie home as Mrs. O'Brien asked?
 - Does Mr. O'Brien strike you as a bad man?
 - Why did Mr. O'Brien's wife worry about leaving the baby with him?
 - After the end of the book, how do you think Colleen explained to her parents about the baby? What was their reaction?

Web Sites

Life on the Great Plains

http://www.edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?ID=265

This lesson plan about the Great Plains was created for grades 9 – 12, but could be adapted for middle grades.

Prairies

<http://www.42explore.com/prairie.htm>

Site offers many links to information about prairies.

Prairies First Frame

<http://www.cesa10.k12.wi.us/Ecosystems/prairies/index.htm>

This is a database that includes information about native animals, plants, people, prairie types and links to resources. This web site was created by a 6th grade class.