

Lesson Plans and Resources for *Orphan Train*

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These resources are all available, both separately and together, at www.freelibrary.org/onebook

Please send any comments or feedback about these resources to Larissa.Pahomov@gmail.com.

OVERVIEW AND ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

The materials in this unit plan are meant to be flexible and easy to adapt to your own classroom. Each chapter has discussion questions provided in a later section.

Through reading the book and completing any of the suggested activities, students can achieve any number of the following understandings:

- *There are both permanent and changeable parts of a person's identity.*
- *Humans are influenced by both the joys and challenges they have experienced.*
- *People cannot survive without some kind of connection to others.*

Students should be introduced to the following key questions as they begin reading. They can be discussed both in universal terms and in relation to specific characters in the book:

Universal

- *What do children need to survive? How about to really thrive in the world?*
- *What parts of a person's identity can be changed? Which parts can never be changed?*
- *What has a greater influence on a person: the joys they have experienced, or the challenges?*

Book-Specific

- *Did Vivian get what she needed to survive? How about Molly?*
- *Is Vivian the same person as Niamh? In what ways?*
- *Was Vivian made into her current self because of the hardships she endured, or because of the kindness and joys she found along the way? How about Molly?*

Many of the reader response questions and suggested projects relate to these essential questions, and they can be looped back to frequently.

IN-CLASS INTRODUCTION

This lesson is designed to provide students with a one-class introduction to the book. The lesson can be used to start off a class reading of the text, or to encourage them to read it independently.

As a recipient of One Book resources, the Free Library requires that you devote one class period to introducing *Orphan Train* to students, either using this lesson or your own plan.

Introduction

1. Have students brainstorm, verbally or on paper:

Who are your ghosts?

Discuss that the ghosts in their life may not be people who have passed away – they can be people that they have lost contact with, or have left them in some way.

2. Distribute books and read the prologue together. Discuss:
 - a. Who might this person be? What clues do “gram” and “da” and “ma” give?
 - b. Is she or he “lucky” for having these ghosts?
 - c. Do you agree with the line that ghosts can “console and protect me in death as they never did in life.” Can somebody play a stronger role in their absence than they can in their presence?
3. Now, have students partner up and read different short chapters, introducing them to the two main characters. One student reads about Molly (pages 3-10) and one student reads about Niamh (pgs 19-23). When they are finished, discuss: what did you learn about your individual? Who might their ghosts be?
4. Hand out a reading log and/or vocabulary list as needed, and then give students time to continue reading on their own.
5. If students have internet access: have them visit the “virtual tenement tour” on the New York Tenement Museum website: http://www.tenement.org/Virtual_Tour/index_virtual.html

Correlation to Common Core Standards for Grades 11-12

INTRODUCTION LESSON + DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reading Standards for Literature

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
10. By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11–CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently

Speaking and Listening Standards

1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

VOCABULARY

Reading Standards for Literature

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

Language Standards

4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 11–12 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
6. Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

ANALYTICAL + CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Writing Standards

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences
4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)

5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1–3 up to and including grades 11–12 on page 54.)
9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

READER RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Section 1 – Pages 1-23

Who is speaking in the prologue? What role did the ghosts play in their life?

What are the basics of Molly's situation? Do you sympathize with her?

Section 2 – Pages 24-55

Dutchy has a very particular idea about the orphan train and what will happen to the kids on it. Do you agree with him?

Why does Vivian have so much stuff? And why does she avoid modern technology?

Section 3 – Pages 56-82

In her placement with Mrs. Byrne, Niamh gets the advice that "you got to learn to take what people are willing to give." (77) Do you think this is good advice? What might the downsides be?

Section 4 – Pages 83-112

Why does Vivian pry into the details of Molly's life? Why does Molly react to that the way that she does? Who do you think is in the right?

Why do you think Mr. and Mrs. Byrne act the way that they do? Is her behavior – and especially his – excusable in the name of trying to survive?

How has Niamh/Dorothy changed her own behavior or her identity to survive? At the end of the section, she says she feels that she is "retreating" (112). Is this healthy or dangerous?

Section 5 – Pages 113-138

How do the Grotes compare to the Brynes? Has Niamh's/Dorothy's situation improved or gotten worse?

Why does Molly wear a nose ring? Why isn't she in a hurry to put it back in? What might this reveal about her changing mindset?

What choice does the social worker present to Molly?

What's the assignment given to Molly in school? In what ways does the assignment relate to Vivian – and to Molly?

Section 6 – Pages 139-167

Why does Niamh/Dorothy avoid telling Miss Larsen what's wrong at home?

Why does Miss Larsen choose to intervene, even when she said earlier she can't take a child home with her?

Section 7 – Pages 169-199

Why does Vivian reference Macbeth when her stories start pouring out of her? "Who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him?" Why is her telling the story of her life like killing a person?

Why did the "experience of emotion" (170) stop coming naturally to Vivian?

Why does Molly speak up in the defense of Native Americans in class? How does it go?

Why does Molly snap at Jack when he questions what's she's up to with Vivian (174)? Why does his comment get to the heart of her life situation?

Vivian says that the first 23 years of her life are the ones that shaped her – and the rest of them are irrelevant. Do you think a person can actually experience their life in this way?

Why does Niamh/Dorothy agree to take the name Vivian? Do you agree with her choice?

Section 8 – Pages 200-236

Why does Vivian decide to avoid getting in trouble with the Niensens? In what way does this make her different from other teens her age?

What finally makes Molly decide to pack up and leave? Why can't Ralph talk her out of it? How does he compare to Mr. Byrne?

Why do you think Molly decides to reveal to Vivian that her sister Maisie was alive all of these years?

Why is Vivian so comfortable around Dutchy, despite the fact that she has practically no romantic experience?

Section 9 – Pages 237-273

After Dutchy dies, Vivian says that she's learned what it is to lose everything, and that "it must be my lot in life to be taught that lesson over and over again." Do you agree with her viewpoint on fate?

Do you think Vivian makes the right choice in giving away her daughter?

Why do you think Vivian opens herself up to technology and contact at the very end of the story?

Reading Group Guide Questions (provided by the publisher)

1. On the surface, Vivian's and Molly's lives couldn't be more different. In what ways are their stories similar?
2. In the prologue Vivian mentions that her "true love" died when she was 23, but she doesn't mention the other big secret in the book. Why not?
3. Why hasn't Vivian ever shared her story with anyone? Why does she tell it now?
4. What role does Vivian's grandmother play in her life? How does the reader's perception of her shift as the story unfolds?
5. Why does Vivian seem unable to get rid of the boxes in her attic?
6. In *Women of the Dawn*, a nonfiction book about the lives of four Wabanaki Indians excerpted in the epigraph, Bunny McBride writes: "In portaging from one river to another, Wabanakis had to carry their canoes and all other possessions. Everyone knew the value of traveling light and understood that it required leaving some things behind. Nothing encumbered movement more than fear, which was often the most difficult burden to surrender." How does the concept of portaging reverberate throughout this novel? What fears hamper Vivian's progress? Molly's?
7. Vivian's name changes several times over the course of the novel: from Niamh Power to Dorothy Nielsen to Vivian Daly. How are these changes significant for her? How does each name represent a different phase of her life?
8. What significance, if any, does Molly Ayer's name have?
9. How did Vivian's first-person account of her youth and the present-day story from Molly's third-person-limited perspective work together? Did you prefer one story to the other? Did the juxtaposition reveal things that might not have emerged in a traditional narrative?
10. In what ways, large and small, does Molly have an impact on Vivian's life? How does Vivian have an impact on Molly's?
11. What does Vivian mean when she says, "I believe in ghosts"?
12. When Vivian finally shares the truth about the birth of her daughter and her decision to put May up for adoption she tells Molly that she was "selfish" and "afraid." Molly defends her and affirms Vivian's choice. How did you perceive Vivian's decision? Were you surprised she sent her child to be adopted after her own experiences with the Children's Aid Society?
13. When the children are presented to audiences of potential caretakers, the Children's Aid Society explains adoptive families are responsible for the child's religious upbringing. What role does religion play in this novel? How do Molly and Vivian each view God?

14. When Vivian and Dutchy are reunited she remarks, “However hard I try, I will always feel alien and strange. And now I’ve stumbled on a fellow outsider, one who speaks my language without saying a word.” How is this also true for her friendship with Molly?

15. When Vivian goes to live with the Byrnes Fanny offers her food and advises, “You got to learn to take what people are willing to give.” In what ways is this good advice for Vivian and Molly? What are some instances when their independence helped them?

16. Molly is enthusiastic about Vivian’s reunion with her daughter, but makes no further efforts to see her own mother. Why is she unwilling or unable to effect a reunion in her own family? Do you think she will someday?

17. Vivian’s Claddagh cross is mentioned often throughout the story. What is its significance? How does its meaning change or deepen over the course of Vivian’s life?

VOCABULARY

Section 1 – Pages 1-23

Void (20) – It was so dark that I wondered, as I had many times before, if this is what blindness felt like—this enveloping void.

Wan (22) – Mr. Kaminski pulled a chain from the pressed-metal kitchen ceiling, and light seeped from a bulb, casting a wan glow over a scarred wooden table...

Incessant (23) – I was so afraid that our lives would fall apart again that I tried to ignore the things that frightened me the most: our da's continued love affair with drink, which a change in country did not change; Mam's black moods and rages; the incessant fighting between them.

Section 2 – Pages 24-55

Superlative (25) – Yes, he says “perfect,” *parr-fec*, in his German accent; I learn, in this instant, the terrible power of superlatives.

Milquetoast (28) – Mrs. Scatcherd and Mr. Curran, a milquetoast with a brown moustache, line us up by height, tallest to shortest...

Surreptitious (52) – Glancing surreptitiously at her phone, Molly sees it's 4:15—only fifteen minutes since she arrived.

Genteel (53) – That she has fulfilled her role as a thieving member of the underclass, now indentured to this genteel Midwestern white lady, is too perfect for words.

Section 3 – Pages 56-82

Depravity (64) – “You have the chance to save a child from destitution, poverty, and I believe Mrs. Scatcherd would agree that it is not too great an exaggeration to add sin and depravity.”

Florid (69) – Mr. Curran gives a less florid version of the speech he gave in Minneapolis, and people begin to inch forward.

Tufted (77) – At the back of the yard, tufted with grass like spare hair on a balding head, is a weathered grey shed with a slit cut out of the door.

Austere (81) – The house is austere, but not uncomfortable.

Section 4 – Pages 83-112

Apropos (85) – At one point, apropos of nothing, Vivian says, “So where is that mother of yours, anyway?”

Rescind (93) – “He should know fully what sort of a bargain he had made, while there was time to rescind it.”

Insolent (96) – “You insolent girl. I don’t want to hear another word.”

Desiccated (106) – We’ve stopped eating dinner together. She takes her food upstairs, leaving a desiccated chicken leg or a bowl of cold brisket in a chunk of brown gelatinous fat on the counter, with strict instructions that I wash my dish when I’m done.

Section 5 – Pages 113-138

Gingerly (114) – Mr. Sorenson rubs his hands together and, motioning for me to follow, makes his way gingerly up the creaking steps to the porch.

Contemporaneous (131) – They’ve read Native narratives and contrasting contemporaneous viewpoints and taken a field tripe to the Abbe, the Indian museum in Bar Harbor...

Scant (132) – Molly’s own childhood memories are scant and partial.

Emanating (137) – It was pouring earlier, great sheets of rain, and now the clouds outside the window are crystal tipped, like mountain peaks in the sky, rays emanating downward like an illustration in a children’s bible.

Section 6 – Pages 139-167

Remnant (142) – I sat on a three-legged stool listening to the crackle and spit of goose skin in the oven while she trims a ribbon of dough from around the rim of the pie dish, making a cross with a remnant for the center and brushing it all with a beaten egg...

Haphazard (148) – By mid-September, round bales of golden straw dot the yellow fields on my walk to the country road, arranged in geometric formations stacked in pyramids and scattered in haphazard clumps.

Salvage (153) – My coat is thin, but I’m wearing what clothing I could salvage underneath, and as I hurry along I begin to warm up.

Inadvertently (158) – I merely meant that sometimes, particularly if one has been through distressing events in one’s young life, one might be inclined to jump to conclusions—to inadvertently blow things out of proportion.

Section 7 – Pages 169-199

Insubordination (182) – “The predicament, you must understand, is that you are an orphan, and that whatever the reality, it looks as there may be an issue with... insubordination.”

Quivering (187) – The other three adults watch us with a quivering intensity.

Elemental (195) – We light candles the twenty-foot tree to the right of the altar, all the fair-haired Lutheran

children and parents and grandparents singing with songbooks open, the reverend preaching a sermon as elemental as a story in a child's picture book, a lesson about charity and empathy.

Section 8 – Pages 200-236

Reprobation (202) – The only thing they can really take away is my weekly Sunday-afternoon trip to the picture show with Judy, so for the next two weeks I stay home instead. And endure their silent reprobation.

Revelation (204) – And when I begin to wear makeup, I have a revelation.

Placate (205) – Together we manage employee's problems, placate customers, manage vendors.

Pusillanimous (209) – She almost feels sorry for him, the pusillanimous wretch.

Sycophantic (218) – Once upon a time—fairly recently, in fact—Molly would've gagged over these words, both because they're blatantly sycophantic and cringingly sentimental.

Section 9 – Pages 237-273

Languorous (238) – I have never felt like this—slow-witted and languorous, dreamy, absentminded, forgetful, focused only on each moment as it comes.

Parse (242) – I listen to the radio, scour the *Tribune*, wait anxiously for the mail drop, and devour Dutchy's letters when they come, scanning quickly for news—is he okay? Eating well, healthy?—and parsing every word for the tone and nuance, as if his sentences are a code I can crack.

Idiom (243)—The words he uses are the idioms of popular songs and poems in the newspaper.

Amicable (258) – In the window in Molly's bathroom, also on the ocean side, a light cotton curtain dances constantly in the breeze, sucked toward the screen and out again, billowing towards the sink, an amiable ghostly presence.

Challenges for Vivian and Molly

Name: _____

Both Niamh/Vivian and Molly encounter several challenges during their childhood. When you discover one in the text, write it down along with who it happened to. Then describe what effect it had on their identity.

Name of character, challenge, page #

Analysis: what effect did it have on them?

Joys for Vivian and Molly

Name: _____

Both Niamh/Vivian and Molly also have a series of positive experiences during their childhoods. When you encounter one in the text, write it down, along with an analysis of what positive effect that encounter had.

Positive encounter, character, page # Analysis – what effect did it have on them?

SUGGESTED ANALYTICAL ASSESSMENTS

These prompts could be used for traditional essay assignments, or for responses across a variety of mediums (live presentation, digital stories via Powerpoint or video, etc.)

1. In a description of her motivation for writing the novel, author Christina Baker Kline explains:

I am interested in exploring how people tell the stories of their lives and what these stories reveal (intentionally or not) about who we are. I am intrigued by the spaces between words, the silences that conceal long-kept secrets, the elisions that belie surface appearance. And I am interested in the pervasive and insidious legacy of trauma – the way events beyond our control can shape and define our lives. All of my books address these themes. (<http://christinabakerkline.com/blog/my-next-novel/>)

In what ways does “Orphan Train” achieve what she is describing? Pick one or more items that she notes as being present and give specific examples from the book.

2. Choose one narrative from a real orphan train rider to read and compare to the story of Vivian. How do the stories compare and contrast? What common thread do they have? <http://orphantraindepot.org/orphan-train-rider-stories/>

3. This book was selected by Philadelphia as a novel that would interest readers across the city, of different ages and backgrounds. Do you agree with this assessment? Write a letter to libraries in other cities presenting an argument either for or against adopting the novel for their own programs. Cite specific examples from the text with direct quotes to show why this book does or does not have a universal appeal to readers.

SUGGESTED CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

These prompts could be used for traditional essay assignments or for responses across a variety of mediums (live presentation, digital stories via powerpoint or video, etc.)

1. The assignment from the book! Interview someone—a mother or father or grandparent (or another elder)—about their own portages, the moments in their lives when they've had to take a journey, literal or metaphorical. Record the interviews and conduct "oral analyses," asking the person questions, transcribing their answers, and putting it together in chronological order as a narrative. The question to focus on are:
 - a. *What did you choose to bring with you to the next place?*
 - b. *What did you leave behind?*
 - c. *What insights did you gain about what's important?*
 Students can create an edited audio version of the final product if the technology is available to them; otherwise, it can be transcribed into a narrative essay.

2. The book switches between the narratives of Vivian and Molly, but leaves out large chunks of many other characters and their history. Pick one of the characters we are missing information about – Dutchy, Vivian's sister Maisie, the baby Carmine, or Vivian's daughter Sarah – and fill in their own story, writing in either the first or third person.

3. Though their methods were questionable, the adults who organized the Orphan Trains – and the people who adopted from them – often had an honest desire to help children in need. Pick one adult from the book – Mrs. Scatcherd, Mr. or Mrs. Schatzman, Miss Larsen, or Mr. or Mrs. Nielsen - - and write a letter from their perspective, explaining their actions to a friend or family member. What motivated them to become involved? Did they feel that anything they were doing was wrong? If yes, how did they rationalize it? If no, why not?

ONLINE RESOURCES

FROM THE AUTHOR

Orphan Train Book Club

A treasure trove of information and links relating to Orphan Train – from which many of the other links on this page are sourced!

<http://christinabakerkline.com/book-club>

AUDIO

NPR Interview

Seven minutes with the author discussing some of the historical intrigue and surprises during her research.

<http://www.npr.org/2013/04/14/176920218/after-tragedy-young-girl-shipped-west-on-orphan-train>

VIDEO

PBS Documentary: The Orphan Trains

Information about the American Experience documentary.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/orphan/>

90-Second “Book Trailer” for Orphan Train

A preview without spoilers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmgbE6l9Hnw>

Christina Answer the top 10 book club questions

A 15-minute video with questions about her process and choices for writing the book.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zVe698daTE>

HISTORY

“Orphan Train” Historical Background

A short personal essay from the author that explains the context of the book, as well as her own motivations and interests in exploring this topic.

<http://christinabakerkline.com/blog/my-next-novel/>

Children’s Aid Society History

A book review that gives a detailed explanation of the history and intentions of the group that put children on the trains.

<https://www.nytimes.com/books/first/o/oconnor-01orphan.html>

National Orphan Train Complex

Advocacy group preserving the history of Orphan trains.

<http://orphantraindepot.org/>

Orphan Train Rider Stories

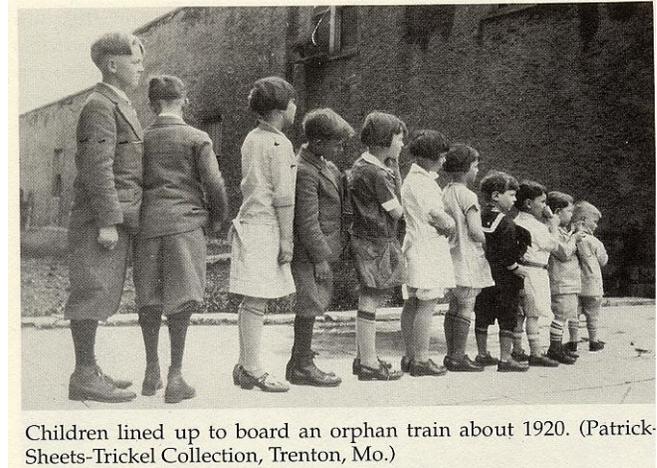
Written testimonials from riders who were sent in the 1900's, 1910's, and 1920's.

<http://orphantraindepot.org/orphan-train-rider-stories/>

PRINT RESOURCES

Orphan Train Historical Background

I am interested in exploring how people tell the stories of their lives and what these stories reveal (intentionally or not) about who we are. I am intrigued by the spaces between words, the silences that conceal long-kept secrets, the elisions that belie surface appearance. And I am interested in the pervasive and insidious legacy of trauma – the way events beyond our control can shape and define our lives. All of my books address these themes.



Children lined up to board an orphan train about 1920. (Patrick-Sheets-Trickel Collection, Trenton, Mo.)

Like my four previous novels, my novel *Orphan Train* is about cultural identity and family history. For the first time, however, I am undertaking a project that requires a large amount of historical, cultural, and geographical research. My novel traces the journey of Vivian Daly, a now-90-year-old woman, from a small village in Ireland to the crowded streets of the Lower East Side to the wide-open expanses of the Midwest to the coast of Maine. Her life spans nearly a century, encompassing great historical change and upheaval.

Change has been the defining principle of Vivian Daly's life, and from a very young age she learned to adapt, to inhabit new identities. For many reasons, she has told no one about her early life: her difficult childhood in Ireland and the lies and secrets that propelled her, alone, toward a frighteningly open-ended future. She spent her entire adult life minimizing risk, avoiding complicated entanglements, and keeping silent about the past. But now, through a series of events, she encounters a stranger who wants to know her story. As Vivian begins to face the truth about what happened long ago, the past becomes more and more present for her. Vivian's recollections come in tiers: her turbulent adulthood in the Midwest; her early life on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, living in a tenement; and finally, her childhood in Kinvara, on the western coast of Ireland.



Orphan Train is a specifically American story of mobility and rootlessness, highlighting a little-known but historically significant moment in our country's past. Between 1854 and 1929, so-called "orphan trains" transported more than 200,000 orphaned, abandoned, and homeless children – many of them first-generation Irish Catholic immigrants – from the

coastal cities of the eastern United States to the Midwest for “adoption” (often, in fact, indentured servitude). Charles Loring Brace, who founded the program, believed that hard work, education, and firm but compassionate childrearing – not to mention Midwestern Christian family values – were the only way to save these children from a life of depravity and poverty.

The children, many of whom had experienced great trauma in their short lives, had no idea where there were going. The train would pull into a station, and townspeople assembled to inspect them – often literally scrutinizing teeth, eyes, and limbs to determine whether a child was sturdy enough for field work or intelligent and mild-tempered enough to cook and clean. Babies and healthy older boys were typically chosen first; older girls were chosen last. After a brief trial period, the children became indentured to their host families. If a child wasn’t chosen, he or she would get back on the train to try again at the next town.

Some children were welcomed by new families and towns. Others were beaten, mistreated, taunted, or ignored. They lost any sense of their cultural identities and backgrounds; siblings were often separated, and contact between them was discouraged. City children were expected to perform hard farm labor for which they were neither emotionally nor physically prepared. Many of them, first-generation immigrants from Italy, Poland, and Ireland, were teased for their strange accents; some barely spoke English. Jealousy and competition in the new families created rifts, and many children ended up feeling that they didn’t belong anywhere. Some drifted from home to home to find someone who wanted them. Many ran away. The Children’s Aid Society did attempt to keep track of these children, but the reality of great distances and spotty record-keeping made this difficult.



I became interested in the story of the orphan trains because my husband’s grandfather, Frank Robertson, was rumored to have been a train rider. It was believed that he traveled on an orphan train from New York to Jamestown, North Dakota with his four siblings when he was ten years old. In the course of researching this family lore, I found that although orphan trains did, in fact, stop in Jamestown, and orphans from these trains were adopted there, the Robertson clan came from Missouri. But my interest was piqued, and I started researching this period in history.

After reading newspaper clippings, I began searching the Web for more information. I found first-person accounts, orphan-train reunion groups, and historical archives. That research led me to New York Public Library, where I found original materials: lists of orphans from foundling hospitals, handwritten records, notes from desperate mothers explaining why they were abandoning their children. I found that approximately 145 orphan train riders are still alive in the United States; orphan-train reunions are still being held in towns across the Midwest. A novel began to take shape in my mind.

My own background is partly Irish, and so I decided that I wanted to write about an Irish girl who has kept silent about the circumstances that led her to the orphan train. “People who cross the threshold between the known world and that place where the impossible does happen discover the problem of how to convey that experience,” Kathryn Harrison writes. Over the course of this novel Vivian moves from shame about her past to acceptance, eventually coming to terms with she’s been through. In the process she learns about the regenerative power of claiming – and telling – one’s own life story.

In *Orphan Train*, Vivian Daly’s first-person, past-tense account of her experience on the orphan train and her journey from Irish-Catholic immigrant to Protestant Midwesterner alternates with the present-day, present-tense, third-person-limited story of Vivian’s life on the Maine coast. (I have quite a bit of experience with this kind of autobiographical narrative, and am intimately familiar with its quirks, subtexts, and possibilities. Some time ago I wrote a nonfiction book with my mother called *The Conversation Begins: Mothers and Daughters Talk about Living Feminism*, for which we interviewed, and created first-person accounts for, more than 60 women.) The present-day story takes place over six weeks; the narrative arc of Vivian’s history encompasses 90 years.

Orphan Train Rider Story: Marguerite Thompson <http://orphantraindepot.org/orphan-train-rider-stories/marguerite-thompson/>

The Larsons had two sons other than Teddy. My new Papa was a big man with a moustache and a kind face. The Larsons were of the upper class in that area. They had a lady that came and washed the clothes on a wash board. Another lady made all of our clothes except for our underwear. Mrs. Larson (Mama) would make all of our underwear.

My new home was a big two story house with 10 rooms, but we didn’t have any electricity. The house was beautiful inside. I didn’t have a bedroom of my own; I slept on the couch in the front room on a feather mattress Mama would take out of her closet every night. After a few weeks, she said I could do it myself. The boys had bedrooms upstairs. Teddy and I were not permitted to use the bathroom. We had to use the outside toilet, and on Saturday we would drag a galvanized bathtub from the back porch and put it by the cook stove.

Mama didn’t like my New York accent at all. She wanted me to talk like they did, so I was slapped quite often in the mouth. Sometimes I would wonder what I had done wrong.

I had only been there a few weeks when Teddy brought out a china doll to play with. He said it was his and I couldn’t play with it. Well one day I found it and took outside and broke it. I got my first whipping.

They rented out three of the bedrooms to salesmen. When I was six, Teddy and I started school. When we came home from school, we had to wash the dinner dishes from noon. Then we had to go upstairs and make the beds, dust mop the floors and clean the bathroom. We didn’t dare use the toilet, she said it took too much water. By the time we got through with that, it was time to set the table for supper. I always only had one helping put on my plate. Teddy and Charles always had milk to drink with their dinner, but she said I couldn’t have any.



They had two cows and a lot of milk, and Teddy and I would deliver it both morning and night. Charles (age 14) went with us a few times until we could do it on our own. Sometimes I went by myself, especially if it was cold. One morning on my way to school, it was so cold that the sidewalks were very icy, and I slipped and fell. One bucket of milk hit the sidewalk, the lid blew off, and half of the milk spilled out. Well, I got up, put the lid back on, and set it on the porch where it was supposed to go. The lady called my foster mother and wanted to know why she didn't get a full quart of milk. When I went home at noon, my foster mother told me about it and wanted to know if I drank some of it. I told her what had happened, and she said I was lying. Then she got the rawhide whip and didn't even care where she hit me.

Between the ages of six and eleven I got many whippings. I can truthfully say I never got enough to eat. When I would come home from school and go to the pantry to get a piece of bread and butter, she said I was stealing it, because I didn't ask for it.

Once a year, Mr. McPhealy would come from the New York Foundling Home to see how I was getting along. I had to tell him fine. I would have to speak a piece for him, or poetry as it is called now. The name of it was "Looking on the Bright Side." Then I had to dance the Irish jig for him, and when I was through, I was excused. I would go outside and cry and wish he would take me back with him. I wanted to tell him the truth about how I was treated, but I couldn't. Still, she would whip me if she thought I was lying. I often wondered why Papa Larson didn't ever have anything to say about the way she treated me, but it seemed to me like she ruled the house."