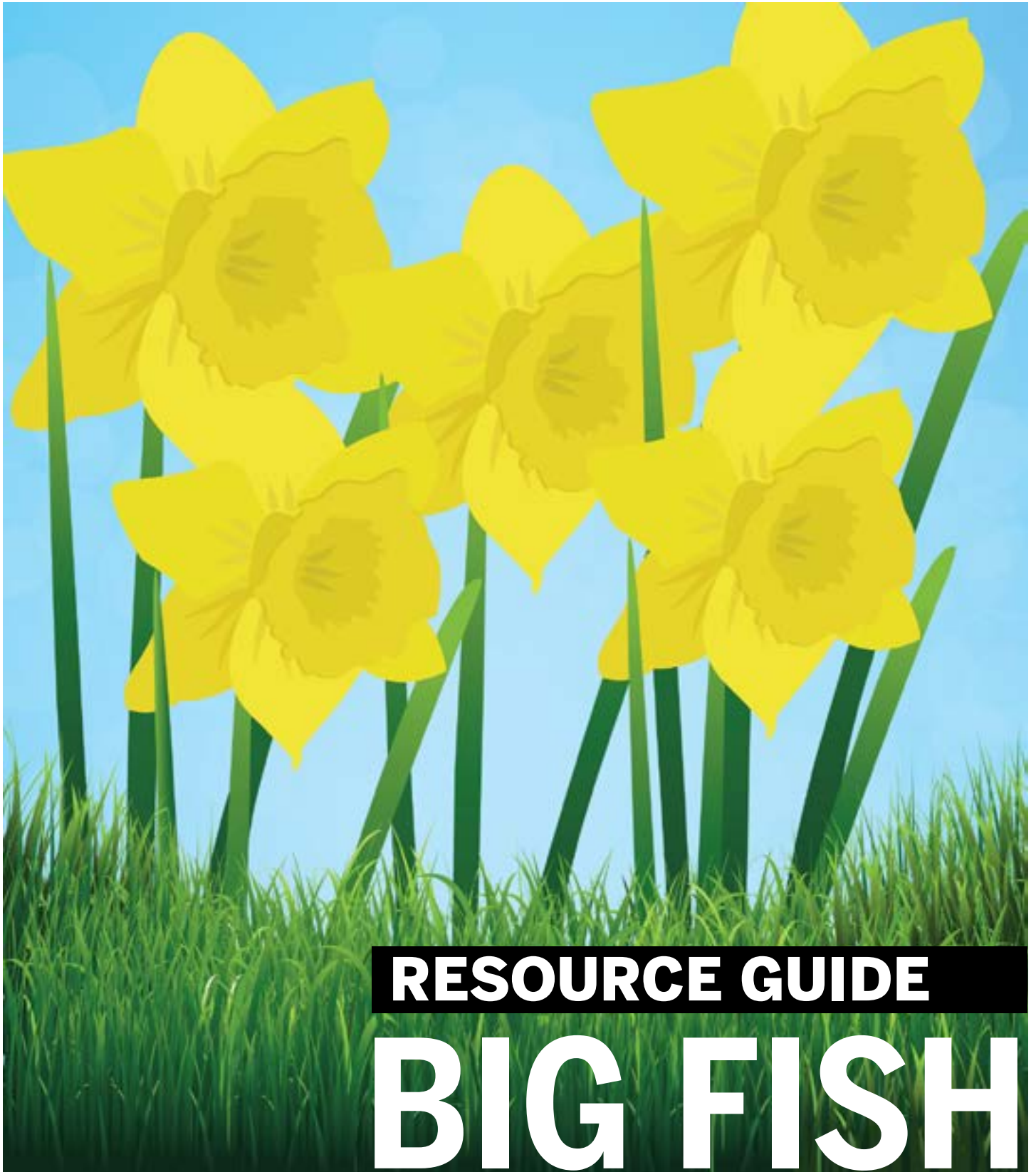




THEATRE & DANCE

theatre.indiana.edu



RESOURCE GUIDE

BIG FISH

OCTOBER 23–NOVEMBER 2



**INDIANA UNIVERSITY
BICENTENNIAL**

200 YEARS

INSIDE THE GUIDE ---

NOVEL | 1998.....3

WALLACE’S MAJOR INFLUENCES.....6

FILM | 2003.....7

MUSICAL | 2013.....8

WHY DO WE TELL STORIES.....11

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION.....14

SAMPLE POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.....16

Resource guide compiled by dramaturgs **Ben Ballmer and Madison Colquette***

PLEASE NOTE:

The use of recording equipment and cameras are not permitted during the performance.

Food, drink, candy and gum are not permitted inside the theater.

Should you need to exit the theater at any time, please locate the nearest illuminated exit sign. Once ready to re-enter, please wait for the House Manager to escort you back into the theater.

If you have special seating needs, please contact our Patron Services Manager, Trish Hausmann, at pjhausma@indiana.edu

WHAT IS A DRAMATURG?!?!?!

A dramaturg is a member of the creative team who investigates the social and historical context of a play or musical. Dramaturgs consider how theatre and performance responds to and comments on significant social and historical events, and shares applicable resources with the production creative team and audience.

BIG FISH: A NOVEL OF MYTHIC PROPORTIONS

By Daniel Wallace



Synopsis: In his prime, Edward Bloom was an extraordinary man. He could outrun anybody. He never missed a day of school. He saved lives and tamed giants. Animals loved him, people loved him, women loved him. He knew more jokes than any man alive. At least that's what he told his son, William. But now Edward Bloom is dying, and William wants desperately to know the truth about his elusive father—this indefatigable teller of tall tales—before it's too late. So, using the few facts he knows, William re-creates Edward's life in a series of legends and myths, through which he begins to understand his father's great feats, and his great failings. The result is hilarious and wrenching, tender and outrageous.

Daniel Wallace is author of six novels, including *Big Fish* (1998), *Ray in Reverse* (2000), *The Watermelon King* (2003), *Mr. Sebastian and the Negro Magician* (2007), *The Kings and Queens of Roam* (2013), and most recently *Extraordinary Adventures* (May 2017). In 2003, *Big Fish* was adapted and released as a movie and then in 2013 the book and the movie were mish-mashed together and became a Broadway musical. *Extraordinary Adventures* was chosen as the best fiction published by a native Alabamian in 2018. In 2019 he won the Harper Lee Award. The award is given to a living, nationally recognized Alabama writer who has made a significant lifelong contribution to Alabama letters. Wallace is the J. Ross MacDonald Distinguished Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, his alma mater, where he directs the Creative Writing Program.¹

¹ Bio and image courtesy of danielwallace.org

NOVEL | 1998

“...the book started with the title. I had those two words – BIG FISH – scrawled on a piece of notebook paper...I would look at them and think how great a title that was for a book...my father was and still is I imagine both a magnetic and repulsive force in my life... [he] was alive and well when I wrote it. I don't think I could have written a novel about a dying father if he actually had been dying.” – Daniel Wallace ²



² Quoted in an interview by Caroline Leavitt
<http://carolineleavittville.blogspot.com/2013/11/daniel-wallace-talks-about-big-fish-my.html>

EXCERPT FROM BIG FISH

One of our last car trips, near the end of my father's life as a man, we stopped by a river, and we took a walk to its banks, where we sat in the shade of an old oak tree.

After a couple of minutes my father took off his shoes and his socks and placed his feet in the clear-running water, and he looked at them there. Then he closed his eyes and smiled. I hadn't seen him smile like that in a while.

Suddenly he took a deep breath and said, "This reminds me."

And then he stopped, and thought some more. Things came slow for him then if they ever came at all, and I guessed he was thinking of some joke to tell, because he always had some joke to tell. Or he might tell me a story that would celebrate his adventurous and heroic life. And I wondered, What does this remind him of? Does it remind him of the duck in the hardware store? The horse in the bar? The boy who was knee-high to a grasshopper? Did it remind him of the dinosaur egg he found one day, then lost, or the country he once ruled for the better part of a week?

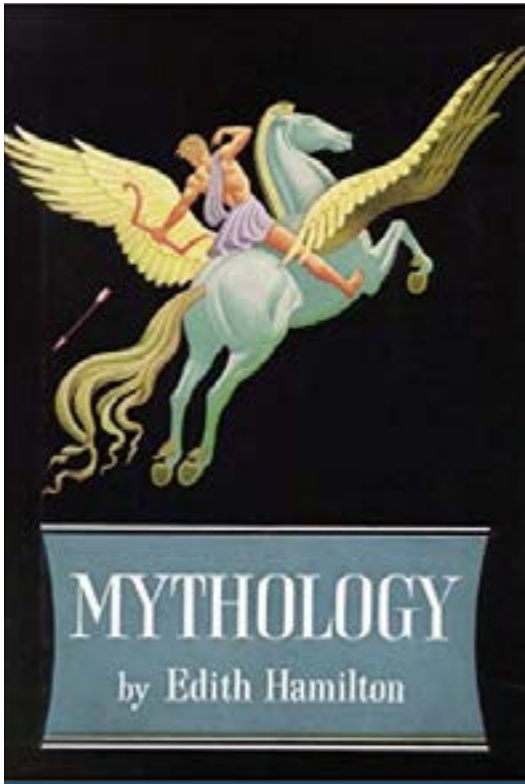
"This reminds me," he said, "of when I was a boy."

I looked at this old man, my old man with his old white feet in this clear-running stream, these moments among the very last in his life, and I thought of him suddenly, and simply, as a boy, a child, a youth, with his whole life ahead of him, much as mine was ahead of me. I'd never done that before. And these images—the now and then of my father—converged, and at that moment he turned into a weird creature, wild, concurrently young and old, dying and newborn.

My father became a myth⁵.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/books/first/w/wallace-fish.html>

WALLACE'S MAJOR INFLUENCES



EDITH HAMILTON'S *MYTHOLOGY*

Hamilton's *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, published in 1942, retells stories of Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology drawn from a variety of sources. The collection notably details how changing cultures have led to the changing characterizations of their deities and their myths. "I would put [Hamilton's] *Mythology* and *The Bible* on the same shelf." – Daniel Wallace ³

KURT VONNEGUT

"I can only write like me, though I think there are some similarities with his writing. But reading books by him and some others made me want to achieve the same sort of experience for other readers. I wanted to give someone else the same feeling Vonnegut gave me in *Breakfast of Champions* and *Slaughterhouse Five*." – Daniel Wallace ⁴

Kurt Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis, Indiana and is one of the most celebrated Hoosier writers. In a career spanning over 50 years, Vonnegut published fourteen novels, three short story collections, five plays, and five works of non-fiction. He is most famous for his darkly satirical, best-selling novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, published in 1969.

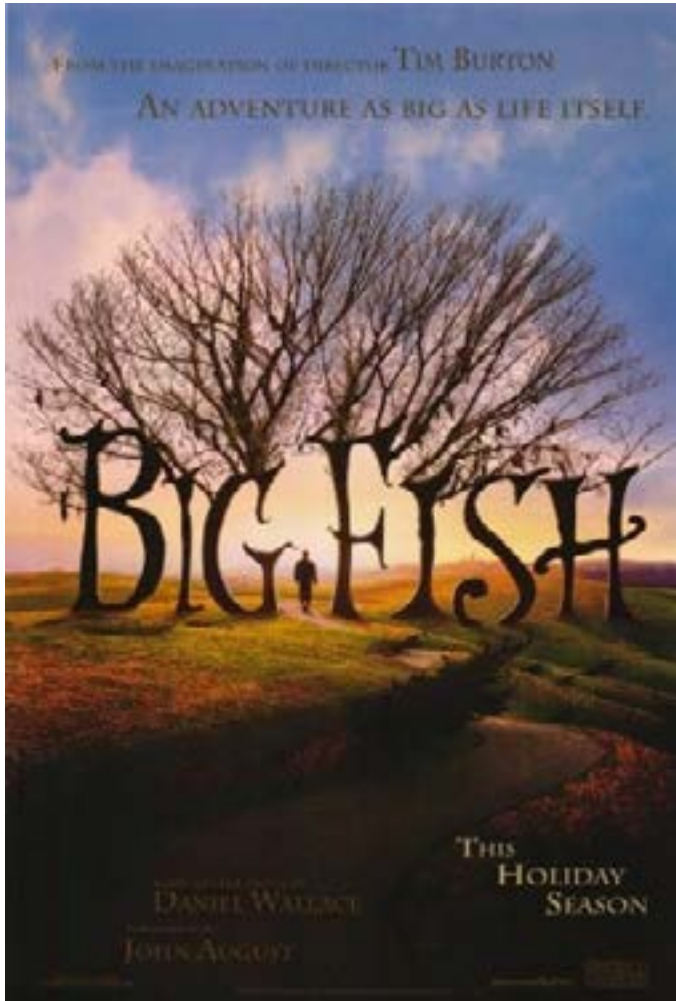
IU's Lilly Library is home to the largest collection of Vonnegut books and manuscripts in the world. The Lilly Library's archival materials include manuscripts and early drafts of many Vonnegut novels, original drawings from Vonnegut, and personal and business correspondences. Kurt Vonnegut received an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters degree from IU in 1973.



photo courtesy of IU Archives

³ Quoted in an interview by Daniel Cross Turner <http://www.storystouth.com/2009/03/interview-with-daniel-wallace.html>

⁴ Quoted in an interview published by Southern Lit Review http://southernlitreview.com/authors/daniel_wallace_interview.htm



“This is a Southern story, full of lies and fabrications, but truer for their inclusion.”⁶

Screenplay by John August

Directed by Tim Burton

On the major change of narrator from the novel to the film, August said, “If the movie is about Will not understanding his father’s stories, why is he telling them in the first place? The solution was to have Edward tell them himself.” *Big Fish* has two parallel stories: Edward in the past and Will in the present.⁷

According to August, the movie is much more of a romance than Daniel Wallace’s novel, which didn’t have the circus, the war or most of the other obstacles on the path to true love. [The film] spends a lot of time on Edward’s quest to find Sandra.⁸

⁶ August’s screenplay includes this acknowledgment on the title page

⁷ Courtesy of johnaugust.com

⁸ Ibid.



“Even when we were finished with the movie, I said ‘I think there’s more to do here, I really want to know what’s going on inside these characters, they really need to sing.’” – John August ⁹

Music and Lyrics by Andrew Lippa

Book by John August

SYNOPSIS:

ACT 1

The curtain rises on present-day EDWARD BLOOM (50s) at the banks of a river, skipping rocks. His son WILL (20s) is getting married the next day. Will asks Edward not to tell any of his crazy stories at the wedding. Edward reluctantly agrees. As Will thinks back, he trades places with YOUNG WILL (8). Edward doesn’t want to read his son a bedtime story from a book, but rather tell a story about life (“Be the Hero”), which introduces many characters from Edward’s impossible stories. Edward’s wife SANDRA reminds them that it’s time for bed, but Young Will wants to know more about THE WITCH who showed Edward how he would die (“The Witch”). The story returns to present day. Preparing for the wedding, Edward reveals his suspicion that Will’s fiancée, JOSEPHINE, is pregnant. Will confirms the hunch and swears Edward to secrecy. But Edward can’t help himself, revealing the news in a toast to the crowd. In parallel scenes at doctors’ offices, Will and Josephine learn they’re going to have a son, while Edward and Sandra learn that Edward’s cancer has

⁹ Courtesy of johnaugust.com

progressed. In New York's Central Park, Will sings of the wonder and mystery of his future child ("Stranger"), but his joy is interrupted by a phone call from his mother, telling him about Edward's condition. Will says he's coming home. In the backyard, Sandra tells Will that although he and Edward can be a handful, she loves them both ("Magic in the Man"). Josephine is eager to hear more of Edward's stories, so he launches into a tale of his high school days ("Ashton's Favorite Son"), including his small-town girlfriend (JENNY HILL) and his arch-rival (DON PRICE). Edward journeys to a cave to confront a giant that is frightening the town. But rather than fight KARL THE GIANT, he befriends him and convinces him to join him on an adventure to see the world. ("Out There on the Road"). Back in the present, Josephine gets Will to tell her the story of how his parents met, which brings them to the Calloway Circus. Sandra and two friends audition for ringmaster AMOS CALLOWAY ("Little Lamb from Alabama"), during which Edward falls in love with her at first sight ("Time Stops"). Amos hires Karl The Giant, while Edward agrees to work for the circus for free in exchange for one monthly clue about Sandra ("Closer to Her"). After three years of toil, Amos (secretly a werewolf) finally reveals that her name is Sandra, she goes to Auburn University, and she loves daffodils. In the present, Josephine discovers a mortgage signed by Edward and Jenny Hill. Will wonders why his father would buy a house with a woman other than his mother. Edward travels to Auburn, only to discover that Sandra is engaged to be married to Don Price from Ashton. Don beats up Edward, but that convinces Sandra to break up with Don. Edward promises to love Sandra forever ("Daffodils"). They kiss.

ACT 2

Reeling from the discovery of the mortgage, Will wonders if his dad had a second life. A second family. Later, Edward tells Sandra and Young Will he'll be traveling more for work. Edward tells Young Will he'll be the man of the house. He needs to be brave and "Fight the Dragons." In the present, Will attempts to ask his father about the mortgage, but Edward keeps derailing the conversation with jokes and talk of woolly mammoths. When Will brings up Ashton, Edward grows angry and they confront each other ("The River Between Us"). Calmed down by Sandra, Edward falls into an uneasy sleep and wakes up yelling and confused in the middle of a thunderstorm. Sandra comforts him, telling him "I Don't Need a Roof" to feel at home. She only needs Edward. Will travels to Ashton, where he meets Jenny Hill. She tells him the story of what happened when Edward returned to Ashton. The valley is about to be flooded by a new reservoir, yet the townsfolk refuse to leave, chaining themselves to a statue in protest. Edward convinces them to build a new Ashton ("Start

Over”). He gets land from Amos and money from Karl, both of whom have become successful because of Edward. Only Jenny Hill refuses to leave. She’d been waiting in Ashton all these years for Edward to return. To save her life, Edward reconnects with her, and co-signs the mortgage on a new house. They kiss — but Edward breaks it off. From the moment he saw her until the moment he dies, Sandra is the only woman he’ll love. As Jenny Hill finishes the story, Will gets a phone call. Edward’s condition has worsened. Alone in the hospital with the unconscious Edward, Will tells him that he went to Ashton, and that he now understands the reason for his stories. Edward stirs, in pain, and asks Will to tell him how he dies. Will has to make up the story on the spot (“What’s Next”) of how Edward escapes the hospital and travels to the river, where everyone from his stories is waiting for him. At the river, Edward sings about his life and what it meant (“How it Ends”). Back in reality, Edward dies in the hospital bed. The funeral takes place at the river’s edge. As the guests shake Will’s hand, he sees that each is the real-world equivalent of the characters from Edward’s stories. A few years later, Will teaches his own son to fish, and the secret his father taught him (“Be the Hero” reprise).¹⁰

Composer Andrew Lipka talks about his score for the show and creative ways for Music Directors to approach the material: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umrp8plexvM>



¹⁰ Synopsis courtesy of Theatrical Rights Worldwide <https://www.theatricalrights.com/show/big-fish-small-cast-edition/>

WHY DO WE TELL STORIES?

STORIES HELP EXPLAIN THE WORLD AROUND US

“[Through myth], humans are helped to tear down the walls between themselves and the infinite number of phenomena that surround them, while bringing the unknown into relation with the known.” - Bronislaw Bajan, “Sociologic-Ideological Affirmation of Social Reality in Myth”



Hades kidnap Persephone, starting the chain of events leading to the birth of winter according to Greek myth

STORIES PRESERVE CULTURAL/PERSONAL HISTORY

Stories of family history are frequently passed down through oral tradition – these kinds of stories are retold at social and familial gatherings to preserve the heritage or values of those social and cultural groups.

“...and I run back out to the car where my uncle is asleep in the driver’s seat, and I wake him screaming, “Don, where was Nana for five years?” ... ‘Well, when I was bringing your grandmother’s ashes down to Cannes to bury them, somebody gave me a smoked salmon to cheer me up...I left the smoked salmon in the carrier bag, and your [grandmother’s ashes] was in one of those pale-blue Pan-Am overnight bags. And I put them both above my seat in the plane, and when we landed at Nice, I collected the smoked salmon...and I forgot your grandmother.” – Joan Juliet Buck, “Ashes and Salmon” told on The Moth Story Hour, November 16, 2017

WHY DO WE TELL STORIES?

STORIES CREATE INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP IDENTITY

Stories – especially personal narratives – can act as strong statements of identity for both individuals and social groups. Whether true to life or based on it, interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions in the stories we tell can illustrate how the teller relates to the rest of the world as an individual or as a member of the social group.



Donna Washington's 2012 story "Election Night" is an excellent resource for stories that examine individual and group identity. "Election Night" is a personal narrative of her time at a hotel deep in North Carolina on the night of the 2012 election, encapsulating her struggles with racism and search for acceptance and unity in a divided country.

WHY DO WE TELL STORIES?

STORIES CONVEY SOCIAL AND MORAL LESSONS

Fables exist in many different forms across cultures, with one commonality: they all exist to convey social and moral lessons. Fables feature animals, legendary creatures, plants, inanimate objects, or forces of nature that are anthropomorphized, and that illustrates or leads to a particular moral lesson. People look to these stories as examples of how to behave – characters that take proper action are always rewarded, and characters that break practical or moral lessons receive their comeuppance.

The most famous of these are *Aesop's Fables*, a collection of fables credited to Aesop, a slave and storyteller believed to have lived in ancient Greece between 620 and 564 BCE. Fables attributed to Aesop include “The Tortoise and the Hare” and “The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse.”



Illustration from a 1912 edition of *Aesop's Fables*

Stories are entertaining

Every other reason discussed here aside, stories entertain and amuse the people to whom we tell them. Even traditionally moralistic stories in cultural oral tradition don't just come out and state the moral; they tell stories or fables as described above. Today's best stand-up comedy specials use storytelling as a vehicle for humor.

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

GENERATIONAL STORIES

In *Big Fish*, Will ends up passing on his father's stories to his own son, and because his father became his stories, Will allowed his father to live forever. **Do you have stories in your family that were passed down from family member to family member? Log these stories in a journal and write about how it feels to remember them. Do you believe the stories to be true?**

TALL TALES

A tall tale is a story with unbelievable elements, related as if it were true and factual. Some stories such as these are exaggerations of actual events. In this vein, American tall tales typically involve exaggerated versions of actual historical individuals including Johnny Appleseed, Calamity Jane, and Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox. Tall Tales are closely related to hyperbole.

HYPERBOLE

A hyperbole is an obvious and intentional exaggeration; an extravagant statement or figure of speech not intended to be taken literally.

Examples:

This backpack weighs a ton!

I can't go to the movies, I've got a million things to do.

I will have to wait an eternity.

FANTASY VERSUS REALITY

To quote Tim Burton, the director of the 2003 film version of *Big Fish*, "*Big Fish* is about what's real and what's fantastic, what's true and what's not true, what's partially true, and how, in the end, it's all true." Edward creates elaborate myths about his past to hide himself, using storytelling as a means to avoid the truth. Will desires logic and honesty, but Edward is proud to be a storyteller.

As *Big Fish* goes on, the stories told by Edward begin to blend with the stories lived by Edward, and Will takes it upon himself to come to terms with the truth. When Edward's health deteriorates, Will ends up finishing the story his father has started. He brings together the images and characters

of his father's stories to merge reality and fantasy. Will gains understanding by letting go of his resentment and discovering that, in the end, all we have left—all we are—is our stories. His father's stories were a gift. They may have been exaggerated truths, but to his father, they were realities.¹¹

What is the line between real life and our interpretations of real life? Is it always meaningful to know the difference? Write your own tall tale! Think of a true experience of your life, now transform it into a tall tale by adding mythological types of images and characters to the storyline.

MUSICAL THEATRE AS STORYTELLING

Musical theatre is one of the unique methods of storytelling that exists in performance, using text, song, movement, and dance to tell a story. In musical theatre, when a character can no longer express what they desire in words, they sing. If singing cannot satisfy the need, the element of dance comes into play. As *Big Fish* author Daniel Wallace states “these songs do more than tell a story of one man's journey through the world, they take you on that journey with him. It's what an artist does: by telling his own story he tells your story as well.”

SOUTHERN GOTHICISM

Much of *Big Fish*'s source material is influenced by and owes a stylistic debt to the aesthetics of Southern Gothic works. Much like its European cousin, Southern Gothicism features a dark tone and explores macabre, dark and decaying parts of society, but with a focus on Southern locales and moral values. Special attention is paid to themes of the supernatural and the collapse of the post-war South.

Important Southern Gothic works:

“A Rose for Emily” by William Faulkner

Beloved by Toni Morrison

Child of God by Cormac McCarthy

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers

Wise Blood by Flannery O'Connor

¹¹ From <http://broadwayeducators.com/big-fish-the-musical-themes-for-classroom-discussion/>

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ---

1. What types of archetypes did you find in the play? (For example, archetypal settings such as the river, archetypal characters such as the hero, archetypal plots such as the journey.) Is there any relationship to myth in this story? (For example, the hero saving a town from natural disasters or a witch who foretells the future?)
2. What do you think are the major themes of the show?
3. Daniel Wallace believes: "A storyteller makes up things to help other people; a liar makes up things to help himself." Is there a difference between telling a lie and telling a story?
4. Do you believe that theater in general and this musical in particular has the power to change people? What impact might this play have on audiences who see it today? How did it affect you directly?
5. There was a lot of technology used throughout this production. Did you find this helped you understand, appreciate and enjoy the story?
6. Trace a character of your choosing from the start of the performance till the end. Is there a difference between what you believed about the character at the beginning and what you came to believe by the end? How so?
7. Theater is a collaborative art. It takes a lot of people to put on a theater production including actors, directors, choreographers, designers, stage managers, and crews. What do you think are some of the strengths and challenges of working with others toward a common artistic vision?
8. Edward Bloom wants to make sure he leaves a legacy. How do you want to be remembered?
9. Do you think there are clear heroes and villains in *Big Fish*? Who would they be? Do these characters remind you of any figures or types of people you have encountered in your own life?
10. When do you tell stories? And why do you tell them? ¹²

12 Questions courtesy of <https://pages.stolaf.edu/bigfishstudyguide/sample-discussion-questions/>