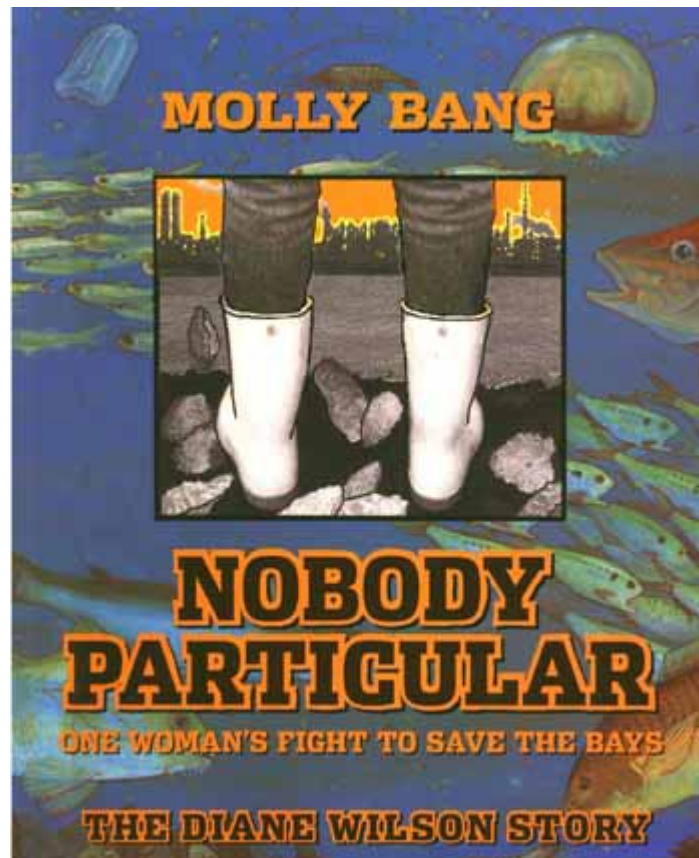


Literature Guide for Molly Bang's

Nobody Particular: One Woman's Fight to Save the Bays



by Robin M. Huntley

Summary

Diane Wilson was always a strong woman. She made a living as a shrimper while raising five children, and relied on her own resilience and pure grit in order to raise her family. In 1989, shrimp became scarce in the bays of her hometown in Calhoun County, Texas. Diane worried about the size of her catch, and the future of the shrimp population in Texas' bays. What would happen to the industry if the shrimp died out? How would she support her family?

Diane's concerns turned into action when she learned about a connection between the lack of shrimp and the monstrous plastics manufacturing plants that dotted the coastline of her home county. At the time (1989), her county was responsible for over half of the state's pollution – and it wasn't just killing the shrimp. Diane saw the effects that the plants had all around her – in the local landscape and within the human community, too. And much to her horror, the companies causing environmental destruction and human health problems were not only being allowed to do so, they were about to be allowed to expand without any consideration of the environment impact that expansion would have.

Reborn as an environmental activist, Diane channeled her anger, frustration, and desire for justice into meaningful action. She partnered with an environmental lawyer for legal support, and through a hunger strike, picketing, and acts of civil disobedience, Diane brought great attention to her cause. The manufacturing companies paid attention, and so did her community. Even though her cause was controversial (as the plants offered thousands of jobs to families living in an area riddled with poverty), Diane persevered. Her activism drew huge amounts of negative attention to her, and took a huge toll on her personal life. However, her efforts eventually paid off: her actions brought lots of attention to the environmental impact of plastics manufacturing, and led to fines for many of the companies in question. She didn't fix everything, but for one woman – self-described as “nobody in particular” - she sure accomplished a lot.

The story, told through a graphic novel format, details the beginning of Diane's career as an activist. Additionally, the book teaches readers about the fragile bay ecosystems that dot Texas' coast.

This blend of narrative and informational writing makes the book incredibly educational, and allows it to connect to studies of a wide variety of topics. While the story's themes and reading level make it accessible to readers as young as 10, it is best for teen readers.

Critical Thinking Questions

Intended to support readers in developing a deep understanding of the story, these critical thinking questions are written so as to provide readers with the opportunity to think deeply and to share their understanding of the story. These questions ask readers to make connections between the stories and their own life experiences, and also ask readers to think in depth about major themes from the story. Questions have been written with readers ages 14+ in mind.

- Describe Diane's connection to her local landscape. Why was Calhoun County so important to her?
- Where did Diane's drive for environmental justice stem from?
- How does an excess of salt water contribute to a decline in shrimp populations (and those of other species as well)?
- Describe Formosa's attitude towards their own environmental impact.
- What tactics did Formosa try to use in order to draw attention away from Diane? Why do you think they chose to deal with her activism in this way?
- What was the significance and symbolism of Diane's hunger strike?
- The name Formosa carries with it some irony. What could have been the company's reasoning in choosing such a name?
- Compare Taiwanese environmental policy and history of manufacturing to what you know about the United States' experiences and policies. How are they similar? How are they different?

- What did Diane learn during her trip to Taiwan? Why was this significant?
- Why didn't Diane's community rally behind her?
- Why do you think Diane was willing to risk so much for her cause?
- Why do you think Diane felt like she couldn't accomplish much and didn't know much about the world before she discovered activism? Do you think that her feelings about herself were accurate? Explain.
- Initially, Diane agrees to sign Formosa's agreement, despite it not including a zero discharge plan. When it comes time to sign, however, Diane can't make herself do it. Why do you think she questioned her beliefs? Why do you think she wavered? What could have happened differently to help her know that she should trust her intuition and stick to her stance?
- The views of Diane's family members aren't addressed within the story. How do you think they felt about her activism? In what ways might her work have affected her family members, both negatively and positively?

Mini-Lesson

The purpose of the mini-lesson is to support readers in processing what they've read and exploring creative ways to share their understanding. Readers will focus on building connections between the events that take place in the book, and will work to link them to the connections found between creatures and natural resources in the environment. Readers will examine cause-and-effect relationships, both amongst humans and scientifically. This lesson is intended for 8th grade and older, but could be adapted for use with grades 5+ if readers are able to access the the book's theme and scientific foundation.

Chain Reactions // Interconnectedness in Nature and Humans

In this lesson, readers will be asked to create a timeline of important events from the story, emphasizing not only what takes place, but the ways in which it is both a product of the event(s) preceding it and a catalyst for those that antecede it. Additionally, readers will be asked to create a timeline detailing the connections between waste water from manufacturing and population decline due to habitat loss. In the final stages of the lesson, readers will relate the steps in each process to each other, drawing parallels between Diane's experiences and the human impact on Calhoun County's bays.

1. Review the information presented in the text with readers, paying attention to both Diane's experiences and the scientific information shared within the margins and background illustrations. It is most important to gather as many events and details as possible at this point; these things do not need to be gathered in order. Record information shared by readers in a format that will allow it to be used later on (write on a white/chalk board, take notes on large chart paper, create an online document for readers to access, etc.).
2. Ask readers to sort the events and details from the story. They may choose to create their own organizational systems, but a facilitator might choose to create an organizational structure, sharing it with readers so as to offer additional support or speed up the organizational process. Readers might work in pairs. Additionally, the facilitator might choose to ask readers to focus on either Diane's experiences or the scientific information presented – making lighter work for each participant.
3. Once information has been organized, discuss timeline structure with students. How can it be made clear that time is passing? How should events be organized so as to stay true to the amount of time that passed between each event? How much information is necessary for each event? How can slow change be shown on a timeline that otherwise marks events as beginning and ending on specific dates? Presenting a few examples of well-crafted timelines can be helpful for readers who don't have much experience reading, interpreting, and/or creating

timelines.

4. Next, discuss with students the ways in which the environmental impact of plastics manufacturing can be displayed in a timeline format. Breaking down the process into steps and imagining them taking place in real time might be helpful for readers. Adding to the steps in the process (from the creation of the landscape to the release of waste water to the death of species and depositing of mercury in the bay) by drawing on pre-existing knowledge can make such a step-by-step description of the process all the more powerful.
5. Ask readers to create their own version of each of these timelines. If readers work with partners, each group could split the workload, thus creating one timeline each. If readers are working alone, they should be given lots of time to complete this step. At this stage in the process, facilitators might choose to offer a large amount of work time, continuing the lesson on the next day or during the next meeting time.
6. After timelines have been completed, allow readers to quickly share their work with the group. Readers should be encouraged to discuss the structure that they used, their thinking, and the decision-making process that they used while creating their work. Readers should also try to identify similarities and differences between their own work and that of others.
7. Finally, guide readers in drawing parallels between the events on Diane's timeline and the events on the scientific timeline. Placing one above the other will be the most effective way to do this, as readers will be able to see how the events compare. Possible connections to make include:
 - The passage of time between events, and the amount of time needed in order for both Diane and the companies' pollution to have a major impact
 - The domino effect that both the pollution and Diane's actions caused
 - The depth and severity of both irresponsible use of natural resources and treatment of Diane
 - The sense of closure and possibility for future change found near the end-point of each

timeline

- The global vs. local ways of examining pollution and Diane's actions; Diane's activism could be seen as centered around her community or as being targeted at the plastics manufacturing industry as a whole, and the environmental impact of the factories could be examined on either a local or global level

Extension Activities

Designed with teen readers in mind, the extension activities below offer suggestions for further processing of the story, opportunities to build schema, and ways to learn about what has taken place since the book's last update in 2005. These activities, much like the mini-lesson, could be adapted for use with younger readers if they're capable of accessing the story.

Texas Gold

The book Nobody in Particular ends in 1994, with Diane signing an agreement to drop her suits against Formosa Plastics and the EPA in exchange for environmental impact studies to be done. The most recent edition of the book includes a brief 2005 update on the plastics industry, but says little about Diane's continued career as an environmental activist. Her actions have drawn attention and raised awareness for her cause, and she stands out as both a local and national hero. The documentary "Texas Gold" tells the story of Diane's career from start to finish, and shows her true passion, drive, grit, and determination. The links provided below are for the documentaries informational website and a YouTube playlist for viewing the film.

Website: <http://www.texasgoldmovie.com/>

Playlist: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHtvTiBv7k4&list=PL603B14CBBE007E7E>

Making Sense Through Maps

The book includes some beautifully drawn maps, but they're included largely as background illustrations and don't truly serve as a tool for understanding the geographic area in which the story takes place. Readers can use what they know about the locations mentioned in the story to spark research of Calhoun County, Texas, and can create their own maps that detail the locations of each place mentioned and the events that took place there. Similar to the timeline mini-lesson, this activity pushes readers to think critically about the role that geography played in both the events that took place and the environmental impact of Formosa and the other nearby plants.

International Environmental Regulation

When Diane visited Taiwan, she learned firsthand of the country's extreme lack of environmental protection. She even met someone who was threatened with arrest for trying to create a government organization like the United States' EPA. China is mentioned in the book as well, for the sake of noting that many companies have begun manufacturing in China as a result of its nearly complete and total lack of environmental regulations. Readers can gain a better sense of where the United States stands in terms of environmental regulation by researching the environmental policy of countries around the world. Comparing and contrasting our country's policies to those of other countries can be eye-opening – both in terms of allowing readers to recognize the environmental devastation taking place in unregulated countries and the sustainable, gentle methods being used in other countries.

Feminism and Activism

Diane is one of many, many strong women who have dedicated their lives to creating some kind of social change. Her accomplishments stand amongst those of countless other well-known women, and sit alongside the work of many more obscure women, too. Conducting research on female activists throughout American history can be a powerful experience for readers of any age or gender identity.

Learning about the many different obstacles that women have faced (from voting rights to environmental destruction, and everything in between) can provide a meaningful way to explore women's history, feminism, and women's rights. Kate Schatz's book Rad American Women A-Z is a great starting point for such studies, as it spotlights 25 strong women from all walks of life and historical time periods.

Understanding the Role of Place

The demographics of Calhoun County, Texas play a major role in the existence of plastics manufacturing and the ways in which Diane is regarded by those around her. Diane, through her narration of the story, reveals that the area is riddled with poverty, and that the major sources of income are professions that rely on natural resources. Researching the demographics of Calhoun County both in the 1980's/early 1990's and today can help readers to deepen their understanding of the ways in which Diane and her actions were the product of a very specific place. Every place has its own unique culture, traditions, and values, and these things are dictated largely by money, educational background, local landscape, and the ways in which the community is (or isn't) interconnected. If readers understand the place that Diane is from, they will be better able to truly understand the way that she thinks and the reasons for the decisions that she has made.