

TWO BEANS PRODUCTIONS

Rob Barron, Artistic Director

TALES OF a FOURTH GRADE NOTHING

Study Guide

Dear Teacher:

We have created the following study guide to help make your students' theater experience with *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* as meaningful as possible. For many, it will be their first time viewing a live theatrical production. We have learned that when teachers discuss the play with their students before and after the production, the experience is more significant and long-lasting. Our study guide provides pre and post performance discussion topics, as well as related activity sheets. These are just suggestions... Please feel free to create your own activities and areas for discussion. Please note that some activities are intended for younger students and some are meant for the upper grades; please use your discretion regarding which are appropriate for your class. We hope you and your students enjoy the show!

BACKGROUND

Judy Blume (born 1938) is one of America's favorite authors of children's and young adult literature. Growing up in Elizabeth, New Jersey (right outside New York City), she often made up stories in her head, and when she grew up, her need for storytelling never went away. When her children started preschool, she produced her first book, *The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo*. Since then, over 80 million copies of her books are in print, and her stories have been translated into thirty-one languages. Among her most popular works are *The Pain and the Great One*, the Fudge series, the young adult novels *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* and *Forever*, and the adult works *Summer Sisters* and *Wifey*. Judy Blume is still active as an author, with her most recent book, *Friend or Fiend with the Pain and the Great One* published in May 2009. She and her husband live on islands up and down the east coast, and have three grown children and one grandchild.

Blume got the idea for *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* when her children's babysitter brought her a news article about a toddler swallowing a turtle. She was inspired to write a picture book called "Peter, Fudge and Dribble," which was rejected by several publishers for being too implausible. A few years later, her agent advised her to use this story as part of a chapter book, and based the character of Fudge on her son Larry's toddler years.

THE STORY

Nine-year-old Peter Hatcher struggles with an end-of-the-school-year assignment to write about the most important thing that happened to him during fourth grade. This is a daunting task given how much took place that year, particularly when dealing with his toddler terror of a brother, Fudge. Peter writes about his brother's refusal to eat, to open his mouth at the dentist, a disastrous third birthday party, and getting blamed for Fudge knocking out his two front teeth. Peter always has to help out with Fudge, who gets all the attention, while Peter gets all the blame. It's enough to make a kid feel like a fourth grade nothing! The final straw comes when Peter's pet turtle disappears... Peter has put up with Fudge for too long. How can he get his parents to pay attention to him for a change?

The Characters

There are five actors in this production, who play all the roles in *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. The characters include (in order of appearance):

Peter	The titular fourth grade nothing. He often has to help his parents deal with his obnoxious younger brother.
Fudge	The obnoxious little brother who seems to get away with everything. During the play he ages from two-and-three-quarters to age three.
Mom	Peter and Fudge's mother. She often depends on Peter to help with Fudge.
Dad	The boys' father, an advertising executive.
Mr. Yarby	Dad's client, the President of the Juicy-O company.
Sheila	Peter's classmate and arch-nemesis.
Jimmy	Peter's best buddy
Sam, Jennie	Fudge's playmates and birthday party guests. A crier and a biter, respectively
Nurse	Doctor Brown's assistant
Dr. Brown	Dad's old friend and the family dentist
Mr. Berman	A shoe salesman at Bloomingdale's department store
Mr. Vincent	Another one of Dad's clients, the President of the Toddle-Bike Company
Cameraperson	The director of the Toddle-Bike commercial
Dr. Cone	Fudge's pediatrician

Pre-Performance Discussion

1. Read Judy Blume's *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* with your students. Much of the dialogue is lifted directly from Blume's writing, and children will enjoy hearing the familiar words and turns of phrase.
2. Explain that they will see a play based on this book. What expectations do they have of a live show? For example, will the show feature a live turtle and dog? Will Fudge be played by a real 3-year-old? How do they think the scene where Fudge attempts to fly will be handled?
3. In our show, there are fewer actors than characters. In fact, "Peter" and "Fudge" are the only actors who play only one role. Tell your students to keep their eyes peeled to see if they can identify which roles each actor plays.

4. Review proper theatre etiquette with your class. They may be seeing our show as part of a class trip, with many other schools attending. They should carefully follow their teacher's or group leader's directions. During the show, they should be quiet, so that they do not disturb other audience members (and the actors!) during the performance. However, actors love cheers and applause, especially at the end of the show. This is a great way to thank actors for all their hard work in performing this show for you!
 5. Do your students have younger brothers or sisters? Do they always get along? How do they resolve disputes?
 6. *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* concerns the relationship between a 9-year-old and a 3-year-old. In the story, the older brother feels like Fudge gets many more advantages. What are the positive aspects of being 3 (having to do fewer chores, for instance)? What are the advantages of being 9 (for example, getting to stay up late)? What are the disadvantages of each age? Which age would your students rather be, and why?
 7. Discuss the concept of responsibility. What are your students' responsibilities in terms of schoolwork, family, chores, etc. Do they have more responsibilities now or when they were younger? Do they get rewards (for example, an allowance) for acting responsibly? Should they get these incentives?
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POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION

1. As soon as possible after the performance, engage your class in discussion about the show. Who were their favorite characters and why? Which were their favorite moments in the play? Compare and contrast the book and live performance, as well as other adaptations of the story they may have seen. Did the show meet their expectations? Why or why not?
2. The young adult actors in this production play a wide variety of ages... toddlers, elementary school students, parents, bosses and more. What did the actors do with their bodies and voices to heighten the illusion that they were younger or older than they actually are?
3. How did the brothers express their anger and frustration? Compare and contrast Fudge's actions to Peter's.
4. What were some of the tricks Peter and his parents played on Fudge to get him to behave properly? Was this fair to Fudge? Why or why not?
5. Peter's mother apologized for blaming him when Fudge knocked out his front teeth. Have your students ever blamed someone for something they had no control over? How did that make them feel? Did they apologize eventually?
6. Fudge drives Peter crazy sometimes, but deep down he really loves his younger brother. How did Peter demonstrate his annoyance with Fudge? How did he show his love for Fudge? Is this love/hate relationship realistic? Do your students have similar relationships with their family members?
7. Fudge's real name is "Farley Drexel Hatcher." How did he get the nickname Fudge, do you think? Do your students have nicknames for friends or family? How did they get these nicknames? Do they like their nicknames? Why or why not?

Activities

1. **The Most Important Thing That Happened** The framing device for this production is Peter writing an essay about the most important thing that happened to him that year, which leads him to think about everything else that happened to him. Have your students write similar essays. You may also ask them to illustrate them. You can also encourage your students to keep weekly journals, writing weekly entries about the most important thing that happened to them within those seven days. To individualize their journals, they can decorate them with stickers, photographs, drawings, etc.
2. **Haiku** Haiku is a traditional Japanese form of poetry. The first line has five syllables, the second line has seven, and the third line has five. These lines do not rhyme. Have your students write a haiku about characters and events in *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. Here are a few to get them started:

Funny, funny Fudge Mom and Dad Hatcher
Does not want to eat dinner. Don't pay Peter attention:
"Eat it or wear it!" A fourth grade nothing.

3. **Judy Blume Stories on Stage!** The adaptation of *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* is very similar to Judy Blume's original book, featuring much of the same dialogue. Your students can dramatize chapters from other books to dramatize – they can use Blume's dialogue, and utilize her descriptions as stage directions. You may also wish to have your students act out the story for their classmates, along with self-devised costumes and props.
4. **Advertising** Peter's father is an advertising executive... This means that he comes up with ideas for commercials. Where have your students seen commercials? For example, on television, radio, newspapers, online, billboards, busses, etc. Choose an advertisement and dissect it: who is the ad meant to reach? Does it make your students more excited about the product? What makes an ad good or bad? What are the common elements of an advertisement? Have your students design print or radio ads based on their favorite products, or for local establishments and businesses. Maybe they could even create an ad for *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing!*
5. **Turtles... And Other Pets** In the book and play, Peter takes care of his pet turtle, Dribble. Research different kinds of turtle breeds and how to take care of them. What's the best habitat for each kind of turtle? How big do they grow? What kind of turtle is small enough for Fudge to swallow? How often do turtles need food and water? What kind of food? You may wish to get a turtle (or a hamster, guinea pig, or fish) as a classroom pet. Have the students take turns caring for the pet.

You may also have students research different types of pets... Fish, mice, dogs, cats, horses, rabbits, etc. What is required to care for each of these pets? How would your students make their pets happy? Which pets are easier to care for? How long do each of these types of animals live? How are these animals cared for when their owners go out of town?

6. **Transportation** *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* takes place in New York City, which is so densely populated that most people, including Peter's family, use alternate forms of transportation rather than their own car. What are some other ways of getting around a city? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each method of transportation? (This topic is also addressed in a *Fourth Grade Nothing* chapter not included in the play, "They Flying Train Committee.")
7. **Teeth-Counting** Fudge's dentist tricks him into opening mouth by saying that he's counting the boy's teeth. You can use "teeth-counting" for a number of math-related exercises. Split the class into groups, and have each member count their own teeth. Each group can add up the total number of teeth, and divide that by the number of members in the group to discover the **average**, or "**mean**" number of teeth each group has. What is the average/mean number of teeth in the entire class? Or in each student's family?

Likewise, each group can list the total number of teeth they have in numerical order, lowest to highest. The digit in the middle of this group is called the “**median.**” (This exercise will work best if each group has an odd number of members.)

What number occurs the most in each group? This number is called the “**mode.**”

If you wish, you can have students prepare bar graphs and line graphs to graphically illustrate the average/mean number of teeth in each group.

RESOURCES

Websites:

Judy Blume on the Web (Judy Blume’s website, featuring a biography, bibliography, writing activities, kids’ activities, and more.)

<http://judyblume.com/>

Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing Activities (links to websites featuring more ideas on using Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing in the classroom.)

<http://webtech/kennesaw/edu/reading/fourthgradenothing.htm>

Pet Turtle (website covering pet turtle selection and care).

<http://www.petturtle.com/>

Advertising Tricks (PBS Kids website featuring activities to help kids better understand advertising concepts and tricks).

<http://pbskids.org/dontbuyit/advertisingtricks/>

Other children’s/young adult books by Judy Blume:

Picture Books (Grades 1-3)

Freckle Juice
The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo
The Pain and the Great One (series)

Fudge Books (Grades 2-6)

Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing
Otherwise Known as Sheila the Great
Superfudge
Fudge-a-Mania
Double Fudge

Junior High (Grades 7-9)

Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret
Blubber
Deenie
Here’s to You, Rachel Robinson
Iggie’s House
It’s Not the End of the World
Just as Long as We’re Together
Then Again, Maybe I Won’t
Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself

High School (Grades 7-12)

Forever
Letters to Judy
Places I Never Meant to Be (editor)
Tiger Eyes

Name: _____

Fudge's Super-SMazzy Shoes!

Fudge doesn't like the shoes his mom picked out for him
Can you design a shoe that he'll love?

