

# Curriculum Guide



## SWEET HOME ALASKA

A JUNIOR LIBRARY GUILD SELECTION

BY  
CAROLE ESTBY DAGG



**T**HIS EXCITING PIONEERING STORY is based on the real Depression-era program that took 202 families off welfare and transported them to Palmer, Alaska, to become independent farmers.

It's 1934, and times are tough for Terpsichore's family after the mill in their small Wisconsin town closes, leaving her father unemployed. Determined to provide for his family, he moves them all to Alaska to become pioneers as part of President Roosevelt's Palmer Colony project. Their new home is a bit of a shock—it's a town still under construction in the middle of the wilderness, where the residents live in tents and share a community outhouse. But Terpsichore's not about to let first impressions get in the way of this grand adventure. Tackling its many unique challenges with her can-do attitude, she starts making things happen to make Alaska seem more like home. Soon, she and her family are able to start enjoying their new surroundings—everyone except her mother, who misses polite society. So Terpsichore hatches a plan to convince her that Alaska is a wonderful—and civilized—place to live.

*“Fact and fiction and real and imagined personalities and events are seamlessly woven into this quaint, energetic, and engaging story.”—School Library Journal*

[caroleestbydagg.com](http://caroleestbydagg.com)









[penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)










The Common Core State Standards addressed by the discussion questions and activities in this guide are noted throughout. For more information on the Common Core, visit [corestandards.org](http://corestandards.org).

# Discussion Questions

Unless otherwise noted, discussion questions are aligned with the following standards:

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1**

-  Terpsichore comes from a family of talented musicians. What deal does Terpsichore strike with her mother in relation to playing an instrument? What does this deal reveal about Terpsichore's character? **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3**
-  Describe President Roosevelt's Matanuska Colony project. What factors in the Johnson family's life might lead them to participate in the president's special project?
-  In lean economic times, sacrifices have to be made. How does the Johnson family's financial hardship in Wisconsin affect Mrs. Johnson and her love of music?
-  Terpsichore takes matters into her own hands as the family mulls over their next steps toward a more secure life. What does she do and how do her efforts bring an unexpected outcome?
-  Describe what Terpsichore and her family see when they first arrive in Palmer. What are the immediate challenges in calling Palmer home? **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3**
-  The reality of an Alaskan winter appears in Palmer as eight inches of snow blankets the town. Many families, including Terpsichore's, are still living in tents. How is the organization of the construction plan changed so that all families can be in houses before winter arrives in earnest? What simple conveniences will soon be theirs again?
-  The families of Palmer endure many hardships as they struggle to create a town in Alaska. One of the most significant difficulties is the death of small children from scarlet fever and measles. Terpsichore's mother is particularly disheartened about the state of the ramshackle town and the poor quality of life. To whom does Terpsichore encourage her mother to write? What is the result of her mother's communication?
-  Amid fundraising activities for the library, Terpsichore meets an old man while selling popcorn at the movies. He appears to recognize her. What clues about Mr. Crawford and his past hint at a connection between him and Terpsichore's family?

-  Mr. Crawford often says, “Alaska grows on you” and “Alaska has everything you need for a good life.” Discuss what elements are necessary for a good life and how Alaska might meet these needs for Terpsichore’s family. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.2](#)
-  What is the Palmer Library Action Committee and what is its purpose in Palmer? Terpsichore is called “library girl” by other kids in Palmer who love to read, and she is dubbed the “pioneering librarian” by a company in Wisconsin that sends her library supplies. How are her dreams supported by some and altered by others?
-  Terpsichore comes up with an elaborate plan to convince her mother to let the family stay in Alaska. How do her friends and each member of her family contribute to the team effort?
-  Terpsichore has a great fondness for Laura Ingalls Wilder’s tales of pioneer life as detailed in *Little House in the Big Woods*, *Farmer Boy*, and *Little House on the Prairie*. How do the characters and events from Wilder’s books figure into Terpsichore’s journey to Alaska and to her pumpkin-growing efforts?
-  Describe the character of Mendel. How does Terpsichore feel about him when they first meet on their journey to Alaska? Chronicle the ups and downs of their friendship throughout the novel. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3](#)
-  What kind of friend is Gloria to Terpsichore? Cite text evidence to support the nature of the friendship between the two girls.
-  How does the statement that Grandmother makes, “A house with just one person doesn’t seem like a home,” hint toward what might happen in the future? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.2](#)
-  How does Terpsichore gain confidence in her own worth over the course of the novel?
-  Though *Sweet Home Alaska* is a piece of historical fiction, there are elements of the story that are based on real people and events in Palmer, Alaska. Read the Author Notes at the end of the book and discuss the inspiration for the story and how and why the author wove real people and events into her novel.

The discussion questions and activities in this guide were created by Leigh Courtney, Ph.D. She teaches in the global education program at a public elementary school in San Diego, California. She holds both master’s and doctoral degrees in education, with an emphasis on curriculum and instruction.

# Activities

## PRIMARY SOURCES

When researching her novel, author Carole Estby Dagg sought out primary sources to get a real feel for the experiences of the Palmer colonists from the colonists themselves—she found oral histories of old-timers who came to Alaska with the Palmer Project, she read newspaper and magazine articles written by journalists who visited the colony during its first two years, and she studied original photographs of the fledgling colony. Select three photographs from the official photos of the Palmer Colony in the Alaska State Library’s historical collection found at this website: <https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg21/id/3750>. Write a paragraph about each of your selected photos, noting the details about life in 1935 in Alaska’s Palmer Colony that you can glean from carefully studying each primary source image.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2**

## JOURNEY TO ALASKA

Visualize the magnitude of Terpsichore’s journey from Wisconsin to Alaska by tracing her path on a map from her old home to her new one. Start in Little Bear Lake near Webb Lake, Wisconsin. Head west to Seattle, Washington. How many states does Terpsichore cross on her train trip? From Seattle, follow Terpsichore’s route north by sea on the *St. Mibiel* to Seward, Alaska. What Canadian province does she sail by? What islands does she pass? From Seward, trace her travel by train to Palmer. Discuss with a classmate how making this journey in 1935 would compare with traveling from Wisconsin to Alaska today.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.7; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7**

## THE NATIVE PEOPLES OF ALASKA

Carole Estby Dagg describes one significant omission from her story in the Author Notes section of the novel. For thousands of years before people like the Johnsons came to colonize Palmer, indigenous peoples lived in Alaska. Learn more about how members of the Yup’ik, Aleut, Athabaskan, and other Indian tribes have lived in Alaska over the centuries. Research these original residents and compile your facts about the indigenous peoples of Alaska in an informative report. Find information on various Native cultures on the Smithsonian Institution’s website at [alaska.si.edu/cultures.asp](http://alaska.si.edu/cultures.asp). If you are located close to Anchorage, plan a visit to the Anchorage Museum and the Alaska Native Heritage Center for in-depth experiences and details about Alaska’s Indigenous peoples. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.2;**

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.2**

## BUG BOY

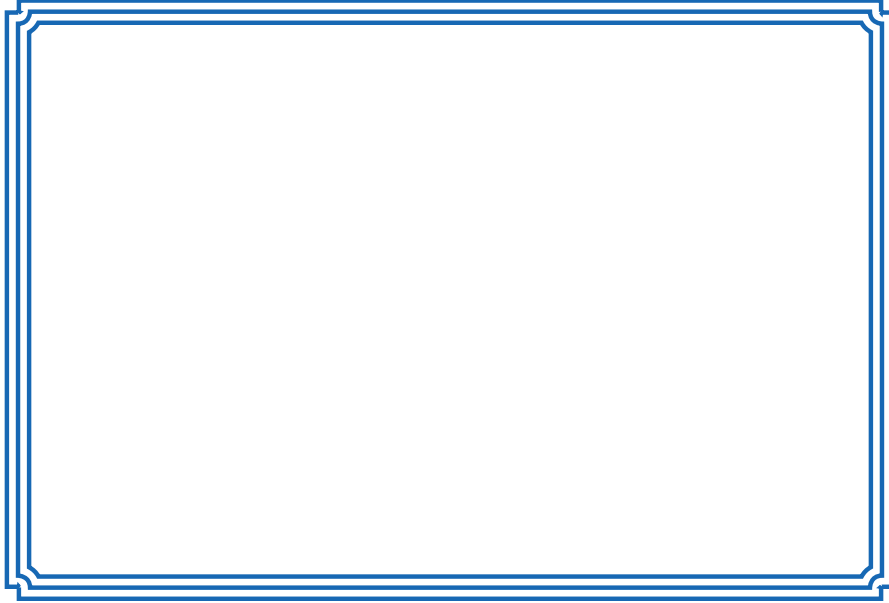
Terpsichore encounters Mendel, a budding entomologist, early on her family’s journey to Alaska. Mendel shares that even though Alaska is a rugged terrain with freezing winters, many species of insects thrive in the tough conditions. Research which insects are adapted to life in Alaska. Compile the information that you gather along with illustrations or diagrams of the insects in a guide to Alaska’s insect population. Imagine your guide is a new book in the Palmer Library!

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.2;**  
**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.7; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.7; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.7; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.7**

# Palmer Colony Library

Thanks to Terpsichore, Gloria, and Mendel, Palmer soon has its own library. Design an official logo for the Palmer Colony Library and write a catchy descriptive slogan for the library to use in advertising its services. Use these to create a library card for the citizens of Palmer.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.1



Why do you think a library is an important part of a town, even a town as new and rugged as Palmer, Alaska, in 1935? Be sure to give reasons for your opinion.

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# Self-Determination: Mining the Text for Evidence

In a speech to the nation given on April 28, 1935, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said: “We have in the darkest moments of our national trials retained our faith in our own ability to master our destiny. Fear is vanishing and confidence is growing on every side . . .” How does each character listed below show his/her ability to overcome obstacles and determine his/her own future? Note each character’s goal and then find words and quotes from the text to illustrate how each character attempts to achieve it. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2](#);

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.2](#)

	GOAL	TEXT EVIDENCE
TERPSICHORE		
GLORIA		
MENDEL		
MOTHER		
POP		

# Literary Quilt

Add words or phrases that relate to the plot, setting, or characters in *Sweet Home Alaska* to the quilt squares below. Your word or phrase must begin with the letter in each square.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1.

a	b	c	d
e	f	g	h
i	j	k	l
m	n	o	p
q	r	s	t
u	v	w	xyz

# Describe a Character

Select a character from *Sweet Home Alaska*. Write the character's name in the center of the graphic organizer below. Think of four adjectives that describe the character and add these to the organizer. Finally, find four examples from the story that illustrate the adjectives that you selected. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3;**

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3**

**EXAMPLE**

**EXAMPLE**

**ADJECTIVE**

**ADJECTIVE**

**CHARACTER**

**ADJECTIVE**

**ADJECTIVE**

**EXAMPLE**

**EXAMPLE**