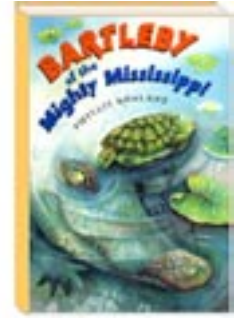


# A Teacher's Guide to **BARTLEBY** of the Mighty Mississippi

by *Stephanie Badulak and Jacqueline Abbott*



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS OF THIS GUIDE...

**Stephanie Badulak** has been teaching fourth grade at Fred J. Stackpole Elementary School in Centennial School District, Southampton, Pennsylvania, for eight years. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree from Ursinus College in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, and a Masters Degree in Education from Arcadia University in Glenside, Pennsylvania. She has facilitated professional development workshops centered on teaching writing, and is active in writing grants that fund artist-in-residence programs bringing authors to her school.

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## Interview with Phyllis Shalant

**Jacqueline:** You have said that you had a pet turtle when you were a child. Is that how you decided to write a story about a turtle as the main character? If not, how did you come to that decision?

**Phyllis:** While getting my M.A. at Manhattanville College, I signed up for a class in writing fantasy. It was taught by Patricia Lee Gauch, who is a superb editor as well as teacher. At the time, we were reading 'high fantasy' — the kind that has to do with the battle between good and evil forces for the future of the world. One morning, I was walking along a river near home, casting around for an idea, when I saw a large red-eared turtle sunning itself on a branch that had fallen into the water. I couldn't help wondering how it had gotten there. Suddenly, I was like a time-traveler, whisked all the way back to my childhood days with my pet red-ear. That afternoon, I began writing *Bartleby of the Mighty Mississippi*. In my story, the world wasn't at stake, but rather, the future of a young turtle who sets out to discover the world and his place in it.

**Stephanie:** How is the creative process of writing a fantasy different from that of writing a work of realistic fiction?

**Phyllis:** I seem to go back and forth between realistic fiction and fantasy pretty easily. I think it's because as a child I frequently slipped between the real world and the magic world. I say "magic" rather than "imaginary," because for me, the experience was different than just making things up. There was a part of me that believed a doll had feelings, that I might be able to fly if I kept on trying, and that the old lady down the street was a real witch with a cauldron in the kitchen. I was always looking for signs and clues. I'm sure there are a lot of children with a similar sensibility. My book, *When Pirates Came to Brooklyn*, which is partly autobiographical, describes such a child.

**Jacqueline:** Some authors think through a whole story in their head before they begin to write it. What is your thought/writing process, or the thought/writing process you used when writing *Bartleby*?

**Phyllis:** I like to work in a loose way. I start with an idea for a story and some of the characters, but I don't outline or work things out in advance. My creative process involves a gradual dawning of ideas. It often feels as slow as evolution itself, but in order to do my best work, I must allow everything to stew.

**Stephanie:** Could you describe your experience with the editing process?

**Phyllis:** I really value my editor's take on what I write. Her comments and suggestions help me to see things in the story I may not have noticed. But before I ever show her a draft, I spend a lot of time editing myself. For me, the



process of revision is as important as writing the initial story. By the time I've finished a first draft, I understand my characters a lot better—what's important to them, and what their reactions to various situations might be. The more real they become, the more capable they are of surprising me. While writing *Bartleby of the Big Bad Bayou*\*, the sequel to the first book, I had that experience with an alligator named Number Four. I'd always thought of him as a morally ambiguous character, but at the end of the story he did something totally unexpected that showed me his true colors.

**Jacqueline:** Your animal characters seem to become human in *Bartleby*. In creating humanistic characters did you create the animals after people you know or have seen, or did you think of specific animal traits that you could humanize for the story?

**Phyllis:** I attempted to make my characters' personalities true to their species by doing tons of research on turtles, alligators, frogs, ducks, snakes, and other creatures. For example, Mudly is a rather grumpy loner because he's accustomed to other creatures' negative reaction to his smell. But in writing about how Bartleby makes the transformation from pet to "wild turtle," I was also thinking about how a child learns and grows as he or she navigates the world outside home. That is where the human qualities come into play.

**Jacqueline:** Who is your favorite character in *Bartleby of the Mighty Mississippi*, and why?

**Phyllis:** I love Bartleby dearly because he has so many of the qualities I appreciate in children—innocence, a sense of wonder, curiosity, sensitivity to the feelings of others, and the determination to learn and grow.

**Stephanie:** Which character was the most challenging to write in *Bartleby of the Mighty Mississippi*? Why?

**Phyllis:** Seezer was the toughest. I didn't get him "right" at first. My editor urged me to keep his motives more ambiguous—Did he want to eat Bartleby, or not? I struggled until I found the key to Seezer's personality—his pride. An alligator in a pond or bayou is like a lion on his home turf. He is a proud king. He can't admit to fear or need. He can't seem too kind. Yet inside, his heart is as big as the landscape. When those he cares about are threatened, he will put himself at risk to protect them.

**Stephanie:** If you could impart only one piece of advice to aspiring authors, what would it be?

**Phyllis:** Because I've taught writing to both adults and kids, I've thought about this a lot. I think it's the reason I'm not capable of offering only one piece of advice. But I've narrowed it down to four suggestions I think aspiring writers might find useful.

1. Choosing the right story is the most important decision you'll make. If possible, choose the story you're absolutely dying to tell. Your enthusiasm for your subject will come through in your piece and win readers over to your side.
2. Look in your own backyard. Every one of us has had experiences that make wonderful stories.
3. Take risks in your writing. Be willing to expose your heart. Write about things that really matter, even if it hurts a little.
4. Be open to revising. Don't be afraid to make changes in plot and character. Many professional writers consider revising the most important part of their work.

**Stephanie:** Have you ever experienced "writer's block"? If so, how did you resolve the problem? If not, how do you think you avoid it?

**Phyllis:** Sometimes I think I suffer from the opposite of writer's block—writer's overflow. It sounds like a joke, but it can be frustrating when you can't write fast enough to keep up with the ideas. But with every book, there are problems to solve. Sometimes I can't figure out how to make a thing happen, or I don't like the direction a story is taking. I've found several ways to get myself moving again. One is to read something I admire very much. Another is to take a break and do something else – I'll go for a walk, cook something interesting, or work in the garden a bit. But if I'm stuck for too long, I know I have to go back and look at the basics: What does the main character want? What is the chief conflict? How will it be resolved? The answers to those questions can help me get back on track.

\**Bartleby of the Big Bad Bayou* will be released in June '05



## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Schedule a visit to the school library and or computer lab so that students can research red-eared turtles. Provide them with an outline format or make suggestions that they seek information about the habitat, physical characteristics, diet, behavior, and predators/prey of red-eared turtles.
2. Research southern bayous and northern ponds. Where are they found? What types of plants, animals, insects, and fish life are found in these two bodies of water? Compare and contrast a **bayou** and a **pond**. How are they different? How are they the same?
3. Have the children research the author as well as other stories she has written at [www.phyllisshalant.com](http://www.phyllisshalant.com).

## CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER GUIDE

**Note:** Some teachers will want to use this Chapter-by-Chapter guide to vocabulary words and response/discussion questions below. Others will choose to have students work in reading response journals to record their thoughts and feelings as they read the novel. A section of Suggestions for Reading Journal Entries follows the Chapter-by-Chapter portion of the guide.

### Chapter 1:

basking (p.3)  
carapace (p.3)  
plastron (p.4)

#### Literary Terms:

**Point of view** is one of the most basic elements in the craft of fiction. Quite simply, it means, ‘Who is telling the story?’ A story will vary greatly depending on who is narrating. In this book, the story is told from the point of view of a young, red-eared turtle. But although the story is seen through the eyes of Bartleby, it is told in the third person voice of the narrator.

#### Questions:

1. Examine **point of view** in this chapter. Who is telling the story?
2. How does Bartleby feel about his bath?
3. What does he think of the boys? What clues do you get that help you answer this?

### Chapter 2:

treading (p.7)  
panicky (p.9)

#### Questions:

1. Find some examples of turtle **point of view** such as “eye windows,” which is what Bartleby calls Jeff’s glasses. Choose an animal, imagine you are the animal, and write a list of things you might see in a room in your house from the animal’s perspective.
2. What kind of mood is Bartleby in at the end of the chapter? How does the author convey his mood?

### Chapter 3:

maroon (p.11)  
dandruff (p.12)

#### Questions:

1. What is Bartleby’s reaction to the television show Natural World?
2. What do you think of Josh’s behavior? Explain.



#### Chapter 4:

foe (title page)  
swiftness (p.16)  
myriad (p.16)  
writhing (p.17)

#### Questions:

1. What season is it in this chapter?
2. What clues tell Bartleby that a new season has come? Which of his senses does he use?

#### Chapter 5:

swoop (p.19)  
lapped (p.22)

#### Questions:

1. Why is Davy frustrated?
2. Make a prediction about what you think will happen in Part Two.

#### Chapter 6:

ache (p.27)  
forefoot (p.28)  
tuft (p.29)  
appellation (p.29)  
wafted (p.30)  
pang (p.31)  
forage (p.32)  
hatchlings (p.32)

#### Literary Terms:

**Descriptive writing** refers to writing that creates an image the reader can see in his or her mind. It often employs more than one of the five senses, and may use small details to help convey the big picture. Descriptive writing is one of the techniques a writer uses to set the mood of a story.

**Character** refers to what an individual is like on the inside. In a way a person's – or a turtle's – character is like an iceberg: you only see the tip poking out, but underneath the surface there is a great wealth of thoughts and feelings that make the character whole.

#### Questions:

1. Find two examples of **descriptive writing** that appeal to your senses. Comment on how these passages help you relate to Bartleby's experiences.
2. What do you think of Mudly? How would you describe his **character**? What do you think makes his personality the way it is?
3. Bartleby has a dilemma at the end of the chapter. What is it? What do you think of his decision?
4. What do you think Mudly meant when he said, "If I were you I wouldn't tell anyone that you're from the Mighty Mississippi."?

#### Chapter 7:

rhythm (p.34)  
prey (p.35)  
flees (p.35)  
boasting (p.36)  
maggot (p.38)  
skittish (p.39)  
indisputable (p.39)



*Literary Term:*

**Foreshadowing** is a literary device authors use to give readers a hint of something that will occur later in the book.

*Questions:*

1. What is the bullfrog's name and why is it appropriate?
2. Of the creatures Bartleby has met so far, who do you like, and why?
3. Can you find an example of **foreshadowing** at the end of this chapter? What do you think it is? What do you think will happen?

**Chapter 8:**

scaling (p.40)

emerge (p.40)

*Questions:*

1. In order to learn to hunt, Bartleby must use all of his senses. Think of an activity you have learned to do, such as swimming, riding a bike, skate boarding, playing an instrument, or dancing. Try to describe how that activity feels using as many of the five senses as you can.

**Chapter 9:**

vibrations (p.44)

perched (p.46)

*Questions:*

1. Make a prediction based on the title of the chapter. What do you think will happen?
2. What is unusual about Zip?
3. Retell in your own words the reason why Zip is guarding Mother Wak's eggs.

**Chapter 10:**

dabbled (p.51)

morsels (p.51)

pungent (p.51)

acrid (p.51)

*Questions:*

1. What kinds of feelings does Bartleby experience when he meets the painted turtles? Have you ever felt this way? Explain.
2. Why do you think the big painted turtle treats Bartleby the way he does?

**Chapter 11:**

hunkered (p.56)

churn (p.58)

*Questions:*

1. What will happen to Bully in the next chapter? Make a prediction.

**Chapter 12:**

hatchling (p.62)

*Literary Term:*

A **simile** is a figure of speech that compares two things using the words like or as.

*Questions:*

1. Zip tells Bartleby he's brave. Why doesn't Bartleby think he's brave? What do you think?



2. The author uses many **similes**, such as—“Bully sprang and vanished like a raindrop in a puddle.” (pg. 60) and, “Above Bartleby’s plastron, his heart was fluttering like a gnat’s wings.” (pg. 61) Look through previous chapters and find other similes to share with the class.
3. Try writing a simile for muskrat and his love for lilies, or Zip and her bravery in protecting Mother Wak’s eggs.

### Chapter 13:

utter (p.67)  
caressed (p.67)  
giddy (p.68)  
cunning (p.69)  
leech (p.69)  
putrid (p.70)

#### Questions:

1. What does Bartleby learn about “the Claw, the Paw and the Jaw” in his conversation with Mudly?

### Chapter 14:

tendrils (p.72)

#### Literary Term:

**Alliteration** is the repetition of consonant sounds—usually at the beginning of words (e.g., **B**artleby of the **B**ig **B**ad **B**ayou).

#### Questions:

1. Find an example of **alliteration** in this chapter.
2. What does the snake keep calling Bartleby? What effect does it have on you to hear him repeat this over and over again?
3. Who has grabbed Bartleby and pulled him under the water? What will happen next?

### Chapter 15:

yearning (p.77)  
bayou (p.79)

#### Questions:

1. This chapter comes at about the halfway point of the book. How has Bartleby changed since the beginning of the story? Do you think he should stay in the pond or go back to Davy?

### Chapter 16:

prowl (p.84)  
wistfully (p.84)  
groped (p.84)

#### Questions:

1. What qualities does Bartleby have that make him a good friend to the other creatures at the pond?
2. What technique does Bartleby use to keep himself and his friends out of danger? Use the events of this chapter to explain.

### Chapter 17:

groggy (p.91)  
undignified (p.93)

#### Questions:

1. What encouragement do Bartleby’s friends offer him when he is disappointed in himself? Write about a time a friend encouraged you and made you feel better.



**Chapter 18:**

junket (p.96)  
mite (p.97)  
gorging (p.97)  
glumly (p.99)

*Questions:*

1. What does Junket's name make you think of? Look up the meaning of the word 'junket.' In what ways do you think his name fits his personality?
2. What choice does Bartleby make? Why do you think he makes the choice he does at the end of the day?

**Chapter 19:**

salutations (p.103)  
fry (p.103)  
surged (p.104)

*Questions:*

1. What do you think Seezer meant when he said, "And I will greet you with a warm welcome, Mississippi-ssstyle."?

**Chapter 20:**

crave (p.106)

*Questions:*

1. What is Bartleby's most pressing problem right now? How do you think it will be solved?

**Chapter 21:**

hospitality (p.112)

*Questions:*

1. Before reading the chapter, make a prediction of which character will reappear and what events might occur.
2. How has your opinion of Bully and Kingfisher changed? Do you think most people have both good and not-so-good qualities? What are yours?

**Chapter 22:**

carcasses (p.22)

*Questions:*

1. Without looking at the book, can you remember Junket's directions to the traveling water?
2. Re-read the last paragraph on page 116. What might the author be foreshadowing when she talks about the "pull" Bartleby feels in his middle? (For a definition of foreshadowing, see page 6 of Teacher's Guide.)

**Chapter 23:**

stench (p.117)  
dependable (p.119)  
eerily (p.120)

*Questions:*

1. Where is Bartleby? Why did he go there?
2. What characteristics of a turtle do you think make Bartleby a heroic creature?



**Chapter 24:**

urgent (p.123)  
blurted (p.123)  
quest (p.124)  
heed (p.125)  
plight (p.125)  
rout (p.125)  
gait (p.125)  
mocking (p.126)

*Questions:*

1. How would you describe Seezer's behavior in this chapter?
2. Make a prediction. What will happen next to Bartleby and Mother Wak?

**Chapter 25:**

catapult (p.128)  
nuisance (p.128)  
bountiful (p.129)  
devoured (p.129)  
perplexed (p.130)  
edibles (p.130)  
retorted (p.131)

*Questions:*

1. Do you think Seezer is trying to trick Bartleby? In what way?
2. Should Bartleby go with Seezer? What would you advise him to do if he asked your opinion? Make a T-chart listing the reasons to stay in the big water place and the reasons to go to the Mighty Mississippi.

**Chapter 26:**

conviction (p.134)  
glee (p.134)  
roam (p.134)

*Questions:*

1. On page 135, Zip says, "When pond creatures grow, they often go." What do you think the author is trying to say about Bartleby? Do you think this statement is also true for children? In what way?
2. What is Bartleby's big decision?

**Chapter 27:**

captor (p.143)  
hurled (p.143)

*Questions:*

1. What kind of animal captures Bartleby in the woods?
2. In what way does Seezer's behavior seem to be changing at the end of this chapter?

**Chapter 28:**

hedge (p.145)

*Questions:*

1. Where are Bartleby and Seezer?
2. What do you think would happen if they got caught?



### Chapter 29:

hazy (p.148)  
emitted (p.150)  
rivulets (p.151)

*Literary Term:*

**Onomatopoeia** refers to words that imitate the sound of the things or actions they describe.

*Questions:*

1. The author uses the word “plipping” on page 150. What is the sound this word imitates? Can you come up with some **onomatopoeia** of your own? Suggestions: Create a word that describes the sound a washing machine makes. Create a word that describes the sound of a skateboard rolling down the sidewalk.
2. How would you describe the relationship between Bartleby and Seezer at this point in their journey?

### Chapter 30:

thicket (p.152)

*Literary Term:*

**Irony** is a type of humor based on using words to suggest the opposite of what they seem.

*Questions:*

1. Were you surprised to learn about the unusual eggs? What are they?
2. On page 154, why is it **ironic** when one of the humans says, “I heard they’ve got alligators in this pond”?

### Chapter 31:

ecstasy (p.156)  
wafted (p.156)  
mingled (p.156)  
alertly (p.157)  
bellow (p.158)  
embankment (p.158)

*Questions:*

1. What character traits would you use to describe Seezer at the end of this chapter? How is this different from your opinion of Seezer when Bartleby first met him?

### Chapter 32:

motionless (p. 161)  
grief (p. 162)  
current (p. 163)  
rasped (p. 164)

*Questions:*

1. Did the ending surprise you? Explain.
2. Were you satisfied with the ending of the story? Is there anything you would add or change? Explain.

**READING/RESPONSE JOURNAL SUGGESTIONS:****Questions**

1. Describe Davy's relationship with Bartleby. Why do you think it is different from Josh and Jeff's?
2. Write about how you would feel if you were a pet turtle kept in a small bowl. What would you think, feel, hope, and wish? Explain why.
3. Illustrate the setting (Bartleby's Bowl) in the beginning of the story.
4. How is Bartleby feeling at the end of Chapter 2 when Jeff says he is as, "Dumb as a stone"? Describe a situation when you have felt this way. Who made you feel this and what did they say or do to make you feel this way?
5. What does Davy mean when he says Bartleby isn't even a real turtle? Why does this make Bartleby feel so badly?
6. Toward the bottom of page 21 the author describes the setting using sounds and images. Illustrate this setting, make sure you include everything that can be heard or seen by Bartleby. What do you think this "Big water place" is? Use that as the title for your illustration.
7. Why does Bartleby drop his voice to a whisper when he tells Mudly he has been a pet? Have you ever felt this way? Explain the situation and how you felt.
8. When a Stinkpot (Mudly) is nervous he emits a foul odor. Why do you think he does this? What physical reactions happen to humans when they are nervous? Do these reactions have the same purpose as the odor that the Stinkpot emits? If not what purpose do they have? Are they helpful or not? Make a list of nervous human reactions that are helpful and those that are not.
9. Choose a character from the big water place that is like you. Give a detailed description of how he/she is like you. Do any of the other characters remind you of a human you know? If so explain who they remind you of and why?
10. On page 69 Mudly and Bartleby are discussing "the Claw, the Paw, and the Jaw." They decide that they too are the Claw, the Paw, and the Jaw. Why do they think this? Do you think you can be described as the Claw, the Paw, and the Jaw like Bartleby and Mudly? Why or why not?
11. What does Bartleby mean when he tells snake, "Friends invite—they don't insist?" Have you ever felt that a friend was insisting rather than inviting? What was the situation, how did it make you feel and how did you handle it? Looking back, do you think there was a better way to handle that situation? If so what do you wish you would have done?
12. At the end of Chapter 25, Seezer says he will consider Bartleby's request to join him on his journey to the Mississippi River. Do you think Seezer should take Bartleby with him? Why or why not? If you were Bartleby would you want to go with Seezer? Explain your choice.



## ACTIVITIES

### Writing

#### A Visit From Bartleby

Each week a child is assigned to take home Bartleby (a stuffed turtle or other turtle replica) and a journal to record Bartleby's visit to his or her house. The story must be written from Bartleby's **point of view** (see Chapter-by-Chapter Guide, page 1). The students should also focus on one detailed event instead of a list of events.

Example: *"Glen brought me into a room with a big box sitting on a tall mountain. Then Glen pushed a button and pictures of things that were moving could be seen. Many of the picture's movements made Glen laugh. Glen told me it was called a t.v. and I remembered when my boys used to watch a t.v. and laugh like Glen. So I got muzzy and took a big nap."*

#### SLIPping into Character

Think of a new character to introduce into the big water place. What is Bartleby doing when it comes into the story? Is he playing Slip, hunting for food, napping on the rock, or doing something else? Make sure you tell us the new character's name and what it looks like. Try to give your character an interesting voice the way Phyllis Shalant does with her characters. Finally, show how your character will be important to Bartleby. It can be a friend, a helper, a protector—or an enemy. You decide.

#### One More Challenge

Rewrite Junket's directions to get from the big water place to the traveling water by adding another obstacle for the two travelers to overcome. Write an additional chapter where Bartleby and Seezer deal with your challenge. Don't forget point of view!

#### Author, Author!

Write the first chapter of a sequel to *Bartleby of the Mighty Mississippi*. Introduce at least one new character. If possible, read the first chapter of *Bartleby of the Big Bad Bayou* aloud (available 6/05). Have students discuss how their chapter compares with the author's.

### Social Studies

Using several types of maps, students work in small groups to decide upon and illustrate the quickest path for Bartleby and Seezer to take from New York to the Mississippi River. Groups present their routes, naming the states that Bartleby and Seezer will travel through, and give reasons why they made the choices they did.

### Science

Hold a Fact vs. Fiction investigation. Working in small groups, students should look back through the novel to find examples of turtle behavior. How does Bartleby smell, breathe underwater, eat, and move? Who does he keep company with? Who seem to be his enemies? After compiling this list, groups should investigate to learn what is fact and what is fiction. They could create a T-chart to display their results.

In Part One of the novel, Davy's mom is bathing Bartleby because she doesn't want the boys to get salmonella disease. Have students investigate what this is, and whether red-eared turtles can be carriers.

Divide students into groups to research southern bayous and northeastern ponds. What types of plants, animals, insects, and fish are found in these two bodies of water? Compare and contrast a bayou and a pond. How are they different? How are they the same? .

Have students select one of the many characters from the novel to draw and write a science report about.



### Math

As a tie-in to the social studies activity of mapping Bartleby and Seezer's journey from New York to the Mighty Mississippi, students should use the map scale and calculate the distance the two friends will have to travel. They could then determine a benchmark distance that Bartleby and Seezer cover each day. Finally, using this benchmark, they would estimate how long the journey would take.

Create word problems like the examples below for the students to solve. Have the students work in pairs to solve and share creative strategies.

If Bartleby travels an average of 10 feet in 10 minutes how long will it take him to travel 30 feet? 45 feet?

If he travels 10 feet in 5 minutes how long will it take him to travel 20 feet? 45 feet?

If Bartleby can travel 66 feet in 11 minutes how many feet per minute does he cover? How many feet would he cover in 10 minutes? How many feet in 5 minutes?

### Final Projects

Create a jacket cover for a sequel you would write for *Bartleby of the Mighty Mississippi*. Include a title and a summary of the story.

Create logos for team t-shirts for the Slip players.

Create and write directions for a new game the characters in the story might like to play. Illustrate a scene from your new game.

### Yoga Position: Bartleby pose, A.K.A. Child's Pose:

Turn out the lights and have students find a space in the room where they are comfortable and away from others. Begin by sitting on the heels with the forehead resting on the floor. Place the hands, palms upward, on either side of the feet. Allow the body to relax and sink down into this position.