A Teacher’s Guide for
The Small Adventure of Popeye and Elvis
by Barbara O’Connor

ABOUT THE BOOK
Nothing ever happens in Fayette, South Carolina. That’s what Popeye thinks, anyway. His whole life, everything has just been boring, boring, boring. But things start to look up when the Jewells’ Holiday Rambler makes a wrong turn and gets stuck in the mud, trapping Elvis and his five rowdy siblings in Fayette for who knows how long. Then things get even better when something curious comes floating down the creek—a series of boats with secret messages—and Popeye and Elvis set out on a small adventure. Who could possibly be sending the notes and what do they mean?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Barbara O’Connor is the author of fourteen novels and biographies for children. Drawing on her South Carolina roots, Barbara’s novels have a distinctly Southern voice. Her books have received many awards, including the Massachusetts Book Award and Parents’ Choice Award, and have been nominated for young readers’ awards in thirty-eight states.
Your characters are often naughty but remorseful. Does that describe you too?

Yes! As a child, I was quite spunky and independent and often a bit naughty. But I have quite a guilty conscience. I could never get away with anything. The tiniest lie showed all over my face. I’m still that way. Between karma and conscience, I’m a loyal friend and an upright citizen.

How do you develop your characters?

My characters just show up in my imagination and are usually fully formed by the time I begin to write about them. But once they are formed, it’s important that they stay consistent. Since I know my characters well, I can usually sense when they are acting or speaking in a way that is inconsistent or out of character. It’s also important that my characters not be perfect—neither perfectly good nor perfectly bad. Like real people, characters should be a believable balance.

What’s your favorite part of writing: drafting or revision? Why?

That’s a no-brainer: revision! The first draft can be frustrating because I usually don’t know exactly where the story is going. It’s only with the actual writing that much of the plot reveals itself. By nature, I’m an organized person who likes to plan things. I’m uncomfortable with “winging it.” But, alas, that is often how the first-draft process goes. But once I have the whole draft down, I feel relaxed and look forward to smoothing the story out through revision, adding layers and tearing away unnecessary elements. I always tell students, “Don’t be afraid to write something bad. You can always make it better. But you can’t fix what you haven’t written.”
PREDICTION

What could a small adventure be? Do you think you’ve ever had one? What makes for a great adventure? Do adventures have to cost a lot of money?

CHAPTER 1
Vocabulary
plaster, linoleum, scalp, aluminum, hovered, vicissitude
Comprehension
List everything you’ve learned about Popeye after reading this chapter.
Prediction
Who is Elvis and how did he come to town?

CHAPTER 2
Vocabulary
drifting, drainage, precariously, lopsided, grubby, camouflage
Comprehension
Describe the scene when Popeye and Elvis first meet.
Prediction
How do you know something will happen between these two? What other clues do you have?

CHAPTER 3
Vocabulary
glorious, scruffy, livelong, scuffled
Comprehension
Explain how you get into the Spit and Swear Club. Why do you think Elvis names Popeye the senior vice president?
Prediction
What will they do next? What is there to do in Fayette, South Carolina?

CHAPTER 4
Vocabulary
drawn, rattletrap, reciting
Comprehension
What would be fun about living in a motor home? What would not? Why is the motor home important to the story?
Prediction
What will the small adventure be?

CHAPTER 5
Vocabulary
tattletale, invisible, taciturn, loquacious
Comprehension
List the things the boys do to create a small adventure. What do you do to create a small adventure where you live?
Prediction
What comes floating down the creek?

CHAPTER 6
Vocabulary
hollering, ignoramus, surge, serendipity, solemnly
Comprehension
Why do you think Elvis wanted to keep the boat a secret from his siblings?
Prediction
What will they do with the little boat?

CHAPTER 7
Vocabulary
contraption, platform, dabbed
Comprehension
Compare Popeye’s life in Fayette, South Carolina, with Elvis’s life on the Holiday Rambler.
Prediction
How much longer will Elvis stay in Fayette? What will he and Popeye do while they’re together?

CHAPTER 8
Vocabulary
mossy, yonder, examined
Comprehension
Describe what the boys do at the creek. Have you ever played in a creek?
Prediction
What do you think the message “Princess . . . Queen . . . T-Bone” means?

CHAPTER 9
Vocabulary
fluttered, wrath, hooligan
Comprehension
Explain Velma’s wrath and why (or why not) Popeye deserved it.
Prediction
How long will Popeye be grounded? Will he ever see Elvis again?

CHAPTER 10
Vocabulary
divert, irritated, minnows
Comprehension
Explain why it is good (occasionally, anyway) to have Dooey for an uncle.
Prediction
What will the boys do next? What would you want to do?

CHAPTER 11
Vocabulary
qualm, narrowed, pickax, hatchet
Comprehension
How do you know if Popeye feels bad for fibbing to Velma? Do you think Elvis would feel bad too?
Prediction
What would Velma do if she found out?
CHAPTER 12

**Vocabulary**
- trotted, squinted, citizen, determined

**Comprehension**
Make an argument for living in either Fayette or on the Holiday Rambler. Then decide who you’d most likely be friends with: Elvis or Popeye. Explain why.

**Prediction**
Will the boys figure out who made the boats in time or not? How?

CHAPTER 13

**Vocabulary**
- avuncular, strolling

**Comprehension**
What do the notes say? Can you make any connections between them?

**Prediction**
Where will the path lead? Is it a clue or not?

CHAPTER 14

**Vocabulary**
- clusters, scattered, diverse

**Comprehension**
Popeye can’t seem to help but follow Elvis’s lead. Why? What choices does he make even though he struggles with them?

**Prediction**
What will they find? What will they do next?

CHAPTER 15

**Vocabulary**
- gravelly, delicate, tattered, hesitate, forlornly

**Comprehension**
Describe what and who Popeye and Elvis find at the end of the path.

**Prediction**
Will Popeye make friends with the girl up the creek or not? What makes you think so or not?

CHAPTER 16

**Vocabulary**
- carton, glare, mesmerize

**Comprehension**
Why is there a difference between who Starletta says she IS and what she is CALLED? Describe Starletta in your own words.

**Prediction**
How will Elvis react to his brothers and sisters following him? What makes you think this?

CHAPTER 17

**Vocabulary**
- sneaky, slimy, flailing, tangle, brief, scowling, admiration, plethora

**Comprehension**
Why did Starletta write each of the notes in the Yoo-Hoo boats? What meaning do they have for her?

**Prediction**
What is the meaning of the last note?

CHAPTER 18

**Vocabulary**
- trampling, avalanche, ambled, quandary

**Comprehension**
Have you ever gotten into big trouble like Popeye? Compare your punishment to his. Do you think Grandma Velma is strict or not? Why?

**Prediction**
What will Popeye decide to do?

CHAPTER 19

**Vocabulary**
- spewed, eccentric, unconventional, miraculous

**Comprehension**
Why do Popeye and Elvis have to return to Starletta’s house on Wednesday? How could that be possible?

**Prediction**
Will they get the answer in time or not? What clues do you have?

CHAPTER 20

**Vocabulary**
- whoop, muttering, sprawled, saint, connive, cahoots

**Comprehension**
Why does Elvis’s mom, Glory Jewell, call Velma a saint? Why is it important to the story that they leave?

**Prediction**
Will the Holiday Rambler stay stuck forever? How will they get it out of the mud?

CHAPTER 21

**Vocabulary**
- livid, slithered, criminal, appreciate

**Comprehension**
Explain the plan that Popeye and Elvis come up with to get back to Starletta’s house.

**Prediction**
What could go wrong with the plan?

CHAPTER 22

**Vocabulary**
- callous, abhorrent, glanced, devious, underhanded

**Comprehension**
Does the plan work? Now what’s wrong?

**Prediction**
Will Popeye and Elvis get in trouble this time or not? Why?

CHAPTER 23

**Vocabulary**
- cajole, flattery, monument, reminded

**Comprehension**
How does Popeye try to convince Starletta to tell them where the dogs are? What finally works?

**Prediction**
With what you now know about Starletta as a character, what will she do and say?
**PROJECTS**

**READING**
Good readers make predictions as they read based on evidence and clues they pick up in each chapter. It’s fine if your predictions are wrong while you read because it wouldn’t be much fun if you always knew what would happen! As you read each chapter place a sticky note answering each prediction question listed above. Be honest!

** VOCABULARY**
Popeye learns many new words from Grandma Velma’s crossword puzzles. Try to use at least one of the words for each chapter during the day once you understand its meaning. Put a line through any words you already know on the lists and circle ones you’ve never heard before. After reading the novel, compare your lists with a reading buddy and talk about your favorite words from the story. Together, write at least ten sentences using these new words.

**WRITING**
Barbara O’Connor can bring a place to life by being really specific in the details she uses to describe it. Reread her description of the Holiday Rambler (page 44 in the paperback) or Starletta’s kitchen (page 99). Inspired by these two mentor texts, describe a place from your own life with fresh eyes. Try to zoom in on the details—colors, shapes, sizes, textures, the way something moves—as you jot down ideas.

**ART**
Draw, sketch, or paint your favorite scene from the book. Then in a short paragraph explain why you picked this moment and why it is important in the book.

Create your own boat out of a Yoo-Hoo box or something else! Test it on a nearby creek, but don’t forget to leave a cryptic message inside it.

**SCIENCE**
Gather ten random objects from your house and fill a tub with a few inches of water. Then fill out the following chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Prediction: Will it float?</th>
<th>Observation: Did it float?</th>
<th>Hypothesis: Why did it float? Why didn’t it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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**CHAPTER 24**

**Vocabulary**
dumbstruck, coonhounds, graves, etched, beloved, savor

**Comprehension**
What did Popeye discover about his own town of Fayette? Why was this a place to savor?

**Prediction**
What will happen next?

**CHAPTER 25**

**Vocabulary**
traipsing, unsupervised, intended

**Comprehension**
Why is Velma so upset with Popeye? What would happen to you? How does Starletta speak to Velma in a way that surprises Popeye?

**Prediction**
Will Popeye ever see Startletta again? What makes you think so or not?

**CHAPTER 26**

**Vocabulary**
whirled, melancholy, interstate, reminisce, passel

**Comprehension**
In the end, explain why Popeye was still glad that Elvis came to town even though he left. How did it change him?

**Prediction**
What do you think will happen to all three characters Popeye, Elvis, Starletta?