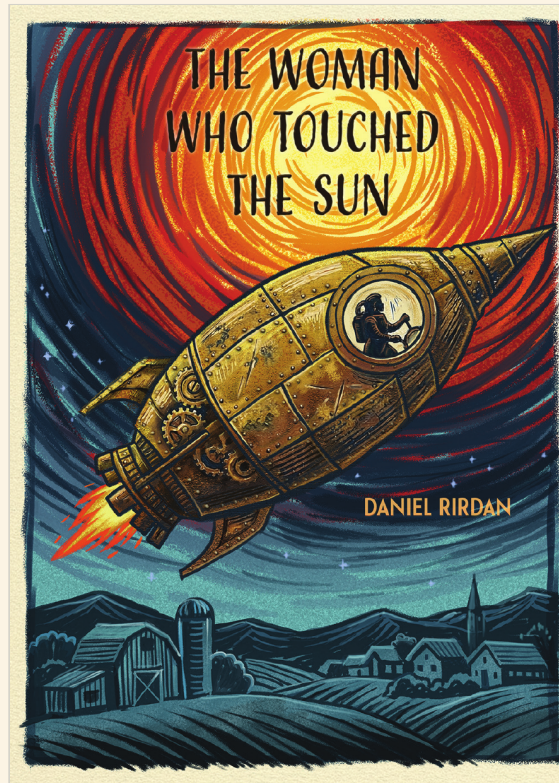




A CLASSROOM GUIDE

The Woman Who Touched the Sun

Grades 4–8 • One Class Period

Daniel Rirdan • Illustrated by Gennadi Erkulis

Hardcover • ISBN 979-8-9926090-7-3 • Also in audiobook

Reviewed by Kirkus, Midwest Book Review, and BlueInk Review

CORINO PRESS

AT A GLANCE

THE STORY	A Nebraska farm woman builds a spaceship in her barn with a sledgehammer and a welding torch, flies it into the sun — which speaks, and forbids her to come closer — and scoops out a bellful of liquid fire. She never explains why.
LENGTH	16 pages of story. 15–20 minutes read aloud. Complete in a single class period.
CORE STANDARD	CCSS RL.8.9 — modern fiction drawing on myth, rendered new.
BEST FOR	Mythology units · hero's journey · figurative language · reluctant readers · cross-curricular STEM

INTRODUCTION

Why This Story, and Why It's Easy to Teach

Two things make this an unusually practical text for a middle school classroom.

It's short. Sixteen pages. Reluctant readers actually finish it — and finishing something is the whole ballgame. It can be read aloud, beginning to end, in one period, with time left over for the argument it starts.

It is a modern myth, built on an ancient one. That makes it a natural vehicle for **CCSS RL.8.9**: *analyze how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths and traditional stories, including describing how the material is rendered new.* Most teachers spend weeks hunting for a text that does this cleanly. This one does it in twenty minutes.

Before Reading

Open with a question and let them argue for five minutes:

OPENING QUESTION

Why do people do dangerous things that nobody asked them to do? Climb mountains. Sail alone across oceans. Go to the bottom of the sea.

Then tell them: when George Mallory was asked why he wanted to climb Everest, he is said to have answered, “*Because it's there.*” Ask whether that is a real answer. Keep their responses — you will come back to them.

Vocabulary to pre-teach in context: ballast · chronometer · periscope · windlass · trajectory · coolant · kerosene · hymn · samurai · inferno

SECTION ONE

The Myth Underneath

Students will reach for **Icarus** immediately — a person flying toward the sun. Let them, then complicate it.

- **Icarus flies too close and falls.** Jo flies too close *on purpose*, and comes home. What changes when a story inverts its source?
- **Prometheus steals fire from the gods and carries it back to humanity.** This is the closer parallel, and students usually find it on the second pass. Jo literally takes fire from the sun and brings it home — and the story ends before we learn what it is for.
- **The hero's journey.** If your class knows Campbell, this is a textbook run: the call, the threshold (the barn roof rolling open), the trials (the loose plate, the cracked coolant pipe, the detour past Mercury), the supreme ordeal (the sun's voice), and — precisely on cue — *the return with the elixir*. A golden liquid, carried home.
- **The American tall tale.** Paul Bunyan. Pecos Bill. **John Henry** above all: a laborer with a hammer, matched against an overwhelming force. But John Henry dies at the end of his story. Jo does not. Ask them what that difference is *for*.

WRITING PROMPT · RL.8.9 / W.8.3

Choose a myth you know. Rewrite its central event so the outcome reverses — the one who fell now rises, the one who won now loses. Then, in one paragraph, explain what your reversal changed about the story's *meaning*, not just its plot.

SECTION TWO · THE CENTERPIECE

“Because.”

Twice, the story refuses to explain Jo's motive.

She was going to the sun.

Because.

And at the end:

She flew to the sun because. And that was enough.

And there was something else. But Jo never spoke of a thing until it was done.

This is the discussion that makes the class period worth it. A suggested sequence:

1. **What is a sentence like “Because.” even doing there?** It is a fragment. It is a paragraph. It is an entire answer with the answer removed. Why would a writer choose that?
2. **Is it satisfying, or is it cheating?** Put it to an actual vote and make both sides defend themselves. There is no correct answer, and students can feel that — which is exactly why they will engage.
3. **What is “something else”?** The story tells us Jo has a second purpose and then withholds it. What do you think the liquid sun is for? (Watch for the Prometheus students here. Someone always gets there.)
4. **Where else do people refuse to explain themselves?** When is that strength, and when is it a wall?

WRITING PROMPT

Write the missing page. What was the “something else”? Match the story's voice — short sentences, concrete objects, no speeches.

SECTION THREE · CRAFT

Close Reading: The Farm in the Sky

This is the craft lesson, and it is a beautiful one. Have students hunt down every simile in the story, then sort them by where the image comes *from*.

They will discover that the cosmos is described almost entirely in the language of the farm:

The moon's gravity tugs “like a hand grabbing an ankle”

The ship skims the moon “like a skiff riding a riverbank”

Pedaling through coolant is “like pushing a plow through wet clay”

Bracing against the sun is “like forcing shut a gate in a storm”

Mercury's shadow is “midnight in a barrel”

Then ask the question that unlocks it: **whose vocabulary is this?** Jo has never left the prairie. She has no words for space, so she reaches for the only words she owns. The style is the character. A story about a farmer reaching the sun is written in the language of farming — and that is not decoration. It is the book's argument, hidden in its sentences.

EXTENSION

Ask students to describe something enormous and unfamiliar — a stadium, an airport, a hurricane — using *only* the vocabulary of a place they know intimately: their kitchen, a basketball court, a grandmother's garden.

Personification, and the Voice She Refuses to Answer

The sun is a character. It roars, it forbids, it shrieks, it demands to know who dares. But note the detail nearly every student misses on a first read. As Jo passes the moon:

Something old and cold brushed her mind. But Jo did not answer the startled cry of the moon. She kept silent.

The moon speaks to her — **and she ignores it**. Ask: why would a writer include a voice the hero refuses to answer? What does silence tell us about a character that dialogue cannot? Compare it with her single line to the sun — “Yes. *I dare*.” Four words, and the whole book is in them.

SOUND AND PACING · READ ALOUD

Have students read the descent sequence aloud and listen to what the prose is doing: *Clank. Clank. Clank... Ping. / Steady. Steady. / Lower and lower. Lower and lower. / Crrrakks.*

Why do the sentences get shorter as the danger gets larger?

SECTION FOUR · CROSS-CURRICULAR

The Science Is Half Real

the moon's bearing. Together, those two numbers gave her what she needed to set course and strike out for the sun.

She twisted in her bucket seat and pulled down to her lap a wooden board—a cut-down barn door. Waxed butcher paper clipped to it.

With a grease pencil dangling from a string, she drew arcs. Marked vectors. Crossed out old numbers. Consulted her waterproof logbook. She grabbed the slide rule and ran the scales—slide, click, slide, calculating. The math was not pretty. It did not need to be. It only needed to be right.

At long last, Jo set and locked a heading, getting the ship under way.

A few minutes in, the gravitational current she was riding began to veer away from the moon—just as the star chart indicated.

The moon's gravity whispered at her heels. The sun's pull pressed on her bow. She threaded the ship between them.

Hour by hour, her ship sped on, and the sun grew—coin to plate to everything. The forward-facing port-holes went from dark windows to blazing altars. And a small sound escaped Jo.

4

Interior illustration by Gennadi Erkulis. Worth projecting before you begin.

This is a gift to a co-teaching partner in science, and a superb critical-thinking exercise. Give students the story and one question: **which of this is real physics, and which is fable?**

- **Real.** The *sacrificial plates* that “burn away layer by layer, shedding heat with every plate that broke off” describe genuine **ablative heat shielding** — the same principle that brought the Apollo capsules home.
- **Real.** **Mare Orientale** is an actual lunar impact basin, with real concentric rings rippling out for hundreds of miles.
- **Half real.** Water as thermal mass, and as protection against crushing g-forces. The physics is sound. The plumbing is not.
- **Fable.** Gravity “streams” and “currents” you can ride like a river. A sun that talks. The entire barn.

- **Real, and worth pausing on.** Jo calculates her trajectory by *hand* — slide rule, grease pencil, waxed butcher paper. “*The math was not pretty. It did not need to be. It only needed to be right.*” This is how the mathematicians of the early space program actually worked. Pair it with the story of Katherine Johnson.

MAKER / STEM EXTENSION

Jo is an engineer who builds with her hands. What tools appear in the story? What would you actually need to build a pressure vessel that survives heat and force? Where would her design fail first — and how would you fix it?

SECTION FIVE · RESEARCH EXTENSION

How Did Jo's Family Get to Nebraska?

The story tells us Jo's great-grandfather was a samurai, and that her grandmother sang a hymn in Japan. It tells us she may once have gone by the name Kana Yamata — “*before Nebraska, before the farming community, before the barn.*” Then it says nothing more.

The fable leaves that history deliberately open, which makes it an excellent research prompt.

RESEARCH & DISCUSS

The chronometer on Jo's wall is a WWII relic, so this story takes place after the war. How might a Japanese American family have come to be farming in Nebraska in those years? Research the incarceration of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, and the War Relocation Authority's resettlement program, which dispersed families into the Midwest.

Then discuss: **why might a storyteller leave that history out?** What does a fable gain by stripping away historical detail — and what does it lose? Is Jo's silence about her past the author's choice, or hers?

SECTION SIX

Discussion Questions

- 1 Jo is described as “*the kind of person who made you think twice before interrupting. Who fixed your fence without asking. Who showed up when you were sad.*” What kind of heroism is this? How is it different from the heroism of the flight?
- 2 The sun says “*All things fall to me.*” Jo says nothing back. Who wins that argument?

- 3 Jo sits cross-legged on the floor to face what she believes is her death, because her great-grandfather “*had known how to look death in the eye.*” What does she inherit from her family — and what does she build for herself?
- 4 Why does she hum her grandmother's hymn at the very worst moment?
- 5 The ship is made from a church bell, a railroad chain stamped *Burlington, 1887*, and a tractor seat. Why is it built out of old American things?
- 6 She removes her dark goggles on the final page. Why end there?
- 7 Is this science fiction, a myth, or a tall tale? Defend your answer with evidence from the text.

SECTION SEVEN

Standards Alignment

Common Core State Standards, English Language Arts, Grades 6–8.

STANDARD	WHERE IT LANDS
RL.8.9	Modern fiction drawing on myth — the core use of this text.
RL.6–8.1	Textual evidence. The “Because.” debate demands it.
RL.6–8.2	Theme: courage, inheritance, craft, defiance.
RL.6–8.3	Character revealed through action and through silence.
RL.6–8.4	Figurative language. The farm-vocabulary close read.
RL.6–8.5	Structure and pacing. Fragment sentences under pressure.
RL.7.9	Fiction set against historical account (the Nebraska resettlement extension).
W.6–8.3	Narrative writing: the myth reversal, the missing page.
SL.6–8.1	Collaborative discussion.

Getting the Book Into Their Hands

The story runs about twenty minutes read aloud. The illustration by Gennadi Erkulis — Jo hauling the windlass, waist-deep in coolant, the moon filling the porthole behind her — is worth projecting or passing around before you begin.

Because the book is short, illustrated, and hardbound but genuinely serious, it occupies a rare shelf: high interest, low barrier, and not the least bit babyish. That combination is exactly what middle grade readers are least often handed.