

**PRAIRIE WHISPERS  
BY FRANCES ARRINGTON**

**Louisiana Young Readers' Choice Award Nominee 2006  
Grades 6-8**

Submitted by Dorothy L. Grimsley, Instructor  
Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education  
University of Louisiana at Lafayette

**Title: Prairie Whispers**  
**Author: Frances Arrington**  
**Publisher: Philomel Books, 2003**  
**Pages: 176**

### **Summary**

In the 1860s on the South Dakota prairie, Colleen helps deliver her mother's baby, but the baby is too early and too small. Her mother is too ill to know that the baby is stillborn. When Colleen goes to find help for her mother, she discovers that the woman in a nearby covered wagon has also given birth. That infant is well, but the mother, Mrs. O'Brien, knows that she is dying. Mrs. O'Brien tells Colleen that she doesn't trust her husband and begs her to take the baby. Mrs. O'Brien also tells her to take a gold watch and a moneybox. Colleen switches the wagon woman's baby for her mother's dead baby. Colleen meant to tell Ma and Pa the truth about that night, but it never seemed the right moment. When the baby's suspicious father returns, Colleen is driven to lying, hiding and even stealing to protect the baby. The book ends as Colleen is about to tell her parents the truth.

### **Awards and "Best Book" Lists**

Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award Master List 2004 – 2005

*Booklist* Best of List, Editors Choices 2004

*Booklist* Top 10 Historical Fiction for Youth 2003

### **Author's Biography**

Frances Arrington was raised in a Hartsville, a small town in South Carolina. After college, she took a cross-country trip and became fascinated with the prairie states and imagined what pioneer life would have been like. Her first novel for middle readers was *Bluestem* that was published in 2000. This novel was set on the open prairie in 1879 and reveals how 11-year old Polly and 9-year old Jessie are forced to fend for themselves after their mother lapses into an irreversible catatonic state. Later, Arrington was inspired by a painting that showed a lone wagon crossing the prairie and this led to the writing of *Prairie*

*Whispers*. She now lives in Folly Beach, South Carolina where she has been a teacher for 24 years.

### **Other Titles by Frances Arrington**

*Bluestem*  
*Stella's Bull*

### **Related Titles**

*As Far As I Can See: Meg's Prairie Diary* by Kate McMullan  
*Bluestem* by Frances Arrington  
*Going West* by Jean Van Leeuwen (Grades 1-4)  
*Pioneer Girl: Growing Up on the Prairie* by Andrea Warren  
*Prairie Birds: Fragile Splendor in the Great Plains* by Paul A. Johnsgard  
*Prairie Song* by Pam Conrad  
*Prairie Visions: The Life and Times of Solomon Butcher* by Pam Conrad  
*Stories From Where We Live—The Great North American Prairie* by Sara St. Antoine and Trudy Nicholson

### **Classroom Connections**

- Ask students to brainstorm why they think American settlers decided to move west in the 1860s. Then have students research the westward movement to determine why American settlers moved west in the 1860s. Have students compare the brainstormed list of reasons to the actual reasons the families moved. Using a Venn diagram, compare/contrast the reasons for the westward movement in the 1860s and the reasons why families move today.
- Writing Exercise: The book ends as Colleen is about to tell her parents the truth about the baby. Have students discuss the following:
  - What will Colleen say?
  - How will her family react?
- This is a good book to develop questions and ethical debates with your students. There are many incidents that provoke the question, "What would you do?" Other questions for discussion:
  - Why did Colleen have to switch the babies? Couldn't she just have taken Bonnie home as Mrs. O'Brien asked?
  - Does Mr. O'Brien strike you as a bad man?
  - Why did Mr. O'Brien's wife worry about leaving the baby with him?
  - After the end of the book, how do you think Colleen explained to her parents about the baby? What was their reaction?

## **Web Sites**

Life on the Great Plains

[http://www.edsitement.neh.gov/view\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?ID=265](http://www.edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?ID=265)

This lesson plan about the Great Plains was created for grades 9 – 12, but could be adapted for middle grades.

Prairies

<http://www.42explore.com/prairie.htm>

Site offers many links to information about prairies.

Prairies First Frame

<http://www.cesa10.k12.wi.us/Ecosystems/prairies/index.htm>

This is a database that includes information about native animals, plants, people, prairie types and links to resources. This web site was created by a 6<sup>th</sup> grade class.

Do you hear the whisper? Butterflies, birds and bees - the exquisite relationship between pollinators and native plants Learn More.Â Why Native plants? Ask the birds, the bees and butterflies -- Listen to their Whisper! woodland flowers. prairie FLOWERS. Prairie Whispers, Frances Arrington, HB-B, J-Historical, @ 2003, 10/03. Only 12 year old Colleen knows that her baby sister died just after she was born, and that Colleen put another baby in her place, one whose mother made Colleen promise to take care of the baby just before the mother died. Ma was unconscious, and Pa was away. Whispering Prairie Press, Kansas City, Missouri. 2,769 likes. We are tireless advocates for the arts. We support established artists and inspire new...Â Whispering Prairie Press is a non-profit organization based in Kansas City. We publish an annual, ec See more. It's worth noting that 'Whispers Among the Prairie' is Roberts's debut novel. She, unfortunately, made a couple of the mistakes many first-time authors make. For one, verbosity. Many of her descriptions were unnecessarily detailed and broke the book's rhythm. Characters frequently gave up too much information while speaking, resulting in awkward dialogue. Additionally, constant head-hopping was, at times, disorienting. It would have been better if she had stuck to a single POV per chapter/section.