**Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions**  
Independent Reading Project

**Brief Synopsis**

A young man (William Bloom), at the deathbed of his father (Edward Bloom), tries to reconcile his memories of his dad with who he really is. Whereas he always saw his father as an irresponsible liar, he comes to understand his dad's exaggerations and their roots in reality. The book is written in a chronological (although they may not appear so at first) series of *tall tales*. Despite the novel's first-person narration, there is no present tense part of the book. The various stories are Will's retelling of tales that Ed has told about his life. The 'My Father's Death Take' chapters are William planning out his final conversation with his father in his head and how it will go, so that when the actual conversation takes place, he will be able to get to bottom of the truth and find a way of truly understanding his father. -- Wikipedia

**Timeline:**

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<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Book purchase</td>
<td>by Tuesday, 1/27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read author interview (p. 3-7)</td>
<td>by Tuesday, 1/27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read NYT article “Stories that Bind Us” (p. 8-10)</td>
<td>by Tuesday, 1/27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read <em>Big Fish</em></td>
<td>by Monday, 3/23</td>
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**Annotation Key**

- **Father-Son Motif** - put a ★ in the margin to note observations about or developments in the relationship between Edward and William Bloom.

- **Hero Archetype** – use a ♔ to track any descriptions of Edward Bloom as a heroic figure

- **Hero’s Journey** – identify Joseph Campbell’s stages of the hero’s journey

- **Hyperbole** – put an (!) in the margin any time the author uses exaggeration

- **Allusions** – put a ✡ in the margin when you notice a reference to characters or situations from classical mythology, fairy tales, and tall tales (i.e. *The Odyssey*, Twelve Labors of Hercules, water nymph; metamorphosis; Ceberus, the dog who guards the gates of the Underworld). Be sure to note what the allusion is in the margin.

- **Symbolic Image (Big Fish)** – highlight any references to fish or water

Note connections to *The Odyssey* throughout the book.
Preview these questions to guide your reading and annotations – you do **NOT** have to answer these questions.

1. William tells the story of his father through a series of tall tales. Why might tales that challenge the truth be a more effective way of getting to the heart of William’s father?

2. Mythical heroes usually undertake a quest for an object or knowledge. What is Edward’s quest? What is William’s?

3. How does Edward react to the role of becoming a father?

4. How would you contrast William and Edward, especially in their understanding of storytelling?

5. How would you characterize Edward and William’s relationship? In what ways does it change throughout the course of the book?

6. The final scene between Edward and William takes place four times (or is played out in four different ways). What is the effect of each one, and why does the author create so many alternate versions of only that one scene? What might that say about William’s role as a spinner of tales?

7. How does the element of water figure into the imagery and ideas of the story?

8. What is the meaning of the big fish? What are we to make of this final transformation?

9. If someone were to ask you what really happened in Edward’s life, how would you describe it? Do you think he is self-centered or unselfish? What leads you to this conclusion?

10. The movie of *Big Fish* departs from the plot of the book in a number of ways, from adding in a character to changing the second half of the book. Why do you think each of these things were changed for the film? What does this tell us about the audience for a book and the audience for a movie?
DT: To begin with a couple of general questions, what authors have influenced your own work in terms of subject as well as technique?

DW: My first serious influence in high school was Kurt Vonnegut. I remember waiting for Breakfast of Champions to come out at the same time I was waiting for the Allman Brothers’ Eat a Peach to come out. The structure of my books is like the structure of Vonnegut’s books. They look similar to his books. Mr. Sebastian and the Negro Magician is a departure from my other novels, but typically my chapters, like his, are very short. I didn’t think about this until recently, but, like myself, Vonnegut is also kind of a doodler. Breakfast of Champions had some illustrations in it. And then I moved into the southern fiction: Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, even though I’m not sure they had much direct influence on my own work. And the magical realists are really important to me: Garcia Marquez, Calvino, Kafka—although he’s not usually thought of as a magical realist, he ought to be. I like his sense of humor a lot, and, as I look back on my own work now the way I would look back on another author’s work, I see the parallels: the mix of darkness and humor.

DT: How would you describe your writing process?

DW: I don’t bring to the act of writing a lot of conscious sense of what I’m doing. I don’t have a plan to how things are going to go. I let the story go and trust that it is going to evolve in its own way. For instance, I had the title of Big Fish, but I had no idea how it was going to end until about thirty pages out. I’m more of an improvisational writer. When you start out with a blank sheet of paper, your choices are infinite, but as soon as you start to commit to one word and two and three, your choices diminish. So the story starts to open up as you’re writing, but also it’s constricting because you close off possibilities. You’re setting it in a certain time and space. Ideally what happens is that the book ends when it can’t go any further. But all that is determined by every word that came before it. So all the material is there for what you’re going to create as you’re creating it, not before. It’s only deterministic after it happens.

DT: There are a range of allusions to classical mythology embedded throughout Big Fish—for example, Hercules’ labor of subduing Cerberus, the name of Edward Bloom’s World
War II Navy ship is *The Nereid*, the naked woman in the river as a water nymph, Edward’s Ovidian metamorphosis into a fish, etc. What inspired your interest in mythology? Is your use of mythic allusions a parody of how ummythic and insubstantial contemporary life seems? Or are they part of an effort to raise contemporary life to a mythic level? Or something else?

**DW:** Well, I’ve always loved myth and saw them as beautiful and sometimes sophisticated adventure stories that had these wonderful scandalous elements. I like the way that people and gods were depicted in myth. I would put Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology* and The Bible on the same self; I think of them as part of the same impulse. I see myth as having a basis in reality. Like Odysseus, for example, I wouldn’t be surprised if that character were based in a real historical figure from which the stories were drawn. And the stories presented in myth are sometimes descriptions of the natural world that couldn’t be explained in other ways, without art. There’s one where Zeus wants to make love to a woman and doesn’t want Hera to see so he makes the sky cloudy, and that’s the explanation for clouds that interweaves this playful agency behind it. So I thought that if these stories could be applied to real people and that real people could be understood in terms of myth through history, then we could understand a contemporary man’s life in the same terms. I could tell the story of a normal man’s life through that lens by which things that have explanations in reality are exaggerated into myth.

**DT:** How did you conceive of the novel on a structural level?

**DW:** I didn’t start out with the idea of *Big Fish* as a novel. I was really just writing little bits and pieces. The first versions of the story were footnoted, so that you could see the parallels between the mythic level and the everyday reality of this figure taken from middle America. But in later revisions I took the footnotes out, because they seemed to be forcing the obvious. The structure really came from the fact that at the time I was a new father. I simply didn’t have the time to sit and stew in a novel. So I thought of writing these vignettes as a means of mental exercising, of keeping in shape, while I was raising my kid. But as I moved along, I saw that they were describing an arc of a whole life. So the first draft of the novel was all these mythic vignettes. The death scenes were added later. That whole relationship between father and son that is fleshed out in the death scenes was only included later and I think it makes the book more comprehensible to the reader.

**DT:** It’s interesting that your relationship with your son literally affected the composition and structure of your novel while the book itself focuses on the narrator’s relationship to his father.

**DW:** Yes, I really do feel that my son influenced the structure, and my father influenced the substance. Because of my son, I didn’t have time to write a thirty-page chapter. I wrote during his naps, and, like the rings of a tree, you can see the length of the chapters as being the length of the naps he took.

**DT:** In terms of the substance you mentioned, Edward Bloom seeks to make himself immortal through retelling the gradiose and mostly self-aggrandizing stories of his life. Do you believe in this vision of secular immortality? Can a “great man” exist today? What does modern “greatness” entail?

**DW:** That’s a good question. I don’t think I can answer it. At one point in the book it says, and I do believe this to be true, that if a man can say he is loved by his family, then he can be considered
great—that there is only this much more discrete, individual idea of greatness. The thing that drives
the soul of the world is not the larger-than-life people—the dictators, the emancipators—but the
people going about their lives everyday. For me, the most important thing I can do is to be a good
father to my son. I consider this much more important than books and writing. I don’t know that
Edward Bloom was a great man. It is a mistaken idea that he has to look for greatness outside the
family, when really it lies in his relationship with his wife and son.

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DT: *Big Fish* suggests an interconnection between jokes and stories, pointing out the
narrative structure of jokes, and the humorous or at least pleasurable quality of narrative,
even when narrating unpleasant events. Could you draw this out a bit? What do you think is
important about the connections between telling stories and telling jokes?

DW: Part of it is just that all writing is a kind of letter from the self, the writer, and regardless of the
biographical content, it’s always autobiographical in some way. Nothing in any of my books ever
happened to me, but all of it is autobiographical. And sometimes I don’t even realize it until later
that a certain scene is a representation of something that happened to me, or of some thought I’ve
had. You can know me by analogy through my stories. Basically, I love jokes. Life is hard, and
laughter is good. There is really no way for me to write about death without humor. I want to talk
about things that aren’t necessarily enjoyable, but I want readers to enjoy the enjoyable. And one
way to do so is to sugarcoat it with humor. It’s really hard to make somebody cry, but I can easily
make you laugh. And the source of both of those emotions is not quite in the same place, but
definitely in the same neighborhood. If you can approach that place through humor, then the
chances of getting into deeper emotional places later are much greater. Laughter is an easier path to
those emotional spaces. If somebody said, “Would you rather do away with jokes or your concept of
suffering?” I would probably get rid of suffering and keep the jokes.

DT: Although doing away with suffering would probably get rid of all the jokes.

DW: Yes, so obviously you can’t do both.

DT: Mark Twain once quipped, “The secret source of humor itself is not joy, but sorrow.
There is no humor in Heaven.”

DW: I completely agree.

DT: In *Big Fish*, the jokes almost seem to become a figure for your own art, converting pain
into pleasure, and the pithiness, the narrative compression of jokes is not unlike the
condensed structure of your chapters.

DW: Yes, and the jokes are all thematically related to the book in some way. They are all either
about fathers and sons, or about death.

DT: For instance, the Pinocchio joke. It’s about myth and religion—the fairytale nature of
religion—but also misrecognition between fathers and sons. There’s so much inside the
jokes that’s self-reflexively commenting on your narrative structures and ideas.

DW: While you’re laughing, you’re getting more deeply into the material of story itself.
DT: Some of the novel’s humor centers on literalizing clichés or colloquialisms (e.g., Edward “digging his own grave,” the story of Karl the Giant as a literal “tall tale” and he literally becomes “the biggest farmer” in Alabama, etc.). We think these are just expressions, mere words, but they become real in the world of the novel. What is the importance of this motif in Big Fish?

DW: Well, I think that language is funny. Cliché often has a meaningful source to it. But it shows the shared nature of our language. And it’s also to have fun. It adds another level of meaning if you get the puns, but it isn’t necessary to understanding the narrative.

DT: In addition to its use of humor, Big Fish is also comic in its other meaning: the figure of Edward’s death is looming throughout the narrative, yet the story ends well. You are primarily a comic writer. Would you say something about comedy as a genre, and the paradox of literature that is comic, yet serious, harmonious and dissonant at once? What are some of the challenges of writing fictional comedies?

DW: I prefer a happy ending. I don’t see any use of putting stuff out there that doesn’t provide something to hang onto. It’s just not something that I want to see in the world. I think writing comedies allows space for both challenge—if done right, comedy makes you think—and resolution to occur at the same time.

DT: Big Fish ends in a kind of Ovidian metamorphosis. Why does Edward transform literally into a Big Fish at novel’s end? Is there any particular figurative weight to this image?

DW: Well, the image of the fish occurs again and again in the book. There’s this whole idea of greatness, of being something more than a big fish in a small pond—this big fishness. There’s also the idea of the fish story—people are always exaggerating the size of the fish they caught. And then there’s also this idea of fish being slippery and hard to hold and hard to catch. And the ending brings together the two sides of the novel: the mythic half and the real half. And when you’re writing, these ideas are working in you and they suggest themselves without you knowing it. Of course a lot of practice goes into writing before you’re composing a particular story. It’s like playing basketball. When you’re in the moment out on the court, you’re not thinking about a crossover dribble or faking left and going right, it’s something you do instinctively from repeated practice.

DT: Sort of a willed habit.

DW: Yes, and when it works, it’s not an accident, but it’s also not a pre-structured moment. You’ve prepared yourself for the moment, but there’s no telling when or if it happens.

DT: Almost as if the work flows on its own momentum, but there is a clear direction.

DW: Yes, there’s a direction. Like evidence being presented. Every sentence is evidence of something and things do start to take a shape and you follow that shape and then decide what you want to keep and not keep.

DT: Mass culture has Americanized, even globalized, much of stereotypical ways of the older South—the supposed emphasis on the past, the Civil War, storytelling, even dialect.
**DW:** Yes, even as I use the South as backdrops for my work, I grew up with almost none of that stuff. Nobody in my family was a big storyteller. My grandfather, Weir Rangeley Pedigo, was probably the only one close to being a storyteller and really he was just a big liar.

**DT:** Would you describe the technique of *Big Fish* as cinematic?

**DW:** I think so. It runs in vignettes and “takes” that seem like filmic scenes. Maybe more deeply, the style tries to evoke all the senses, as you take in all the various sensory stimuli when you watch a movie. My fiction tries to do that—to stay at the surface, like watching a movie, but as a way of getting to things beneath the surface. Frankly, I thought *Big Fish* was going to be a terrible movie, since the narrative line of the novel lingers and doesn’t aim to move forward with much linear momentum.

**DT:** The film version definitely streamlines the narrative and organizes the vignettes into a more linear format.

**DW:** Yes, the novel works as a novel, and the movie works as a movie, and it’s kind of apples and oranges between the two.

**DT:** What did you think about Tim Burton’s film version of *Big Fish* for Columbia Pictures? The style of Burton’s film seems a good fit for your own fictive technique—a kind of hybrid between German Expressionism and the Southern Gothic—yet there is a sense of comic uplift and a brightening up of the color scheme and tone in comparison to some of his other movies. Did you think that the style worked well in the film version? Was that a fitting parallel for your fictive style?

**DW:** Frankly, I probably would have been happy with this movie under almost any conditions because I felt so separate from it. I had complete control over the book; I wrote every word of it. But in terms of the movie, everything was out of my hands. And I liked that. I didn’t want to have any creative control over the film. I just thought of it as an adventure, as something for fun. I don’t think of the movie as being representative of the book. I did meet with John August, the screenplay writer, who did an excellent job, but I always thought of the film as a separate work of art, and I’m OK with that.

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March 15, 2013

The Stories That Bind Us
By BRUCE FEILER

I hit the breaking point as a parent a few years ago. It was the week of my extended family’s annual gathering in August, and we were struggling with assorted crises. My parents were aging; my wife and I were straining under the chaos of young children; my sister was bracing to prepare her preteens for bullying, sex and cyber-stalking.

Sure enough, one night all the tensions boiled over. At dinner, I noticed my nephew texting under the table. I knew I shouldn’t say anything, but I couldn’t help myself and asked him to stop.

Ka-boom! My sister snapped at me to not discipline her child. My dad pointed out that my girls were the ones balancing spoons on their noses. My mom said none of the grandchildren had manners. Within minutes, everyone had fled to separate corners.

Later, my dad called me to his bedside. There was a palpable sense of fear I couldn’t remember hearing before.

“Our family’s falling apart,” he said.

“No it’s not,” I said instinctively. “It’s stronger than ever.”

But lying in bed afterward, I began to wonder: Was he right? What is the secret sauce that holds a family together? What are the ingredients that make some families effective, resilient, happy?

It turns out to be an astonishingly good time to ask that question. The last few years have seen stunning breakthroughs in knowledge about how to make families, along with other groups, work more effectively.

Myth-shattering research has reshaped our understanding of dinnertime, discipline and difficult conversations. Trendsetting programs from Silicon Valley and the military have introduced techniques for making teams function better.

The only problem: most of that knowledge remains ghettoized in these subcultures, hidden from the parents who need it most. I spent the last few years trying to uncover that information, meeting families, scholars and experts ranging from peace negotiators to online game designers to Warren Buffett’s bankers.

After a while, a surprising theme emerged. The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative.

I first heard this idea from Marshall Duke, a colorful psychologist at Emory University. In the mid-1990s, Dr. Duke was asked to help explore myth and ritual in American families.
“There was a lot of research at the time into the dissipation of the family,” he told me at his home in suburban Atlanta. “But we were more interested in what families could do to counteract those forces.”

Around that time, Dr. Duke’s wife, Sara, a psychologist who works with children with learning disabilities, noticed something about her students.

“The ones who know a lot about their families tend to do better when they face challenges,” she said.

Her husband was intrigued, and along with a colleague, Robyn Fivush, set out to test her hypothesis. They developed a measure called the “Do You Know?” scale that asked children to answer 20 questions. Examples included: Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth?

Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush asked those questions of four dozen families in the summer of 2001, and taped several of their dinner table conversations. They then compared the children’s results to a battery of psychological tests the children had taken, and reached an overwhelming conclusion. The more children knew about their family’s history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The “Do You Know?” scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children’s emotional health and happiness.

“We were blown away,” Dr. Duke said.

And then something unexpected happened. Two months later was Sept. 11. As citizens, Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush were horrified like everyone else, but as psychologists, they knew they had been given a rare opportunity: though the families they studied had not been directly affected by the events, all the children had experienced the same national trauma at the same time. The researchers went back and reassessed the children.

“Once again,” Dr. Duke said, “the ones who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could moderate the effects of stress.”

Why does knowing where your grandmother went to school help a child overcome something as minor as a skinned knee or as major as a terrorist attack?

“The answers have to do with a child’s sense of being part of a larger family,” Dr. Duke said.

Psychologists have found that every family has a unifying narrative, he explained, and those narratives take one of three shapes.

First, the ascending family narrative: “Son, when we came to this country, we had nothing. Our family worked. We opened a store. Your grandfather went to high school. Your father went to college. And now you. . . .”

Second is the descending narrative: “Sweetheart, we used to have it all. Then we lost everything.”
“The most healthful narrative,” Dr. Duke continued, “is the third one. It’s called the oscillating family narrative: ‘Dear, let me tell you, we’ve had ups and downs in our family. We built a family business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mother was on the board of the hospital. But we also had setbacks. You had an uncle who was once arrested. We had a house burn down. Your father lost a job. But no matter what happened, we always stuck together as a family.’”

Dr. Duke said that children who have the most self-confidence have what he and Dr. Fivush call a strong “intergenerational self.” They know they belong to something bigger than themselves.

Leaders in other fields have found similar results. Many groups use what sociologists call sense-making, the building of a narrative that explains what the group is about. Jim Collins, a management expert and author of “Good to Great,” told me that successful human enterprises of any kind, from companies to countries, go out of their way to capture their core identity. In Mr. Collins’s terms, they “preserve core, while stimulating progress.” The same applies to families, he said.

Mr. Collins recommended that families create a mission statement similar to the ones companies and other organizations use to identify their core values.

The military has also found that teaching recruits about the history of their service increases their camaraderie and ability to bond more closely with their unit.

Cmdr. David G. Smith is the chairman of the department of leadership, ethics and law at the Naval Academy and an expert in unit cohesion, the Pentagon’s term for group morale. Until recently, the military taught unit cohesion by “dehumanizing” individuals, Commander Smith said. Think of the bullying drill sergeants in “Full Metal Jacket” or “An Officer and a Gentleman.”

But these days the military spends more time building up identity through communal activities. At the Naval Academy, Commander Smith advises graduating seniors to take incoming freshmen (or plebes) on history-building exercises, like going to the cemetery to pay tribute to the first naval aviator or visiting the original B-1 aircraft on display on campus.

Dr. Duke recommended that parents pursue similar activities with their children. Any number of occasions work to convey this sense of history: holidays, vacations, big family get-togethers, even a ride to the mall. The hokier the family’s tradition, he said, the more likely it is to be passed down. He mentioned his family’s custom of hiding frozen turkeys and canned pumpkin in the bushes during Thanksgiving so grandchildren would have to “hunt for their supper,” like the Pilgrims.

“These traditions become part of your family,” Dr. Duke said.

Decades of research have shown that most happy families communicate effectively. But talking doesn’t mean simply “talking through problems,” as important as that is. Talking also means telling a positive story about yourselves. When faced with a challenge, happy families, like happy people, just add a new chapter to their life story that shows them overcoming the hardship. This skill is particularly important for children, whose identity tends to get locked in during adolescence.

The bottom line: if you want a happier family, create, refine and retell the story of your family’s positive moments and your ability to bounce back from the difficult ones. That act alone may increase the odds that your family will thrive for many generations to come.