Daredevil: The Daring Life of Betty Skelton by Meghan McCarthy
A Guide for Teachers and Librarians

Background/Summary
Betty Skelton was known as “the first lady of firsts” because she broke speed, altitude, and distance records in the air, on the ground, and in the water. At a time when most women did not even consider flying airplanes, driving racecars, or training to go into space, Betty Skelton did just that. Daredevil: The Daring Life of Betty Skelton by Meghan McCarthy shows young readers how one woman dared to pursue her goals and dreams—even when they did not match those of most other girls growing up in the 1930s.

Discussion Questions/Activities

Key Ideas and Details
The questions and activities below draw on Common Core State Standards for reading informational text (RI) that ask children to ask and answer questions about a text, identify the main topic and key details that support it, and describe the relationship between a series of events, concepts, or ideas. Encourage students to cite evidence from the book when discussing their ideas.

1. Betty Skelton didn’t act the way most girls did in the 1930s. What did she do that was so unusual?

2. How was Betty Skelton’s life different from yours? For example, Betty wanted to be a navy pilot, but couldn’t because she was a woman. Nowadays both men and women can be navy pilots.

3. Here’s your chance to create an imaginary interview. Imagine that you could ask Betty Skelton questions about her daring career and that she would answer you. One person in the class should pretend to be Betty Skelton. The others should ask her questions about her life. Include questions about big, important events like her first plane ride and small details like the fact that her dog, Little Tinker, always flew with her.

While you are preparing your interview, you might be interested in listening to a real interview with Betty, which can be found at http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292945-1. See if you can add questions and answers based on what you heard Betty say.

4. Make a scrapbook of important events in Betty’s life. Draw three or four pictures showing Betty as a daredevil. You can show her in a plane, in a racecar, in a speedboat, and training with future astronauts. Write a sentence below each picture to describe what is happening. What would Betty want to remember? You could also download real pictures of Betty from the Internet at
http://www.google.com/images?q=betty+skelton&hl=en&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ie=10ozUf6YApGu0AGflIDwAQ&ved=0CCEQsAQ

How does your scrapbook show that Betty was a daredevil?

Craft and Structure
To learn about craft and structure, the CCSS asks us to help students learn and understand vocabulary words and phrases, think about the features of nonfiction text, and assess the author’s point of view. The questions below emphasize these understandings.

5. What does it mean to be daring? This activity asks students to work together to discuss and order related words from daring to its opposite cowardly. These words are polar opposites. But, what words come in between? What word comes after daring? That is, it’s more like daring than any other word. What word comes next? Then what? Students should discuss the shades of meaning between the words as they order them to complete this activity.

To begin, teachers and librarians can watch a seven-minute video showing a teacher using this activity, which is called semantic gradient. You can find the video at http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/semantic_gradients/

Then put the following words on cards:

- daring
- fearless
- cowardly
- afraid
- adventurous
- hotheaded
- shy
- cautious

Discuss the meaning of each of the words. Then have the children work with a partner to order the words from most daring to least daring. As they agree on the order, have them paste the words on a long strip of paper.

As a class, then review what the students have decided. The conversation is an important part of the activity. It is not necessary for everyone to agree on the order of the words.
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6. Create a *Word Splash*. Randomly place a number of vocabulary words and phrases used in the book on a sheet of paper. Have the students connect two of the words and use them in a sentence that tells about Betty Skelton. The sentences can be oral or written and illustrated. Some words you can use are:

- metal plane
- navy base
- amazing
- legal
- license
- career
- aerobatic flying
- fly a plane
- preferred
- inverted ribbon cut
- barefoot
- “Little Stinker”
- altitude record
- racecar
- broke the women’s record
- astronauts
- Mercury 7
- *Look* magazine

Here’s a sample sentence using two items from the list:
During Betty Skelton’s amazing career, she became famous for the inverted ribbon cut, a flying stunt.

7. Examine the nonfiction text features in the book. Make a chart showing each text feature and what that feature tells the reader. A sample chart might look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Feature</th>
<th>What It Tells the Reader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Front Cover</td>
<td>Title, author, illustrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back Cover</td>
<td>Pictures that give clues about what the book is about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title Page</td>
<td>Title, author, publisher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun Facts</td>
<td>Extra information about Betty Skelton that is not in the main text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotes</td>
<td>Betty Skelton’s exact words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Line</td>
<td>Events in Betty Skelton’s life from birth to death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. Get some insight into how the author/illustrator Meghan McCarthy paints her illustrations. Watch the following two videos:
   a. *Betty Skelton Painting in Progress at* [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9t3yNks2kw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9t3yNks2kw) shows McCarthy painted the copy of the *Look* magazine cover that appears in the book.
   b. *Betty Timelapse at* [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6M6EsAxp8DY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6M6EsAxp8DY) shows the development of a painting over time. This is the painting of Betty in 1951 when she succeeded in breaking an altitude record.

**Writing**
CCSS emphasizes writing informative and explanatory text in the early grades. The writing activities below provide experience writing to give an opinion, to inform, and to explain a sequence of events.

9. What is your opinion of Betty Skelton? Do you admire her because she was a daredevil or do you think she was foolish to take so many risks? Write your opinion and tell why you think the way you do.

10. Draw and write about why Betty Skelton was called a Daredevil. Explain why people thought she was daring.

11. Tell how Betty Skelton learned how to fly and then became a stunt pilot. Use words like *first, next,* and *finally* to explain what happened. Check to see that the order of events is correct.

12. Give your opinion of this book. Give reasons to explain your opinion.

13. Using an illustration in the book showing two or more people, imagine that these people could talk. What would they say? Write a one-page play with two or more characters based on the picture. Act it out with a partner or partners.

For example, using the picture of Betty and her father, have them talk about why they agreed she should take her first flight at age 12. Here’s an example of how to begin:

Betty: Dad, I cannot tell you how excited I am to fly. Even though I am only twelve, I know a lot about flying. I know I am ready to fly by myself.
Dad: You cannot tell your mother about this. She would be very upset.
Betty: O.K., Dad, you have my word. I know it’s not legal, so we’ll keep this a secret.
Dad: Let me boost you up into the plane. Good-bye!
Betty: Dad, this is amazing. It’s my dream come true. I know I want to be a pilot. I will not change my mind.
Extending the Experience of Reading the Book

14. Make a text set of books about woman pilots. Gather and read picture book biographies of these pilots:

- Bessie Colman
- Amelia Earhart
- Blanche Stuart Scott
- Harriet Quimby
- Ruth Law

15. Visit the website of author Meghan McCarthy at http://www.meghan-mccarthy.com/ to learn more about her books, writing, and illustrating. Click on “All About the Books” to find out about the author/illustrator's other books.