

## Art

Have students research fashion in seventeenth-century England (<http://www.costumes.org/pages/hollar.htm>). Then have them design life-size figures of Meg and Susannah in the dress they might have worn to Aphra Behn's play.

## Drama

Susannah takes Meg to see a play by Aphra Behn, the first professional woman playwright. This experience gives Meg the courage to start writing her own play at the end of the novel. Meg meets many writers in her father's bookshop, but she doesn't meet Behn. Imagine a conversation that Meg would have with Behn, should she ever meet her. Then have students write a one-act dialogue between Meg Moore and Aphra Behn.

## Internet Connections

[www.vauxhallandkennington.org.uk/sgdetail.shtml](http://www.vauxhallandkennington.org.uk/sgdetail.shtml)

This site gives a description and history of the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, where Susannah takes Meg for an outing.

[www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc17.htm](http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc17.htm)

[www.pinn.net/~sunshine/whm2001/behn.html](http://www.pinn.net/~sunshine/whm2001/behn.html)

These sites provide biographical information on Aphra Behn, whose play Meg and Susannah see in the novel.

<http://prometheus.cc.emory.edu/behn/caywoodtour.html>

This official site of the Aphra Behn Society provides a walking tour of Behn's London.

<http://www.costumes.org/pages/17thlinks.htm>

Students may view images of clothing in seventeenth-century England.

## About the author

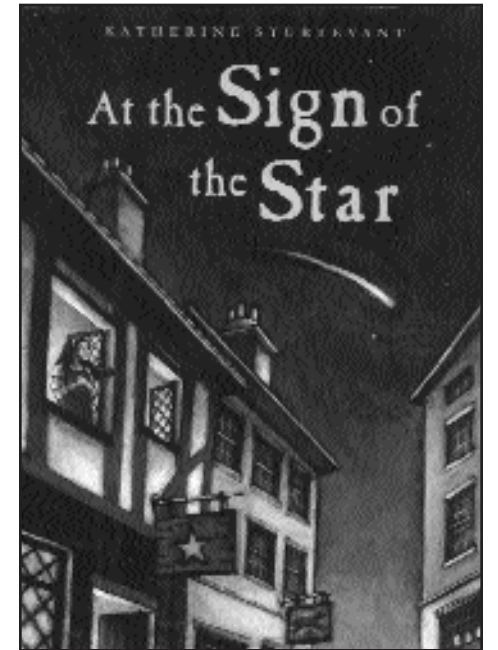
Katherine Sturtevant grew up in a book-loving family in California's Santa Clara Valley. She studied creative writing at San Francisco State University, but has been writing most of her life. She says, "I was a writer from an early age. I wrote stories, poems, and plays; I wrote them for school and I wrote them on summer vacation. My grandmother gave me a portable typewriter for Christmas when I was twelve. After that, it traveled with me on every camping trip we took. I would sit at a picnic table, under evergreens, and turn our humdrum vacations into tales of heroic rescues or martyred pets." Sturtevant's articles and reviews have been published in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The San Jose Mercury-News*, *The Willamette Week*, and *Calyx*. She lives in Berkeley with her husband and twin sons.



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# Teachers' Guide

# At the Sign of the Star



## Introduction

Twelve-year-old Meg Moore is different from most girls in seventeenth-century London. Instead of performing typical household duties such as cooking and needlework, Meg, the only child of a widowed bookshop owner, enjoys reading and writing and working in her father's shop. Her dream is to inherit her father's business one day, but when Mr. Moore announces his plans to marry Susannah Beckwith, Meg realizes that her hopes and dreams are in jeopardy. According to custom, if Susannah produces a male child, he will replace Meg as her father's heir. Meg is unwavering in her attempt to make her stepmother's life miserable, and Susannah is equally determined to turn Meg into a proper lady. When tension between Meg and Susannah becomes too great, Mr. Moore threatens to send his daughter away. But it is through her beloved books that Meg finds a way to take control of her life, and of her future.

## Classroom Connections

The social studies curriculum is broad, ranging from geography, government, and economics to U.S. and world history. Like most areas of the curriculum in middle school, history is taught in isolation, with little or no connection made to any

other area of the curriculum. Therefore, students may read historical fiction set during a period in history that they have yet to study. Novels like *At the Sign of the Star* provide a perfect opportunity for teachers to introduce students in grades 5–8 to an unfamiliar period in history and guide them toward making the important connection between history and all other disciplines.

## Standards:

This guide includes discussion questions and activities that meet the following national curriculum standards:

### *Language Arts:*

- Reads a wide range of literature from many periods in different genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience
- Employs a wide range of strategies as he or she writes and uses different writing-process elements
- Applies knowledge of language structure
- Uses a variety of technological and information resources
- Develops an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use
- Uses spoken, written, and visual language

### *At the Sign of the Star*

by Katherine Sturtevant

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A *Booklist* Editors' Choice

A Children's Book of the Year, Bank Street College

### FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

19 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003

[www.fsgbooks.com/byr](http://www.fsgbooks.com/byr)

This guide was prepared by Pat Scales, Director of Library Services,  
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***Social Studies:***

- Knows how to interpret data presented in time lines
- Understands that specific individuals had a great impact on history
- Understands that specific ideas had an impact on history
- Knows how to view the past in terms of the norms and values of the present

***Science:***

- Knows that different people may interpret the same set of observations differently
- Understands that science and technology have advanced through the contributions of many different people in different cultures at different times in history

***Visual Arts:***

- Knows how subject matter is used to communicate ideas

***Theatre Arts:***

- Creates scripted scenes based on literature and history

## Pre-Reading Activity

To familiarize students with seventeenth-century England, have them use books in the library or sites on the Internet to identify the most important events during this period. Ask students to share the results of their research in class. Then, as a group, construct a time line of seventeenth-century England to display in the classroom for future reference while reading and studying the novel.

## Discussion

Discuss the role of women in seventeenth-century England. How does Meg reject the traditional role of a woman? Debate whether her father unknowingly contributes to her strong opinions. Describe Meg’s mother. How did she contribute to Meg’s love of books and ideas? How do the books that Meg reads make her a different kind of woman from Susannah Beckwith and Anne Gosse?

Discuss why women are expected to learn French, and men to learn Greek and Latin. Meg’s father

wants to send her away to school. What might she learn at school that she cannot learn in his bookshop? How does she convince him that she will learn more by working with him?

Chapter 1, “News from the Stars,” reveals how astrology played a large role in what people believed about themselves and the world around them. What prompts Meg to visit the astrologer Anthony Barker? Discuss why he assumes that Meg’s question is matrimonial. Why is she so eager to know the influence of the stars on her father?

Mr. Barker tells Meg that she is to expect a great change in her life. “You will be as a boat on the sea, tossed by powers beyond your control. Still, you are the pilot of that boat, and everything will depend upon the course you steer. Remember always to head *into* the wind, and do not flee it. Otherwise, you may capsize your boat.” (p. 21) Discuss the metaphor posed by Mr. Barker. What are the powers beyond Meg’s control? How does she sometimes forget Mr. Barker’s advice? At what point does she almost capsize her boat?

Why is Susannah so eager for Meg to meet Anne Gosse? Describe the friendship that develops between the two girls. How is Anne a substitute for Hester? Contrast Meg’s and Anne’s lives. Discuss how Anne begins to understand Meg by the end of the novel.

Meg loves London, and Hester prefers the countryside. What aspects of London does Meg love the most? Discuss how her love for London contributes to her decision to live with her father and stepmother.

Meg is considered an impertinent child. How does this characteristic become worse when Susannah marries Meg’s father? Why does Meg feel abandoned by Hester? Debate the idea that Susannah might be jealous of Meg and her progressive ideas. In what way does Susannah begin to break the traditional role of a woman of her social status after her son is born? How does Meg help?

Meg’s father publishes a book by Mr. Pennyman called *A Wife’s Misdeeds*. Discuss Meg’s conversation with the author. Why do her questions anger her father? How is this conversation part of her plan to interfere with her father’s marriage to Susannah?

Mr. Moore values his daughter’s wit, even though he often scolds her. Cite evidence from the novel that Meg’s father is proud of her intelligence and wit. How does he help Susannah understand these important qualities in Meg?

Discuss Meg’s relationship with Mr. Winter. Why does she allow him to read her play? How are his views of women different from those of most men in seventeenth-century England?

Discuss why Meg is as interested in reading what her father chooses not to publish as she is in the things he chooses to publish. Meg’s father says that Robert, his apprentice, will never be a good bookseller because he has no imagination. Why does it take imagination to be a bookseller? How is this true today?

## Reaching across the Curriculum

### Language Arts

Have students write diary entries that Meg might record from the moment her father announces his marriage to Susannah Beckwith until the birth of her little brother at the end of the novel.

The way people use English varies from place to place and changes over the years. The following phrases are used in *At the Sign of the Star* and reflect how English was used in seventeenth-century England. Ask students to interpret the meaning of the following:

*“My father had come home late from being in company . . .”* (p. 3)

*“At the start of the dinner my elders discoursed on political matters.”* (p. 29)

*“She cuffed me for waking her, and began to scold . . .”* (p. 94)

Then have students select a paragraph from the novel and rewrite it in twenty-first-century English. How does the rewrite change the historical perspective?

A wedding ring in seventeenth-century England was often inscribed with a sentiment of love, faith, and hope, sometimes in the form of a short love poem or “poesy.” (For example, a ring in the British Museum, dated to the sixteenth or seventeenth century, reads, “faithless to none yet faithfull to one.”) Ask students to write a ring quote for Susannah’s wedding ring.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf, a free-thinking female novelist, wrote, “All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn.” Ask students to explain Woolf’s statement. Then have them write a tribute to Behn for Women’s History Week.

### Social Studies

After King Charles I was beheaded in 1649, Oliver Cromwell, a Puritan leader, ruled England. Have students research the changes that occurred in England during Cromwell’s rule. Then ask them to write a short paper explaining why Meg’s father feels that she was lucky to be born under the reign of Charles I.

Encourage students to take a virtual walking tour of Aphra Behn’s London (<http://prometheus.cc.emory.edu/behn/caywoodtour.html>). Ask them to pick a specific place on the tour to investigate further.

Meg enjoys reading from the almanacs that her father sells in his bookshop. In Barker’s almanac, Meg reads, “In the month of April, bad news will be received from across the sea, and there is a chance of loss.” (p. 18) Have students research what was going on in the American colonies during this time. Then have them write a letter that one of the colonists might write to Mr. Barker about the events.

### Science

Two midwives attend Susannah at the birth of her son. Ask students to find out about the practice of midwifery in seventeenth-century England. How has midwifery become an important medical practice in the United States today? What type of training do midwives have? What is the difference between a midwife and a doula (a woman experienced in childbirth who provides physical, emotional, and informational support to the mother before, during, and just after childbirth)? Discuss whether the midwives who attend Susannah in the novel might be considered doulas by today’s standards.

The entire Moore family contracted a fever when Meg was seven years old. The doctor purged and bled them, but her mother didn’t survive. Ask students to find out about other medical practices of seventeenth-century England. Make a small book of such practices that might be sold in Mr. Moore’s bookshop.