

"A captivating, honest, lovingly told story of a young girl's courageous journey. If you only read one book about the Titanic, read this one!"

—FRANCISCO X. STORK, award-winning author of *Marcelo in the Real World*, *The Memory of Light*, and *Illegal*

PEGGY WIRGAU



THE
STARS
IN
APRIL

BASED ON THE TRUE STORY OF TITANIC
SURVIVOR RUTH BECKER

An Educator's Guide

The materials in this guide are aligned to Common Core State Standards for Grades 5 – 8.

Dear Educator:

I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to bring the story of Ruth Becker to life and share it with students and readers everywhere. The discussion questions and activity suggestions outlined in this guide are designed to provide you with tools to enhance your teaching of *The Stars in April* and/or recommend the book for extra-curricular reading.

In exploring the story of Ruth Becker, you and your students will discover themes of courage, family and friendship, perseverance, and facing the unknown. *The Stars in April* offers the opportunity to:

- Learn about the *Titanic* disaster from the perspective of a real twelve-year-old survivor.
- Explore the Edwardian period of 1912, including life in India, train and ship travel, and current events and culture.
- Discover the stars and constellations, along with their mythology, that Ruth may have seen on her journey.
- Examine Ruth's character growth as she faces her fears and learns to accept challenges.

This Guide is divided into chapter sections, with 4 -6 chapters per section. Questions and activities pertain to those chapters, with some overlap. The activities are meant to spark ideas and can be tailored to your students' needs and interests. Additional discussion questions are available in the book on page 230.

I would love to hear your students' thoughts about the story! And please feel free to contact me anytime with suggestions or questions, or to inquire about a school visit, in-person or virtually.

Thank you for taking part in Ruth's journey,

Peggy Wirgau

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About the Author

Peggy Wirgau lives in Delray Beach, Florida. She loves bringing history to life for readers and has written for *Appleseeds*, *Insight*, *Learning Through History*, and contributed to *Why? Titanic Moments* by Yvonne Lehman. Her blog at www.peggywirgau.com features in-depth *Titanic* stories, and her followers include descendants of the ship's real-life victims and survivors.

A graduate of Michigan State University and George Mason University, Peggy is an active member of American Christian Fiction Writers, Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, and Great Lakes *Titanic* Connection. She loves to travel and explore historical sights, especially in New York and Mackinac Island, Michigan. Peggy is also a Registered Nurse. She and her husband have two adult children and a baby grandson.

Praise for *The Stars in April*

The Stars in April by Peggy Wirgau is a deftly crafted novel that is based on the true story of twelve-year-old *Titanic* survivor Ruth Becker. A fully absorbing and memorable story, *The Stars in April* is especially and unreservedly recommended for middle school, high school, and community library YA Fiction collections for young readers ages 12-18.

Midwest Book Review/Children's Bookwatch

This is a well-researched and well-paced title. Back matter includes a bibliography, family photos of the Becker family, and additional information about the *Titanic* survivors. VERDICT: This historical novel moves quickly and shares a little slice of the ever-fascinating subject of the *Titanic*. A winner.

Starred Review, School Library Journal

The Stars in April is highly recommended to readers who would love to explore the *Titanic* with Ruth Becker. The reader is taken along, from Ruth's anxious anticipation of what lies ahead to her anticipation of a fresh start with gratitude and eagerness. Ruth Becker's last sky report in her journal, where she describes a clear and starlit sky instead of the constellations and the ancient tales associated with them, illustrates her desire to paint her own story against the big horizon of the sky in her new life.

Gold Award, Literary Titan

The character development is well-executed and truly shows the growth and change in the characters through their experiences. We had the author visit our school and she did a great job talking to the students, answering their questions, and sharing the process to write a book. This would make a great family read aloud.

Elementary School Librarian, Michigan



Classroom Lesson Plans

Chapters 1 – 5

Discussion Questions

1. Why is Ruth angry with Reverend Becker? What are her reasons for wanting to remain in India?
2. If you only could pack a small bag for a long journey during Ruth's time, what would you take and why? And what would you pack in a trunk if you were moving across the world?
3. Have you experienced a big move or change that you felt you had no control over, and how did you react?
4. What do you think about the way Mrs. Becker acts toward Mr. Frank and Michael during the train ride? What might she be thinking?
5. If you made a quilt like Sajni's, what symbols would you include that are unique to your family or culture?
6. Why do you think Peggy Wirgau chose to tell Ruth Becker's story in first person? In what ways is it effective?

Activities

Draw or paint a quilt to represent you and your life. Don't forget the background! What theme or themes do you want to express?

Find Guntur, India on a map. Research Indian geographical and historical facts, customs, foods, and religions of the region.

On a world map, chart Ruth's journey. Students can choose a port and research its government, customs, currency, etc. Find out what has changed from the way Ruth describes it and what is similar. For example, look up the Port of Aden, the Suez Canal, Valletta (Is the Royal Opera House still there?) Gibraltar (How busy is the port today?), London (Where are the places the Beckers visit?), and Southampton.

What exactly is a dosa? Research this common Indian food and look for easy recipes to prepare for the class to try. To keep it simple, use naan bread or tortillas and add different fillings.

Begin a list of novel vocabulary words, a list of characters along with details about their personal development, and a list of significant plot events.

Chapters 6 – 10

Discussion Questions

1. What adjustments must Ruth make aboard the *City of Benares*?
2. Looking at Ruth's Sky Reports, how does she relate the constellations and their mythological stories to her situation?
3. What were some current events happening in 1912? What events are in the news today?
4. What do you learn about Ruth and Michael in these chapters, particularly during their talks on deck and during the rope-walking incident?
5. Discuss the metaphorical qualities and symbols woven throughout the story, such as in the stars, Ruth's bird collection, the quilt, and others you find. What does the rocking ship signify or the slow drift through the Suez Canal, and later, the speed of the *Titanic*?

Activities

Imagine that you are Sajni, and you are receiving Ruth's letters that she mails from various ports. What would you like to say to Ruth in a letter?

Research the Suffragette Movement in Great Britain and how women won the right to vote.

Ruth loved the stars and music. In writing, name two things that you love or describe you and explain why.

In her research, Peggy Wirgau discovered that Ruth spoke Telugu before she learned English.

Learn a little about the language and listen online to the pronunciation of a few simple words including those Ruth teaches to Michael. What other languages or dialects are spoken in India today?

Compare and contrast shipboard life in 1912 and what is available on today's modern cruise ships.



Chapters 11 – 17

Discussion Questions

1. How do we see Mrs. Becker begin to change her thinking about Mr. Frank in Chapter 11 and in following chapters?
2. Discuss Ruth's worries about a confrontation between Mr. Clayton and her mother. After she and Marion sleep on deck, what happens that forces Ruth to focus on Richard and Marion rather than on herself? Do you see any connection in the three quilt squares she finally notices?
3. Describe Ruth's feelings at the end of Chapter 14. Does it seem as if she's back to where she started in terms of her thoughts about the move to America?
4. In Gibraltar, how do Ruth and Michael handle the situation when Marion is missing? Would you have done something different? (Remember, cell phones were not an option!)
5. At the end of Chapter 16, what does Ruth start to realize? And how do you think Mrs. Becker's apology affected Ruth?



Activities

Richard was thought to be suffering from a severe case of viral meningitis. What is it and how is it treated today?

Do some research into traveling circuses in Ruth's day. What were they like? Were the animals treated well? What about the performers? If you joined a circus, what job would you want most?

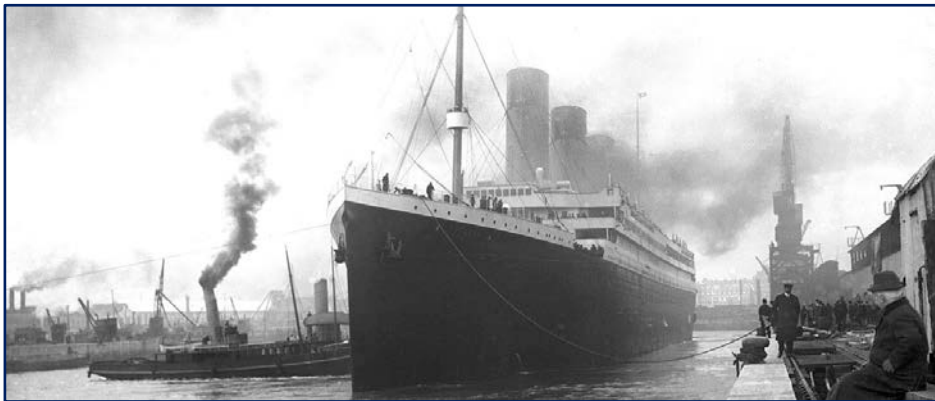
Find out how to locate the Big Dipper where you live. Check what other stars and constellations can be identified at this time of year and how to find them. On a clear night, go outside and see which ones you can find. Can you see any that Ruth named? Note your observations and write a Sky Report, imagining you are seeing them from the deck of a ship.

As the *City of Benares* approaches Southampton, Millie mentions a coal strike that has affected other ships. What led to the coal strike and why was it important to shipping companies? How did it affect workers in the coal industry? Did it have any effect on the launch of *Titanic*?

Chapters 18 – 24

Discussion Questions

1. What did you learn from Ruth's descriptions of the *Titanic*? What do you think about her breaking the rules and exploring the first-class areas?
2. What does Ruth observe about the *Titanic* that makes you think of what lies ahead for the ship? (Examples: The dates of each chapter, Ruth counting the lifeboats.) This is called foreshadowing. Keep a list of anything you notice during your reading, including in the dialogue.
3. How does Ruth relate to Ann O'Hara and how is she moved by her background and outlook on life? How do Ruth's feelings toward her father and the journey begin to change?
4. Ruth loves to play the violin and has grieved over missing the Spring Festival throughout the story. What do you think will happen when she meets Mr. Hartley in the lounge, and how will it impact her?



Activities

What are your thoughts about the divisions and varied treatment based on a passenger's class? Find out more about what was considered common practice aboard ships regarding class and in society in general in 1912.

On page 125, Ruth describes a near-collision with the *New York* and overhears a woman say to the man beside her, "That is not good, Isidor." Who was Isidor Strauss, and what happened to him and his wife?

How many passengers boarded the *Titanic* at Queenstown? How many children? What were some of their names and where were they from? Extra credit: Who were the Addergoole 14?

Chapters 25 – 29

Discussion Questions

1. How do the events in Chapter 25 lead Ruth to a change of heart regarding her father? What does she say at the end of the chapter that shows this?
2. What are your thoughts as Ruth and her family prepare to leave the cabin, make their way to the Boat Deck, and Mrs. Becker sends Ruth back to the cabin for blankets?
3. Reverend Becker told Ruth to be brave and help others. How does Ruth show she is brave, and what other characteristics does she display during the night?
4. What specific fears does Ruth face in these chapters? Think of a time when you were very confused or frightened. What did you do?
5. Discuss Ruth's varied thoughts in the lifeboat as she listens to the music from high atop the *Titanic*, as she watches the sinking, and hears the voices from across the water. What crosses her mind as she waits?
6. How do you feel about the decisions Ruth makes regarding the handkerchief and quilt? How do these choices show her character growth?

Activities

Watch one or two short video documentaries about the *Titanic*. What do experts say might have helped prevent the collision and/or the great loss of life?

Find out about the recovery efforts following the sinking. How did the *Mackay-Bennett* and other vessels help? Where are many of the victims buried?

Where was the *Carpathia* going when it received word of *Titanic's* emergency? What other ships were in the vicinity and how did they respond? Research the *California* and why it failed to come to *Titanic's* assistance.

What was the Marconi room? How did *Titanic's* radio operators send word of her distress? What were they busy doing prior to the collision?



Chapters 30 – 32

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think so many passengers willingly gave their lives so others could have a place in the lifeboats? If a similar tragedy happened today, do you think people would behave differently?
2. Describe Ruth's thoughts and feelings as she boards the *Carpathia* and looks for those she loves. What are your thoughts about her search for her family? Would you have done anything differently?
3. What is the significance of Ruth's gift of the hummingbird to Marion? What is your favorite possession? Could you give it away?
4. If you were a passenger on *Titanic*, what would you have enjoyed the most? The least? (other than the sinking)
5. How does Ruth see the relationship between music, the stars, and her future? How does her faith play a part in her eventual change of heart about her move to America? How does the author show this?
6. What does Ruth mean by stating, "Sometimes we have to go a long way to find out who we are."?

Activities

In the Author's Note, Peggy Wirgau explains who the real passengers and crew members were that Ruth meets in the story and which ones were fictional characters. Find out more about those who were real. Did they survive? If so, what did they do after *Titanic*? For example, how did Officer Lightoller make it to a lifeboat and what is he known for during World War II?

Ruth meets the Hoffman boys and their father who occupy the cabin across from hers. What was their real name and what happened to them?

Using material available in books or online, build or draw a replica of the *Titanic*, or draw a cross-section of the ship or one of the top decks.

As a result of inquiries in Great Britain and the United States into what may have led to the sinking and how more people might have been saved, measures were put into place to help prevent such a tragedy from happening again at sea. Research what the measures are, such as minimum lifeboat requirements aboard vessels. What does the Coast Guard Ice Patrol do?

When was the wreck of *Titanic* found? Who led the expedition and what did they discover? What is the debris field? What is the "big piece"? Report on the current condition of the ship and any ongoing research.

For more about teaching the *Titanic*, please visit [Welcome Aboard Titanic Museum Attraction in Pigeon Forge, TN \(titanicpigeonforge.com\)](http://Welcome Aboard Titanic Museum Attraction in Pigeon Forge, TN (titanicpigeonforge.com)). Click on the Education tab at the top for a Curriculum Resource Guide, Scavenger Hunt, and much more.

Encyclopedia Titanica www.encyclopedia-titanica.org is an excellent resource for researching facts, passengers, and crew members.

Other resources are listed in the Bibliography on pages 243 – 247.

The image shows the front page of The New York Times newspaper from Tuesday, April 16, 1912. The masthead reads "The New York Times" in a large, ornate font. Below it, the date and page information are printed: "NEW YORK, TUESDAY, APRIL 16, 1912—TWENTY-FOUR PAGES, ONE CENT". The main headline is in large, bold, black letters: "TITANIC SINKS FOUR HOURS AFTER HITTING ICEBERG; 866 RESCUED BY CARPATHIA, PROBABLY 1250 PERISH; ISMAY SAFE, MRS. ASTOR MAYBE, NOTED NAMES MISSING". To the left of the main headline, there are several smaller sub-headlines: "Col. Astor and Bride, Isidor Straus and Wife, and Maj. Butt Aboard.", "“RULE OF SEA” FOLLOWED", "Women and Children Put Over in Lifeboats and Are Supposed to be Safe on Carpathia.", "PICKED UP AFTER 8 HOURS", "Vincent Astor Calls at White Star Office for News of His Father and Leaves Weeping.", "FRANKLIN HOPEFUL ALL DAY", "Manager of the Line Insisted Titanic Was Unshakable Even After She Had Gone Down.", "HEAD OF THE LINE ABOARD", "J. Bruce Ismay Making First Trip on Gigantic Ship That Went to Burgeon All Oceans.", "The admission that the Titanic, the largest vessel in the world, had been sunk by an iceberg and had gone to the bottom of the Atlantic, probably occurred about noon, 1:00 or not later." To the right of the main headline, there is a large black and white photograph of the Titanic ship at sea, with its three funnels visible. To the right of the photograph, there are several columns of text: "THE WEATHER.", "Biggest Liner Plunges to the Bottom at 2:20 A. M.", "RESCUERS THERE TOO LATE", "Effort to Pick Up the Few Hundreds Who Took to the Lifeboats.", "WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST", "Commander Carpathia Rushing to New York with the Survivors.", "SEA SEARCH FOR OTHERS", "The California Stands By as Chance of Picking Up Other Boats or Rafts.", "OLYMPIO SENDS THE NEWS", "Only ship to finish wireless message to shore after the disaster.", "LATER REPORT SAVES REG.", "BOSTON, April 15.—Wireless message picked up late tonight, relayed from the Olympic, says".

This book fulfills the following Common Core Curriculum Standards:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1-6.1, RL.4.2-6.2, RL.4.3-6.3, RL.4.4-6.4, RL.4.5-6.5, RL.4.6-6.6, RL.4.7-6.7, RL.4.8-6.8, RL.4.9-6.9, RL.4.10-6.10