**Activities to use with *Life in the Iron Mills*, by Rebecca Harding Davis and *No Star Nights,* by Anna Egan Smucker**

**All students:**

* **Anna Smucker wrote about the time when she was growing up,** about things she and her family did. So she did not have to research her characters’ lives. **Rebecca Harding Davis** never worked in an iron mill, so she had to do research and imagine the life of somebody working there.

**Two approaches to writing a story:**

* + **Turn a real story from your childhood into a short children’s story.** Pick something that happened and tell it like a story.
  + **Imagine the daily life of somebody who is very different from you**. Write a short story about one day in their life.
* **Middle-grade or older students*:*** *No Star Nights*
* **Gather material for a children’s book of your own, like *No Star Nights*.** Anna Smucker made a list of her memories of growing up in Weirton: lying in the field looking up at the sky, her mom cooking dinner, her dad taking the kids to a ball game. Make a list of your own memories of growing up where you grew up. Think of each page as a category, e.g. “What did you see when you went into town?”or “What animals did you see where you lived?” “What did you do in the morning?”
* **How can I start my story?** The opening paragraphs of Anna Smucker’s *No Star Nights* and Rebecca Harding Davis’ *Life in the Iron Mills* both start with the sky over a mill town in West Virginia’s northern panhandle. In each case, the sky tells a lot about the background of the story.
  + **Try starting a story about the place where you live with the sky**. What did you see on the horizon? Did the sky change from season to season? Show the sky, then move the “camera” down to the earth. What’s happening on the ground? Where will the story go from there? Do this as a group exercise.
  + Now try starting with the trees. Etc. Start with the trees, then go somewhere else.
    - Here is the start of *Life in the Iron Mills: “A cloudy day: do you know what that is in a town of iron-works? The sky sank down before dawn, muddy, flat, immovable … The idiocyncrasy of this town is smoke. It rolls sullenly in slow folds from the great chimneys of the iron foundries and settles down in black, slimy pools on the muddy streets.*
    - Here is the start of *No Star Nights: “When I was little, we couldn’t see the stars in the nighttime sky because the furnaces of the mill turned the darkness into a red glow …”*

**Older students:**

* ***No Star Nights* and *Life in the Iron* Mills both give us an easy way to imagine iron mill and steel mill towns in West Virginia’s northern panhandle. Here are two units (or special projects) that us*e Life in the Iron Mills* and *No Star Nights.***
  + **Fiction unit: How can fiction help readers imagine what life was like for people who lived in times and places they’ve never seen?**: In *Life in the Iron Mills*, Rebecca Harding Davis captured what life was like for people working in the 19th century iron mills. In No Star Nights, Anna Smucker captured what life was like for a kid in Weirton in mid-20th century.
    - **Compare the two times. How are they different?**
  + **History unit, using Life in the Iron Mills and No Star Nights.** The technology and jobs at the iron mills differed from the technology and jobs after the iron mills converted to steel mills. “We had a different way of tipping the molten metal to make steel,” Anna Smucker said. “The big caldrons would be on the train tracks, then tipped over, then the sky would turn red. In both cases, you couldn’t see the stars!”
  + The color of the sky and condition of the air. Compare the two skies. Why was one grey and the other orange? What did it have to do with the iron mills, in Rebecca Harding Davis’ time and the steel mills in Anna Smucker’s time?

ACTIVITY #2 Language Arts:

Comparisons – Using Similes and Metaphors

When you use the word “like” to compare one thing to another, that’s called a **simile.**

In describing what the mill looked like when Anna Smucker was a child, she said

“A crane that us looked **like** a dinosaur with huge jaws was constantly at work picking up jagged pieces of metal and dropping them into railroad cars to be taken into the mill.“

Now, write a **simile** of your own. For example, if you were describing a very tall skinny building like a skyscraper what might you say it looked like? “The skyscraper looked like \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

A **metaphor** doesn’t use the word “like.” Instead, it says something IS that, as in this sentence Anna used to describe the mill:

“Sometimes we would imagine that the mill itself **was** a huge beast, glowing hot, breathing heavily, always hungry, always needing to be fed.”

Now, write a metaphor of your own. For example, if you were describing a raging, flooding river what could you compare it to by saying, “The raging river was \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

ACTIVITY # 3 Map Skill:

Anna Smucker grew up in Weirton, West Virginia. Use a map of our state to find Weirton. Look at the shape of our state. Does it look like a pan with two handles? Weirton is in our state’s northern panhandle. Anna could look out the window of her house and see the Ohio River. It forms much of the western boundary of our state. The other panhandle, the eastern panhandle, goes east toward Washington, D.C..