



Wunderkammer: A Cabinet of Curiosities (Part One)

Paula Simonson, Wasatch Range Writing Project

Summary:

In this short, introductory lesson, students will read, discuss, and conduct an informal analysis of the introduction for *Vesper Flights* by Helen Macdonald. *Vesper Flights* is a collection of beautifully written personal narrative essays that bridge the gap between science and literature. Any of the essays could be used to create an interdisciplinary, cross-curricular collaboration between science and ELA. This lesson can be taught alone or along with additional parts to create a multi-layered research project.

Students will have the opportunity to reflect on their own curiosities of nature and consider the connections and differences between scientific, data-driven research and the less explainable phenomenon of personal reaction and connection that often requires creative writing to truly capture.

Core Standards:

- English Language Arts Grade 9–10
Reading Informational Text: Standards 2 & 5
- Reading Standards for Literacy in Science and Technical Subjects: Grade 9–10

Objectives:

- After reading, analyzing, and discussing the “Introduction” of *Vesper Flights*, students will be able to identify and/or recall personal curiosities in nature.
- Students will write a short, informal narrative reflecting on a personal, powerful experience within nature.
- Students will participate in small group discussions sharing a personal experience.
- Students will articulate verbally or in writing what the writer was attempting to communicate with this short piece of writing and make predictions about the book.

Context:

This lesson would be a great introduction to any secondary ELA class and/or science class to help support and show the need for wonder and curiosity when approaching literature, scientific research, and writing.

**Materials:**

- Individual copies of the “Introduction” from *Vesper Flights* by Helen Macdonald
- Highlighters and pencils/pens
- A digital copy of the introduction can be accessed here.
<https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/09/10/helen-macdonald-vesper-flights>

Time Frame:

This lesson can be taught in as few as one to two class periods or may be extended for deeper level activities and/or discussion.

Procedures:

1. Begin by asking students to complete a quick-write on a small notecard retelling a memory from a time in nature. This could be an experience with an insect, animal, or any other natural setting. Ask that they include how this memory impacted them and how it changed the way they see the natural world.
2. Offer students the opportunity to share their memory in small groups or with the entire class.
3. Hand out copies of the “Introduction” along with highlighters or share the digital version.
4. Ask students to independently read and annotate the “Introduction.” Annotations should include questions, personal connections, confusing vocabulary, and primarily, the author’s specific ideas and claims.
5. Open up for a whole class discussion about the piece and answer any questions students may have. Then, read the piece again as a whole class and discuss what changed for them during the second reading.
6. Now bring the discussion in for a tighter view on what the author wants the reader to take away from the piece and challenge students to approach literature and science in the same way. This part can be completed through discussion or writing or a combination of the two.

Extensions:

- Ask students to write a more formal personal essay to creatively capture a time in their life when an interaction with the natural world caused them to feel a strong personal reaction, wonder, or reflection about their own lives as humans.
- Have students select a topic of concern for the natural world such as extinction of a species, global warming, recycling, depletion of rainforests, or any other environmental issue that is highly publicized and conduct a formal research project.



Rationale:

This lesson will help students to connect to the power of literature to communicate important ideas, experiences, and lessons that we have and will continue to experience throughout our lives. It will also be beneficial to reluctant readers and learners.

Resources:

Mcdonald, Helen. *Vesper Flights*. New York: Grove Press, 2020.

Young, Robin. “In 'Vesper Flights,' Naturalist Helen Macdonald's Imagination Takes Wing.” *Here & Now*, <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/09/10/helen-macdonald-vesper-flights>.

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