

SYMBOL

- A symbol is an object or picture that represents an idea or feeling.
- Some symbols, such as a country's flag, have the same meaning for many people.
- Some symbols have meaning only to one or a few individuals.
- A symbol is a convenient way to express an important idea or feeling in a brief or simple way. It can take many words to say what one symbol says.



THINK ABOUT IT!

1. What picture does the name "Peter Rabbit" bring to mind?
2. Why did Peter have a special dread of this name?
3. What does a lion symbolize to you? Did it symbolize that to Tommy?
4. What does an eagle symbolize to you? Did it symbolize that to Peter?

I Am An Eagle

Only fifteen minutes into fifth grade, Peter was filled with dread. Peter suffered from a cleft palate, a mild deformity which had, from birth, left him with the characteristic scar right down the center of his upper lip. That, together with two tremendous buck teeth, had earned him the nickname "Peter Rabbit." All summer he had been filled with the hope that the move to the middle school would give him a chance to make a new start. But sitting across the room from Robert Adams—one of his cruelest tormentors from last year—Peter felt doomed.

And to make matters worse, Mrs. Mahoney was asking students what kind of animal they would be if they could become any animal at all. It was supposed to be a fun icebreaker, but to Peter it felt like a cruel joke. He was sure that by lunch time Robert would have spread the "Peter Rabbit" nickname to all his new classmates.

"I'm Tommy," one boy said. "I'd like to be a lion, because I am an excellent hunter. Last summer with my dad I—"

Peter barely heard a word. He was desperate to think of an animal, but he couldn't get "Peter Rabbit" out of his head.

I like model airplanes, he thought. What kind of animal likes model airplanes? And I like math, but animals don't use math, do they?

"Peter?"

It was Mrs. Mahoney. Peter's hands felt sweaty. His heart raced.

"What kind of animal would you like to be?"

He looked over at Robert. Robert was leaning back in his chair and staring out the window.

"An eagle." Peter surprised himself with the perfect answer. "I would like to be an eagle, because I love airplanes, and one day I would like to be a pilot."

"Thank you, Peter," said Mrs. Mahoney. "It's a pleasure to have you in my class."

Wow! Just like that. No one had laughed.

Peter looked at the boy called Tommy. Tommy smiled at him. Peter smiled shyly back.

Maybe fifth grade wouldn't be so bad after all.

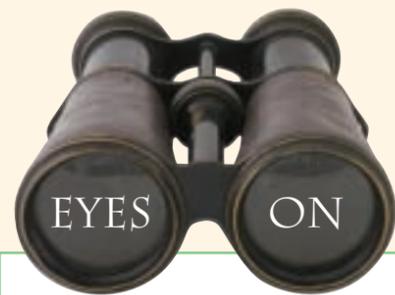
INTO . . . *The Memory Box*

It may be hard to describe an experience.

Sometimes, this is because we don't have the right words. So here is a new word that describes the story, *The Memory Box*: *poignant*.

First of all, *poignant* is pronounced POY nyent. You don't say the **g**, and the accent is on the first syllable. The **ny** sound is just like the sound you make when you say *onion*.

Poignant refers to a story or an experience that affects your feelings. You feel pain, sadness, and, at the same time, sweetness.



. . . *Rite of Passage*

All communities have ceremonies for major life events. In your community, what do people do when a baby is born? When a young person comes of age? When people marry? When a person dies?

What people do at these times are called *rites of passage*. A rite of passage is a series of actions that we perform with life-changing events. Everyone in a community knows these rituals.

Change is difficult, especially when it means suffering. Authors write about rites of passage, because they are central to our lives.

In this story, Gramps has Alzheimer's disease. As a rite of passage, the family creates a memory box.

The Memory Box

Mary Bahr

When I woke up this morning, I knew it was going to be a great vacation. Gramps was standing by my bed, holding the tackle box.

"Already too hot for catching walleye," he said.

"I bet Zach would like to throw out a line anyway, this being his first day," Gram argued from the doorway. She was holding a plateful of butter-dripping cinnamon rolls. As I said, it was going to be a great vacation. Three weeks of fishing Gramps's lake and eating Gram's cooking.

Now, from the boat, I could see Gram waving at us fishermen from the dock on the sky blue lake. Behind her on the hillside sat their berry red house in the middle of the dark green northern woods. The colors reminded me of a painting I saw once.

WORD
BANK

tackle (TAH kuhl) *n.*: equipment for fishing, such as lines and hooks

Gramps and I rested our bamboo poles on the side of the boat. Our bobbers¹ rode the glittery waves.

“It’s a Memory Box day,” Gramps said as we waited for the perch to decide if they were hungry.

“What’s a Memory Box?” I asked, dangling my hands in the cool water. I wondered if fish ever nibbled fingers.

“Remind me to tell you after the fish fry we’re gonna have tonight. Now let’s get quiet and catch ‘em.”

And we did. We got so quiet I could hear the fish circling our night crawlers.² But it still took three hours of sweaty, itchy stillness before we hauled in enough to fill Gram’s skillet.

“Don’t forget the Cook’s Rule,” Gram said as we unloaded our catch. We always cleaned ourselves and the fish in the lakeside shed. But every summer Gram reminded us, anyway! “Nothing but good smells at my dinner table,” she’d say, pushing us back out if we tried to sneak in without washing first.

In the shed, for the first time ever, Gramps handed me the long filet knife, the knife that’s about a hundred years old. The one I hope will be mine someday.

“I think you’re old enough to handle the blade,” he said, “and to hear the true tale of the Cook’s Rule.” He guided my fingers as I gutted my fish. “That first time I caught fish for Gram to cook, I brought them into the kitchen to clean. I don’t think she was prepared for fish eyes staring back at her out of the sink. She screamed so loud I dropped the frypan and broke my toe. After that, the fish and I went to the shed.”

1. A *bobber* is a small object that floats on the water. The fisherman attaches it to a fishing line to attract fish.

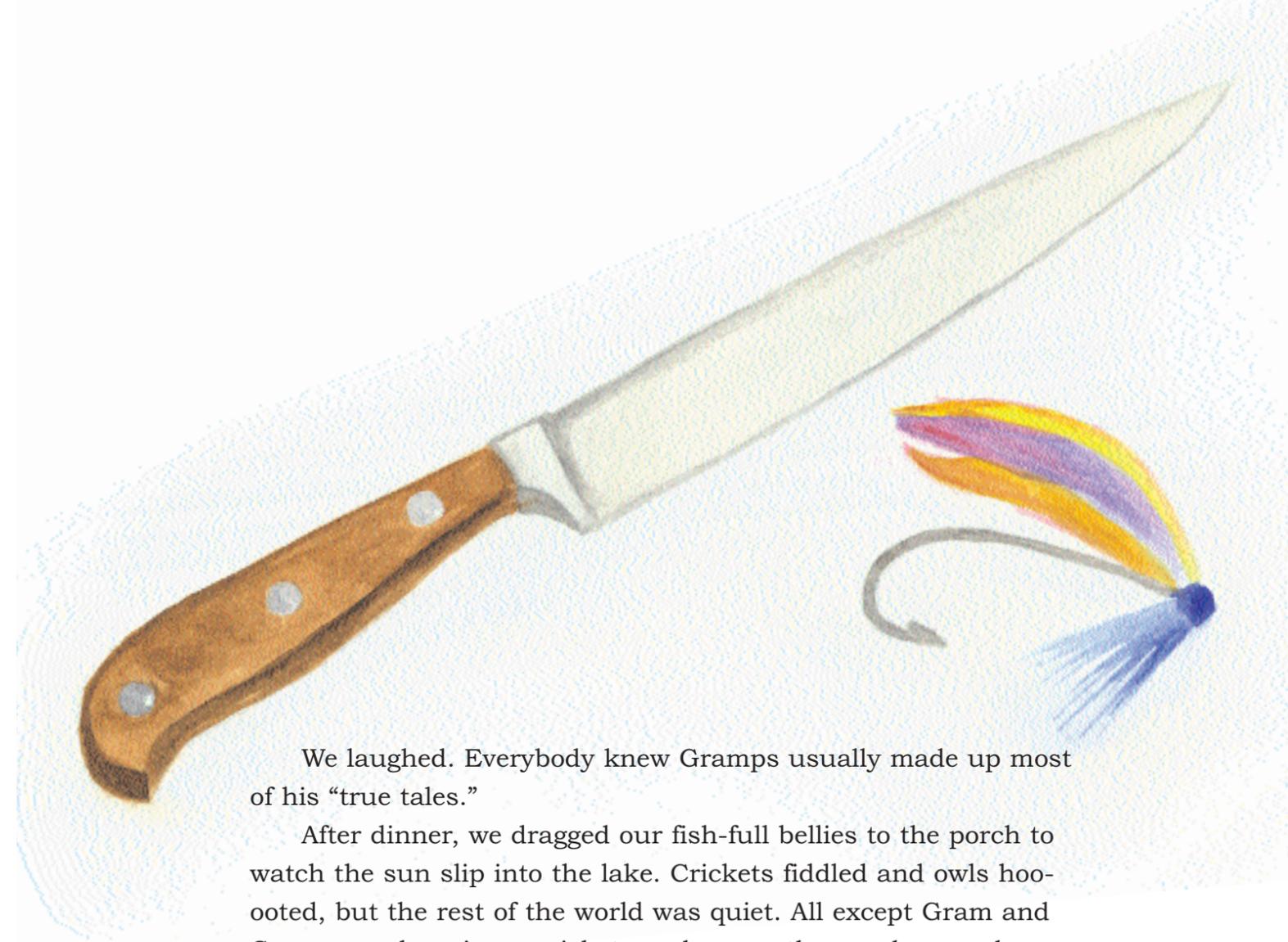
2. *Night crawlers* are earthworms, used here as bait.

WORD
BANK

hauled (HAWLD) *v.*: pulled or tugged with force

filet knife (fih LAY NYF) *n.*: a knife used to remove the bones of meat or fish

gutted *v.*: removed the inner parts, such as the stomach and intestines



We laughed. Everybody knew Gramps usually made up most of his “true tales.”

After dinner, we dragged our fish-full bellies to the porch to watch the sun slip into the lake. Crickets fiddled and owls hoo-ooted, but the rest of the world was quiet. All except Gram and Gramps and me in our rickety rockers on the wooden porch.

“Hmm-mmmm-m.” Gramps was settling in, getting ready for another true tale. He’s a great storyteller. Gram thinks so, I know, because she always puts down her cross-stitch³ when he begins.

“It was your Great-Gram who told me about the Memory Box,” Gramps said, staring at the sunset sky. “It’s a special box that stores family tales and traditions. An old person and a young person fill the box together. Then they store it in a place of honor. No matter what happens to the old person, the memories are stored forever.”

3. The first stitch learned in embroidery is usually the *cross-stitch*, which is a little, embroidered *x*. Here, the author calls the entire piece of embroidery that Gram is working on cross-stitch.

“What do you mean, ‘no matter what happens?’” I asked Gramps. I didn’t like his story much.

The sun practically disappeared before Gramps answered. “Do you know this old body just flunked a physical exam for the first time?”

Gram stopped rocking.

“This old person must make his Memory Box,” Gramps said after a long silence. He stopped rocking, too, and looked me square in the eye. “Is this young person ready?”

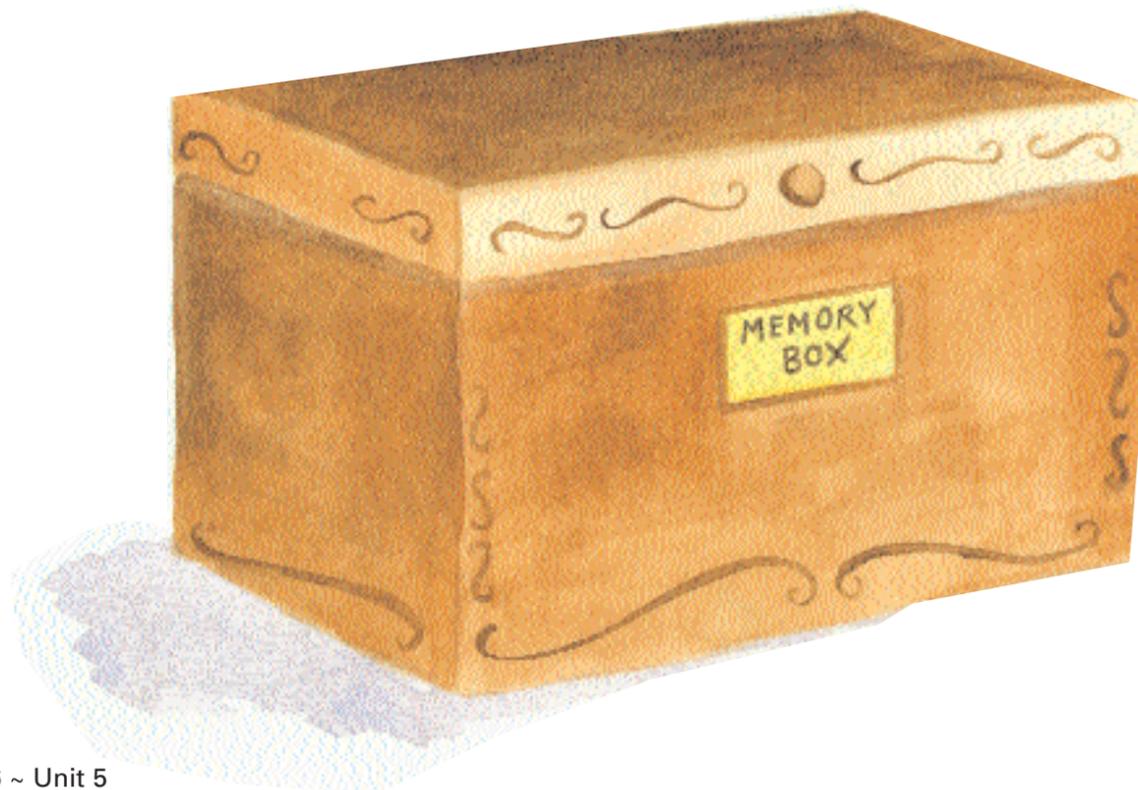
“I guess. Sure.” The words stuck in my mouth like caramel from a candied apple.

Gram disappeared into the house and made a pot-and-pan racket.

“Zach? The door, please?” she called through the screen. “I emptied an old recipe box so we can start *our* Memory Box,” she said, handing me a treasure chest a pirate would love. “Now I’ll leave my men alone.”

My fingers traced the designs carved in the smooth, shiny wood.

“I gave that to your grandmother on our wedding day,” was all Gramps said. Then we sat in the dark and watched the fireflies



dart past the porch. Maybe Gramps was already searching his mind for memories to put in the box. He never said.

But for the rest of my vacation, we remembered, Gramps and Gram and me. We especially remembered when we were fishing. “Thoughts come faster when bobbers are jumping,” Gram said as she wrote our memories on paper scraps.

“How about the time I climbed the water tower?” I asked Gramps. “Mom said no, but you turned your back so I could make it to the top.”

“You nearly fell off, as I recall.” He scratched the whiskers that appeared on his face for the first summer ever. I wondered about those whiskers. Didn’t Gramps tell me once how much Gram hated it when he didn’t shave?

“How about the time I laid my freshly picked blueberries on the porch to sun-dry?” Gram remembered. “Zach came in from his swim and squished a path right through those juicy berries.”

“Looked like an old blue rug to me,” I said, remembering how Gram’s face had turned red and my feet had turned blue at the same time.

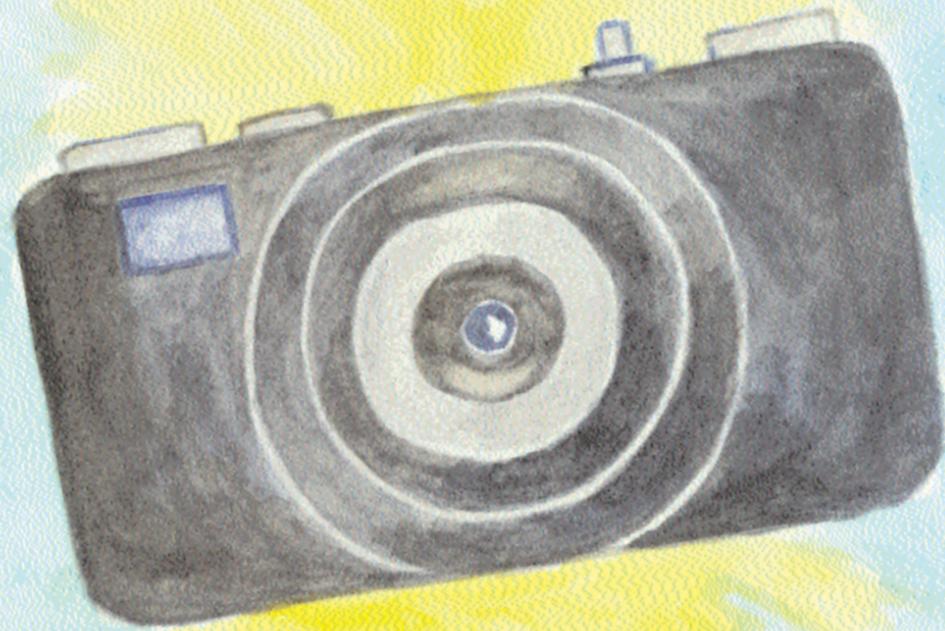
It was Gramps’s job to add photos and souvenirs to the Memory Box. He found a picture of my second birthday party when I had taken a bite off the top of the cake. There was a shot of Gram in her wedding dress with flowers in her hair and one of Dad in his football uniform when he still *had* hair. Another was of Gramps and Mom the day he had taught her to ride a bike. She had ridden it too. Right over his foot!

We added other important stuff, like my first soccer medal and Gram’s chocolate-chip cookie recipe.

We added new memories too.

We wrote about the morning the three of us rolled green

WORD BANK **dart** *v.*: move swiftly and suddenly



apples down the hill for a herd of deer that rested in the long grass.

And the time we watched a raccoon bandit watch *us* as she ate a trayful of cookies that Gram had set to cool on the picnic table.

And a picture of the trophy walleye⁴ I caught the morning we put the boat on the lake before the sun even got up.

As the days passed, I noticed something different about Gramps. A major small change, if you know what I mean. One afternoon I saw him sitting in the swing that hung between two giant pines. I headed on over. But I stopped when I heard him talking to somebody else. Gramps was telling Francie how to reel in a northern pike that was fighting her hook. He was talking to

4. A *walleye* is a large fish sought after by fishermen. A *trophy walleye* is a walleye so big it deserves to win a prize or trophy.

WORD BANK **bandit** *n.*: an outlaw, a robber

her as if she were right there. But nobody was. Especially not *Francie*—she’s my mom.

And one afternoon we hiked to find nature stuff I could take back to school. Gramps wandered off the trail into a poison ivy patch as if he didn’t even see it. I yelled until he stopped, but he wouldn’t come back. I had to go get him and take him by the hand. That day it seemed like his body walked with me, but his thoughts strolled somewhere else.

None of it made sense until the morning Gram shook me awake.

“Get dressed, Zach. Help me find Gramps. He’s been gone too long.”

“Probably just fishing.” I stared at Gram as if she were a crazy lady.

“But he forgot his shoes.” She looked back at me as if *I* were the crazy one. “Check the shed. Whistle if you find him first.”

I ran toward the lake, even faster when I saw the shed door swinging. But Gramps wasn’t inside.

Outside again, I stopped to listen, the way hunters do. I thought I heard noises out back, so I circled the woods around the shed. When I found Gramps, I whistled loud. He was sitting on the ground like a scout⁵ in front of a campfire. His feet were bare, and one was bleeding.

“Forgot my shoes.” He tried to hide his face. It was shiny with tears.

Gram moved the fastest I’d ever seen. She sat on the ground beside Gramps while I ran back for his slippers. We helped him back to the house. Led him, if you want to know the truth. While we bandaged his foot and made him lie down on his bed, Gramps was quiet. We waited until the snoring began before Gram and I

5. Since Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts are trained to camp out, Gramps is compared to a *scout* when he is found sitting on the ground outside.

WORD BANK **reel** *v.*: to pull out of the water by winding a fishing line around a small wheel or spool

tiptoed out of the room.

“Remember that first Memory Box night?” Gram asked. She sat in the kitchen. “Gramps was trying to tell you about Alzheimer’s disease...when the body stays but the mind leaves.”

She stared off, and I just waited until she looked at me again.

“The mind doesn’t go all at once, or all the time, but it never comes back quite the same way. When Dr. Johnson suggested Gramps might have Alzheimer’s, it explained so many things about this past year—Gramps forgetting to shave, his talking to me like we were kids again, his getting lost on trails he’d hiked for years.”

I thought about the poison ivy and Francie’s fishing lesson.

“It scares Gramps, knowing he’ll forget. That’s why the Memory Box is so important.”

When Gramps woke up, he called me. I stood at his bedroom door. He sat on the bed.

“Did Gram tell you about this useless old man? And how he needs to find a home for special things like this?” He handed me the old fishing knife from the shed. “I forgot the sheath, so I went back...and got lost.”

“Thanks,” I whispered, holding the knife the way Gramps had taught me. My own, very first knife. I’d always wanted one. *This* one. But now it didn’t seem so important.

“Your mom’s going to hurt,” Gramps said. “When it gets bad, bring out our Memory Box. Show her what I remember.”

I hugged Gramps. We both felt better.

The rest of my vacation bolted like a fawn when you try to sneak too close. The day Dad and Mom came to take me back for school, we had such a great barbecue that we decided it should be part of the Memory Box. I could tell Dad already knew about Gramps because he shot a zillion photos of Gramps and Gram.

WORD BANK **sheath** (SHEETH) *n.*: a close-fitting case for the blade of a knife or sword
bolted *v.*: moved suddenly in a rush to escape

When it was time to leave, Gramps squeezed me hard.

Gram squeezed me soft. “Add things to the Memory Box you want Gramps to remember,” she whispered as she handed it to me. “And bring it with you next summer. We’ll need it, you and I.”

I waved as our car drove away—away from the best and worst summer ever. This time Gramps and Gram had taken care of me. Next summer, Gram and I would take care of Gramps. And the summers after that...well, we’d figure out something.

As the car hit the top of the hill, I watched Gramps slowly disappear into the horizon.

And I hugged my Memory Box.



WORD BANK **horizon** (huh RI zun) *n.*: the place in the distance where the sky and earth appear to meet

About The Author

Born in Minnesota in 1946, **Mary Bahr** always wanted to be a nurse. But in her first year of training, a favorite patient died suddenly. This upset her so much and for so long that she realized she had to find another career. In the years that followed, she took a job as a librarian, married, and had four sons. Having young children of her own made her recall her own childhood. She began to write stories about and for children. She has written four books and numerous stories and articles. The Bahrs live in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Studying the Selection

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

How did the story make you feel?

QUICK REVIEW

1. Where has Zach gone for his vacation?
2. Which two things does Zach imagine he is going to be doing for three weeks?
3. Describe his grandparents' house and its surroundings.
4. The first time Zach and Gramps go out in the boat, what kind of day does Gramps say it is?

FOCUS

5. What is the purpose of the memory box?
6. How is Zach forced to grow up in this story?

CREATING & WRITING

7. Why does the author write about something sad? In one or two paragraphs, explain why it is important to write about sad events as well as happy or thrilling ones.
8. Explain what a rite of passage is. In different cultures, children have different rites of passage. For example, a rite of passage of an Eskimo boy might be participating in a whale hunt for the first time. Find out about a culture different from your own, and write about the rite of passage of an imaginary boy or girl of that culture.
9. Create a collage using the kinds of things you would put in a scrapbook or a memory box: ticket stubs, school productions, photographs, parts of letters, printed words, vacation scenes.