

PLAN-B
THEATRE

14th Annual
Free Elementary School Tour

SNAIL Mail

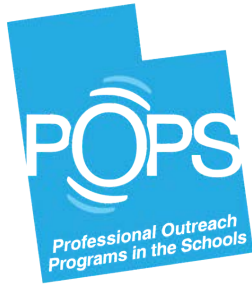
created for grades 4-6

by *Melissa Leilani Larson*

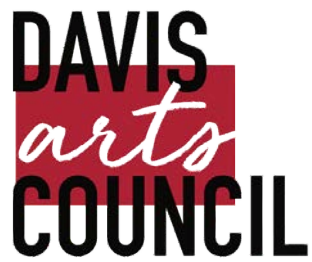
STUDY GUIDE

by Penny Caywood & Sarah Meservy

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**Utah Division of
Arts & Museums**



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Classroom Slides

New this year we've created classroom slides to accompany this study guide. You'll find this symbol throughout the guide, linking you to the corresponding slides for each activity.



**Click here to
access slide deck**

What to Expect

5 mins Introduction You'll meet the actors, learn some basic theatre terms, and get ready for the interactive elements of the play.

35 mins The Play

5 mins Post-Show Discussion Students have the chance to answer questions about the play's themes and characters.

Synopsis

Malia and Chester have been best friends forever. But now Malia's dad has a new job, which means she has to move really far away.

So what does that mean for sixth grade?

A road trip through friendship, postcards, and the scientific method.

Setting

Set in the summer of 1989 and inspired by playwright Melissa Leilani Larson's own childhood, the play begins in Hau'ula, Hawai'i, then travels across a number of locations in the continental U.S.

Characters

MALIA, 12, is smart, impatient, and curious. She is navigating a huge life transition with bravery and vulnerability. Her journey is at the heart of the story.

CHESTER, 12, is Malia's best friend. He is thoughtful, scientific, and grounded. He often corrects Malia with precise facts and has a big imagination (especially when it comes to snails).

MALIA'S DAD is warm, thoughtful, encouraging. He works in neuroscience and treats life as a series of teachable moments. He loves Billy Joel and encourages Malia to slow down and observe the world around her.



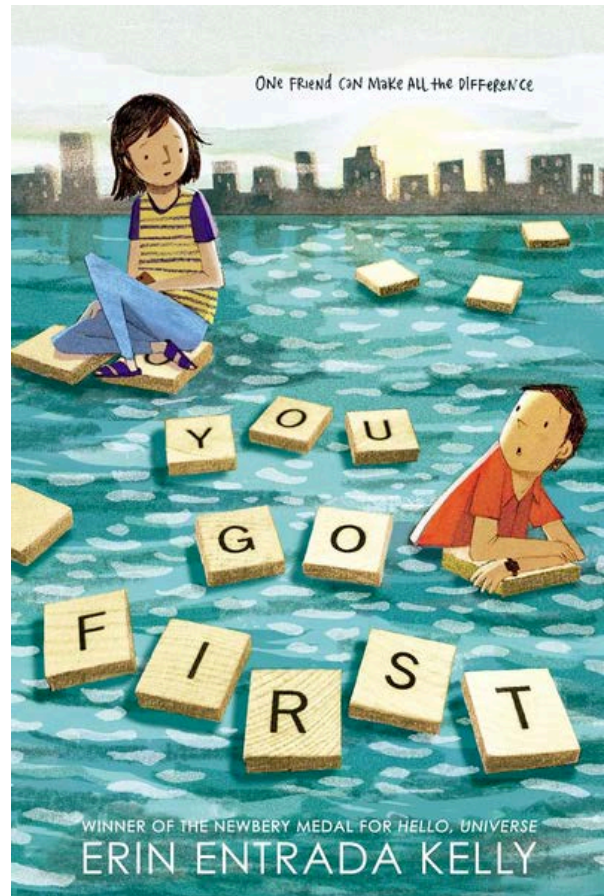
[Slides 2-4](#)

You Go First

To supplement the themes of the play, we're donating the book *You Go First* by Erin Entrada Kelly to the library at each school *Snail Mail* serves in person.

Funny and poignant, *You Go First* is an exploration of family, bullying, word games, art, and the ever-complicated world of middle school friendships.

Twelve-year-old Charlotte Lockard and eleven-year-old Ben Boxer are separated by more than a thousand miles. On the surface, their lives seem vastly different, but the two have more in common than they think. During the course of one week, Charlotte and Ben's lives will intersect in unexpected ways as they struggle to navigate the turmoil of middle school.



[Harper Collins Educators' Guide for *You Go First*](#)

Accessibility

- *Snail Mail* will be available by November 1, 2026 as video-on-demand, including a pre-recorded version of the pre- and post-show discussions and closed captioning in English and Spanish.
- Actors wear microphones during live performances in large venues.
- Public performances feature ASL interpretation.
- The Digital Playbill includes links to this study guide and the script in 18-point font (all of which are also available on our [free app](#)).

Intended Learning Outcomes

Snail Mail provides an accessible and interdisciplinary experience that invites students to reflect, imagine, and connect. By engaging with *Snail Mail* and the accompanying study guide activities, students will:

- foster scientific curiosity, appreciation for the research process, and observational thinking;
- develop empathy, emotional literacy, and resilience;
- deepen their understanding of narrative structure, character development, and theme;
- and cultivate an appreciation for theatre as a collaborative art form and its power to illuminate complex topics.

Scientific Curiosity

Through her love for science, Malia demonstrates Science and Engineering Practices (SEPs), which tie in directly with Science with Engineering Educations (SEEd) Standards. With her father's coaching, Malia plans and carries out an experiment. The characters ask questions, define problems, and analyze and interpret data.

English Language Arts

Snail Mail reinforces the value of reading, writing, and storytelling.

In the age of instant messaging and digital communication, *Snail Mail* invites students to discover the joy of slowing down and writing with intention. Amidst historically low reading levels, historically short attention spans, and the new bell-to-bell ban on smartphones and other devices in Utah schools, *Snail Mail* directly supports and enhances the objectives of Utah's K-12 English Language Arts Standards to create proficient readers, writers, and communicators.



SEL Outcomes



Snail Mail supports all six of [USBÉ's Social Emotional Learning Outcomes](#), offering students a meaningful way to reflect on their own experiences of shifting friendships, family changes, and feelings of loss or uncertainty. The characters model emotional growth—not through lectures, but through story. Though set in 1989, the questions at the heart of *Snail Mail* are timeless: *What happens when a best friend moves away? How do we say goodbye? Is it possible to stay connected when everything is changing?*

Outcome 1: Understand and Manage Emotions

The play gently demonstrates how to talk about grief and memory, how to process big emotions like sadness, anxiety, and impatience, and how to stay curious and open when life feels hard.

Outcome 2: Set and Achieve Positive Goals

Through the framing of an “experiment,” Malia’s dad helps her identify her goal of maintaining her friendship with Chester after moving away. She achieves her goal by writing and sending Chester postcards.

Outcome 3: Feel and Show Empathy For Others

Seeing the world through the eyes of characters different from themselves helps students build empathy.

Outcome 4: Establish and Maintain Positive Relationships

Snail Mail provides students with positive examples of parent-child and friend relationships. Malia confides in her father who responds with support and encouragement. Malia and Chester write postcards to each other to maintain their friendship across the distance.

Outcome 5: Make Responsible Decisions

Malia demonstrates curiosity, open mindedness, and critical thinking skills. She learns about the importance of research and gathering data.

Outcome 6: Self-Advocate

Malia demonstrates asking for help when she becomes lost in a mall and approaches a security guard for directions.

Vocabulary

After going over the words together, use the cards on the next page to [play a game](#) like memory, bingo, or go fish.



[Slides 5-8](#)

Reading Activity: Moving Far Away

Playwright Melissa Leilani Larson was inspired by her own family's move when she was 12 years old. Have your students read the story on pages 9-10. Invite students to write their own story (true or fictional) about someone going through a major life change.



[Slides 9-14](#)

Discussion Questions

Moving to a new state was a big change for Malia.

- How do you feel when something big in your life changes?
- What helps you stay brave during those moments?

Malia and Chester stayed friends after Malia moved away.

- What are ways you can stay close to someone even if you don't see them every day?

Malia misses her mom who passed away.

- What are some ways we remember people we love, even if they aren't with us anymore?

Malia felt scared when she got lost at the mall.

- What did she do to manage her big emotions?
- How did she find her dad again?
- What do you do when you feel scared or lost?

Malia's dad encouraged her to slow down and notice the world around her.

- What's something small you noticed today that you might have missed if you were rushing?





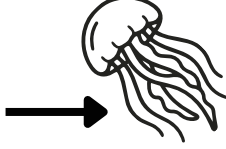

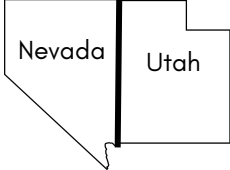
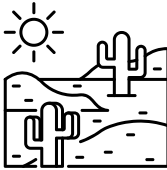
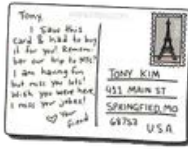
Playwright Melissa Leilani Larson wrote *Snail Mail* to share how it felt to move when she was 12.

- Have you ever written a letter or told a story to help someone understand what you're feeling?



[Slides 15-16](#)

SNAIL MAIL VOCABULARY CARDS

<p>pen pal</p>		<p>a friend you write letters or postcards to</p>
<p>marine biologist</p>		<p>a scientist who studies ocean life</p>
<p>hypothesis</p>		<p>an idea you test by doing an experiment</p>
<p>invertebrate</p>		<p>an animal without a backbone</p>
<p>tentacle</p>		<p>a long flexible limb used to grab things</p>
<p>experiment</p>		<p>a test to learn if something is true</p>
<p>border</p>		<p>the line between two places</p>
<p>desert</p>		<p>a dry place with little rain and few plants</p>
<p>postcard</p>		<p>a picture card you send in the mail</p>

Name:

The play *Snail Mail* by Melissa Leilani Larson is fiction, but it was inspired by her real life. As you read the true story below, think about what made Melissa's move hard for her, and what made it exciting.

Moving Far Away

by Melissa Leilani Larson

I was twelve years old in 1989. I lived in Hau'ula, a small town on the island of O'ahu. But then my dad got a new job at BYU in faraway Utah. Our family would be moving there, and soon.

It was hard to wrap my head around the idea of moving so far away. I would have to meet new kids at a new school. Would my friends forget about me? I was full of questions and fear, but I was also excited. I've always loved to travel and see new places, and I had seen snow in books and on TV, but never experienced it myself. Would I get to catch snowflakes with my tongue? Would I have to wear both shoes and socks to school every day? How long would it take me to make friends? Would anyone there look like me?

I didn't want to go, but I didn't have a choice. I had to figure out how to make the best of it. And while there were things I missed I did eventually get used to Utah. I made friends, and I also stayed in touch with old friends by writing letters. Letter-writing is a fading art, but it has always been important to me.

Thirty-seven years later, I've now spent most of my life in Utah, and my childhood in Hawai'i has faded to a distant memory. Both places are a part of me.

Write the answers to these questions:

1. **What was hard about the move?**

2. **What was exciting?**

3. Why do you think writing letters is important to Melissa?

4. Melissa says that both Hawai'i and Utah are a part of her.
What places are a part of you?

5. Underline these words and phrases in the story. Then match them to their definitions.

wrap my head around 1

make the best of it 2

stay in touch 3

fading art 4

faded 5

distant 6

a accept a difficult situation and find something good in it

b skill people don't use much any more

c communicate when not together

d fully understand

e far away

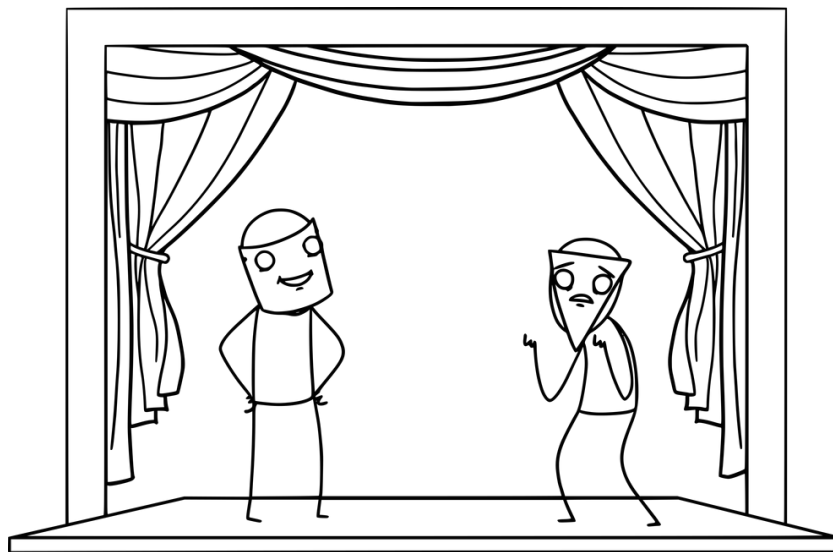
f became lighter or harder to see

Theatre Arts Activities



Slide 17

- Use the excerpt from *Snail Mail* on page 12 with your students to practice reading fluency. Read through chorally as a class, then have students read in pairs. Encourage them to experiment with different vocal choices to convey character and emotion.
- Use [this worksheet](#) to learn about about jobs in theatre.
- Use a script from [our free online Script Library](#) for readers' theatre or to stage a play. We have a wide variety of scripts written specifically for K-6 students.
- Once students have seen *Snail Mail*, they will be eager to create their own plays! Our K-6 curriculum, [Playwriting With Young People by Julie Jensen](#), is easily adaptable to support any other subject or class project. Materials are available in English and Spanish.
- All it takes is a sticky note and a pencil to create a finger puppet! This series of short tutorials ([English](#) | [Spanish](#)) will guide your students through creating puppets and imagining their own puppet play.



Excerpt from



Slide 17

by Melissa Leilani Larson

Characters

Malia, 12

Chester, 12

Malia has just moved from Hawai'i to Chicago with her dad. In this scene she is telling her friend Chester about differences between the two places.

MALIA: Dad says I can't just wear flip-flops to school anymore.

CHESTER: Wait wait wait. What are flip-flops?

MALIA: (*She motions at him with her toes.*) You know, slippers.

CHESTER: Then call them slippers. That's what they are.

MALIA: People here call the fuzzy shoes you wear to bed slippers. They call these shoes, flip-flops.

CHESTER: That's so confusing.

MALIA: Right? One time I went to a store and asked where the slippers were, and the woman helping me didn't know what I was talking about. When she finally figured it out, they didn't have any. She said they only sell flip-flops—

CHESTER: Slippers.

MALIA: —in the summer.

CHESTER: Phooey, Dewey, and Louie! That's tragic.

Make a Postcard

Malia and Chester send postcards to each other throughout *Snail Mail*. Have your students make postcards to send to family or friends (or to us at Plan-B Theatre):



Plan-B Theatre
138 W 300 S
Salt Lake City, UT 84101



[Slides 18-20](#)

The United States Postal Service (USPS) requires postcards to be on cardstock, rectangular, a minimum of 3.5" x 5", and a maximum 4.25" x 6". Postcard-specific stamps are \$0.61 each.

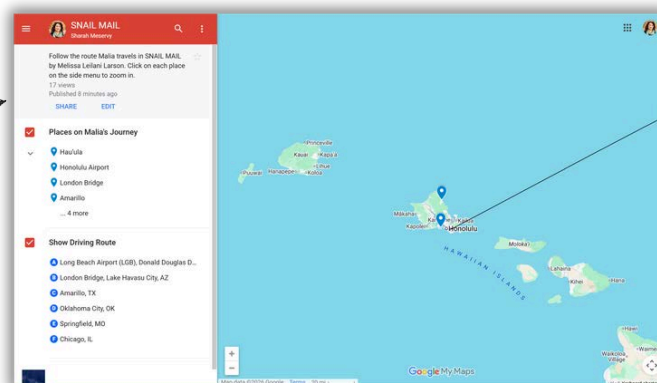
Happy Birthday to Route 66!

In *Snail Mail*, Malia and her dad take a very long road trip from California to Illinois. They follow a very famous highway called Route 66. It was officially named Route 66 in 1926, which means it is now 100 years old!

First [watch a short video about Route 66](#) with your students. Give each student a copy of the worksheet on the next page. Project the [interactive map](#) of Malia's journey on the board.

Click on each location in the side menu to see photos and learn more about it.

Have students label and color in each state that Malia visits. Then have them match the places to the stars on the map and complete each sentence with the name of a state.

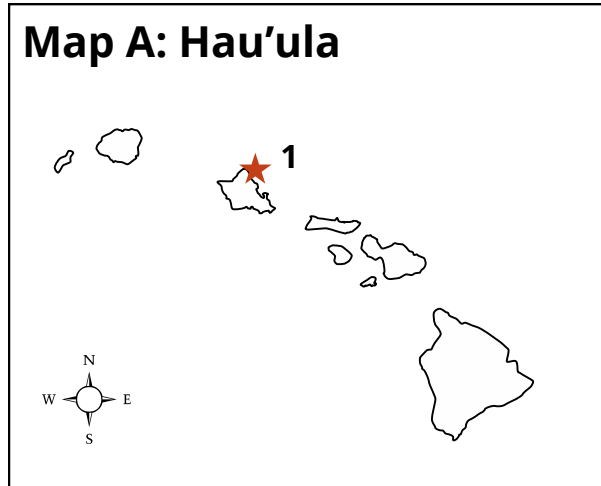


[Slide 21](#)

Name: _____

Malia's Journey

In *Snail Mail*, Malia begins in Hawai'i, and then travels along Route 66 through seven other states. Color in and label each state that Malia visits.



Write the correct number from the map in each box. Complete each sentence with the correct state.

Chicago is in Illinois

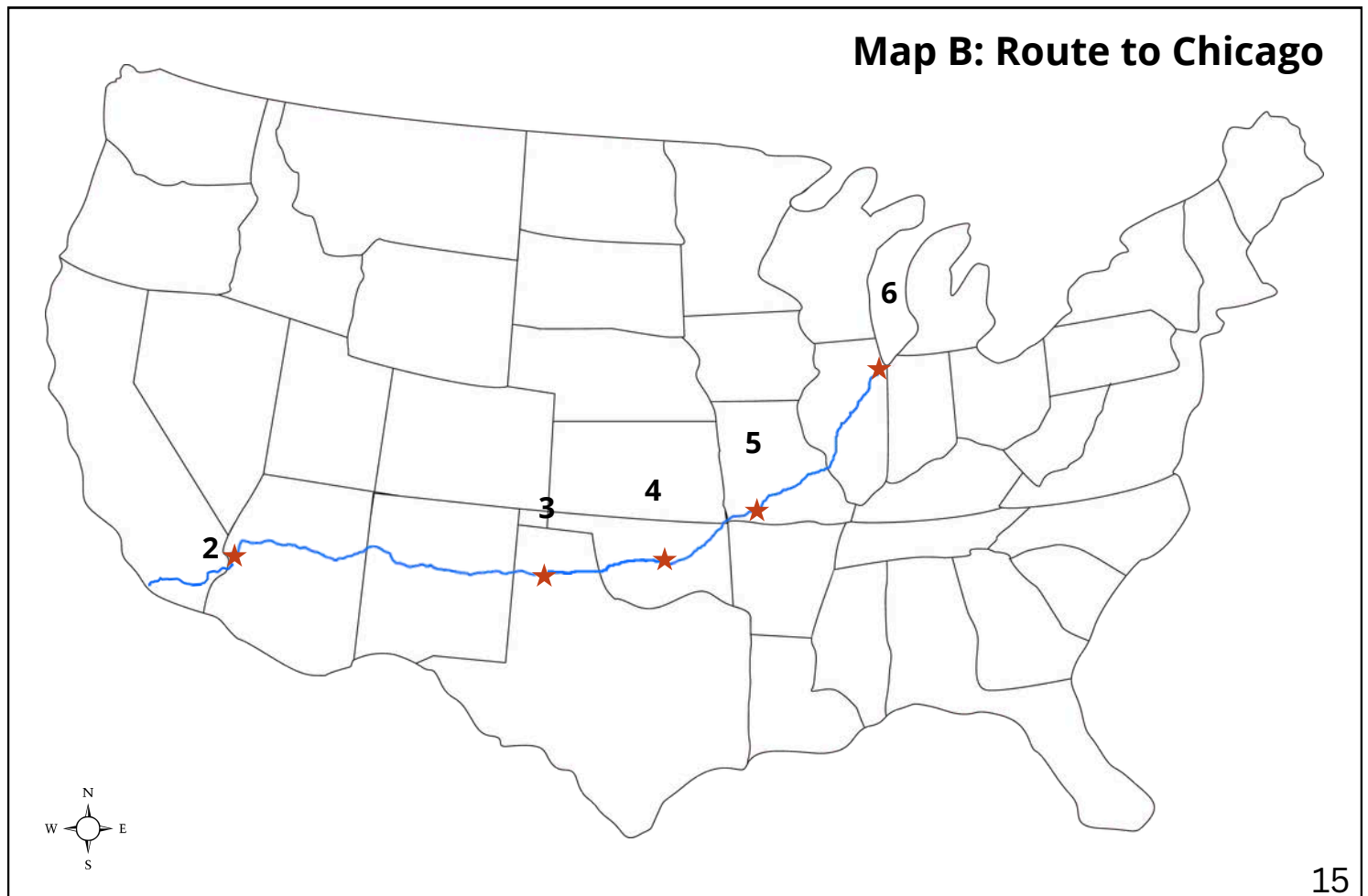
Hau'ula is in _____

London Bridge is in _____

Amarillo is in _____

Springfield is in _____

Oklahoma City is in _____



Learn About Cultural Differences



[Slides 22-23](#)

With its mixed-race protagonist and references to both Hawaiian and Midwestern cultures, *Snail Mail* gently uplifts the importance of heritage, community, and family. Discuss the differences that Malia notices between Hawai'i and Illinois. Explain that everywhere you go in the world you will find differences in what people do, what they wear, what they eat, and how they talk.



Have students interview someone who has lived in more than one place. It could be someone who moved to Utah from a different state or county, or someone who came from an area of Utah that's very different from where you live.

Before their interview, students should prepare questions to ask, e.g. *Where have you lived? What differences did you notice when you moved?* After their interview have students summarize what they learned in writing and/or share their findings with the class.

If your students have difficulty finding someone to interview, reach out to us at Plan-B Theatre. We're happy to set up a call with one of our teaching artists!

Study Guide Core Standards

Moving Far Away

- Language Arts: (4-6).R.4, (4-6).R.5, (4-6).W.2

Discussion Questions

- Language Arts: (K-6).SL.1
- Health Education: (4-6).MEH.1, 4.MEH.4, 5.HF.4, 6. HF.5
- Fine Arts: (K-6).Theatre.R.2, (K-6).Theatre.Co.1, (K-6).Theatre.Co.3, (K-6).Theatre.Co.4

Theatre Arts Activities

- Social Studies: 1.5, 2.1, 3.1
- Science: SEEd.K.2.4
- Fine Arts: (K-3).Theatre.CR.1, (K-2).Theatre.CR.3, 3.Theatre.CR.3, (K-3).Theatre.CR.5, 3.Theatre.CR.6, (K-3).Theatre.P.1, (K-3).Theatre.P.6

Make A Postcard

- Fine Arts: (K-6).V.CR
- Language Arts: (4-6).W.5

Mapping Malia's Journey

- Social Studies: (1-3).2, 4.1.1, 4.5.4
- Language Arts: (4-6).R.7

Learn About Cultural Differences

- Language Arts: (K-6).SL.1, (4-6).W.2