

Lighter than Air

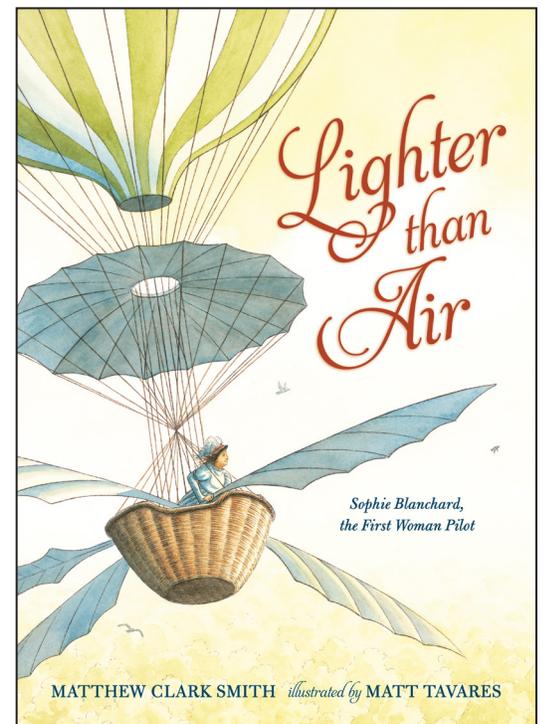
Sophie Blanchard, the First Woman Pilot

MATTHEW CLARK SMITH

illustrated by MATT TAVARES

ABOUT THE BOOK

Imagine rising above the earth and floating along in a hot-air balloon. When five-year-old Sophie heard about the brothers who had just piloted the first hot-air balloon in 1783, she longed to fly like they did. When she grew up, Sophie became the first woman to do just that. Flying with her husband, famous balloonist Jean-Pierre Blanchard, she amazed crowds of watchers. She kept performing after her husband died, venturing out alone despite the dangers, and the French emperor even named her Chief Air Minister of Ballooning. With elegant illustrations, this picture book biography brings to life a daring pilot who broke barriers for women and achieved her dreams in the sky.



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Common Core Connections

Set in France at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth, this historical picture book highlights the persistence of Sophie Blanchard in following her dream of flying in a hot-air balloon and her success in becoming the first woman to do so as a pilot. The story is told through substantial text and large, vivid illustrations. A highly appealing choice for class discussion or independent reading, *Lighter than Air* conveys a strong sense of time and place along with its gripping true story. In this guide, you'll find questions for discussion and writing about ideas, setting, language, and integration of text and illustration, which require the close reading called for by the Common Core Standards. Suggested classroom activities extend the book and its topics into a variety of curriculum areas.

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Discussion Questions

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

These questions correlate to Common Core ELA Reading Standards for Informational Text: Key Ideas and Details RI.1–5.1, 1–5.2, 1–5.3; Craft and Structure RI.1–5.4; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RI.1–4.7; and ELA Speaking & Listening Standards: Comprehension and Collaboration SL.1–5.1.



1. Describe Sophie Blanchard, referring to evidence in the text. What was her background? How would you describe her personality? What were her major accomplishments?
2. How and why did Sophie Blanchard become a balloonist? Talk about some of the obstacles she faced. What was the role of her husband in her career, and how did his death change things for her?
3. What were some of the arguments against women flying balloons? Why did some people object to the idea of women flying? Give specific examples of how Sophie showed through her actions that the arguments were wrong.
4. What were some dangers of flying balloons that men and women faced? What experiences in the story demonstrate those dangers? Describe times that the dangers led to injury or death.
5. The author uses figurative language that draws from flight, birds, and weather. As you read, make a list of some of these phrases, such as “bird-eyed little woman.” Then go back and read them again. What effect does each phrase have on you as a reader? What does it add to the story?
6. Read the author’s note. What information does it contain that isn’t in the story? Discuss the incident with the pitchforks and why the villagers were scared. Why did flight seem like “jaw-dropping magic?” Talk about why some people thought Sophie’s death proved that women specifically shouldn’t fly, even though male balloonists also died in flight.
7. Read the illustrator’s note and find illustrations that show how he “tried to use the sky to help tell the story.” Discuss illustrations of the sky and analyze what they add to the story beyond the words. What role do colors and shapes play in the pictures and their impact on readers?
8. Study the variety of illustration sizes and shapes throughout the book. Why do you think the illustrator sometimes uses decorated frames around pictures? Why are some pictures round while others stretch across two pages with no frame?
9. Another key aspect of the illustrations is perspective. Find pictures in which the reader is looking down and others where the reader is looking up. How do the different perspectives affect you as a reader? What do the two perspectives contribute to the story?
10. The final picture after the notes and bibliography shows Sophie as a girl on the beach. Describe the details of the picture. How do you think Sophie is feeling in the picture? Why is it an oval and framed? Why do you think the illustrator used this as the final picture?

Curriculum Connections

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

These questions correlate to Common Core ELA Reading Standards for Informational Text: Key Ideas and Details RI.1–5.1, 1–5.2, 1–5.3; Craft and Structure RI.1–5.4; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RI.1–5.7; ELA Speaking & Listening Standards: Comprehension and Collaboration SL.1–5.1, 1–5.2; Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas SL.1–5.4, 1–5.5; ELA Writing Standards: Text Types and Purposes W.1–5.2, 1–5.3; Production and Distribution of Writing W.3–5.4; and Research to Build and Present Knowledge W.1–5.7, 1–5.8.

Beautiful Balloons

Have students look carefully at the different balloons and their baskets portrayed in the book. Then ask each student to design a balloon, choosing colors, decorations, and a type of basket. Invite them to draw and color their balloon, cut it out, and hang it on a bulletin board with a blue background for the sky. Students might be inspired by a video of 433 colorful hot-air balloons that took off together in France in 2015 and broke a world record, which you can find on the Internet.

How Does It Work?

What is the science behind hot-air balloons? For example, how do they fly, and how does the pilot control them? Have students do online research to find a simple explanation for these and other questions and share their findings in small groups. The groups can work together to create a labeled diagram that shows the parts of the balloon that are necessary for flying. Instruct students to cite their online source(s).

Strange Flying Objects

The author's note has a striking story about villagers who were scared when they first saw a hot-air balloon. Have each student write a short story about a character who is seeing a flying device for the first time, whether it's a balloon, plane, helicopter, zeppelin, or the like. The stories should focus on the characters' emotions and the actions that result from those emotions.

It's All the Fashion

The illustrations show women in balloon-shaped hats and with balloons on their dresses. Have students work in pairs to create a balloon-influenced clothing design. It can be for modern clothing or clothing from the past. Have them draw their design and share it with the class, explaining their choices.

Fearless Female Fliers

As the author notes, Sophie paved the way for other female aeronauts, pilots, and astronauts. Gather together, or have students locate, picture book biographies of such women, including Ruth Humphreys Brown, Bessie Coleman, Amelia Earhart, Ruth Elder, Mae Jemison, Sally Ride, Elinor Smith, Kathryn Sullivan, and others. Have students work alone or in pairs to read one of the biographies. They should then find similarities and differences between the woman in their book and Sophie Blanchard and share their findings with the class.



The Incomparable Sensation

Many states have hot-air balloon businesses that will take people for rides. Have students write an ad to entice potential hot-air balloon customers. Before they start writing, talk with the class about what makes an ad effective. Note that their writing should highlight what Sophie Blanchard called “the incomparable sensation” of how wonderful it is to be up in a balloon. Invite students to film or perform their ad to share with others.

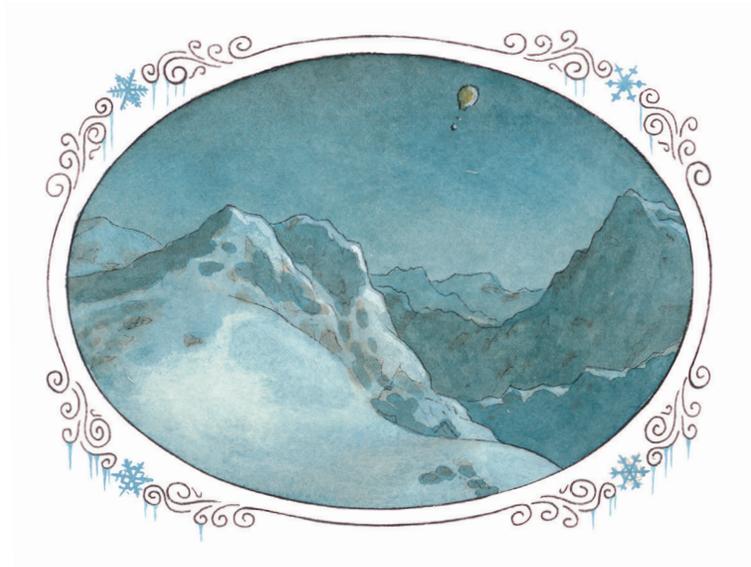
Follow Your Dream

When she was young, Sophie dreamed of flying even though it seemed unlikely that a girl from a small village would do so. Have students write about a dream they have for their future, no matter how unlikely. The essay should suggest a path by which the dream could come true. Have students share their dreams in small groups and talk more about how to make them happen.

Vive la France!

Show the class a map of France and see if they can locate Paris, the Alps, the English Channel, and Yves, where Sophie’s village is located. Then have students do simple research to find five interesting facts about France now or in the past. Gather the facts together on a list and discuss them as a class.





About the Author

MATTHEW CLARK SMITH is a writer and also a naturalist, designer, musician, mapmaker, programmer, and father. The author of *Small Wonders: Jean-Henri Fabre and His World of Insects*, he has a master's degree in creative writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. He lives in Jackson, Mississippi.

About the Illustrator

MATT TAVARES grew up surrounded by books and reading and frequently visited the public library. Since college, he's been writing and illustrating books, many of them award-winning. They include *Zachary's Ball*, *Oliver's Game*, *Mudball*, *Henry Aaron's Dream*, *There Goes Ted Williams*, *Becoming Babe Ruth*, *Growing Up Pedro*, and *Crossing Niagara*. Matt Tavares lives in Maine with his wife and their two daughters.

This guide was prepared by Kathleen Odean, a school librarian for more than fifteen years. She presents workshops on new books for young people, including one that focuses on nonfiction titles and their connections to the Common Core. Kathleen Odean served as chairperson of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and is the author of several guides to children's books, including *Great Books for Girls*, *Great Books for Boys*, and *Great Books About Things Kids Love*.