

EDUCATOR/DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMERICAN SPIRITS: THE FAMOUS FOX SISTERS AND THE MYSTERIOUS FAD THAT HAUNTED A NATION

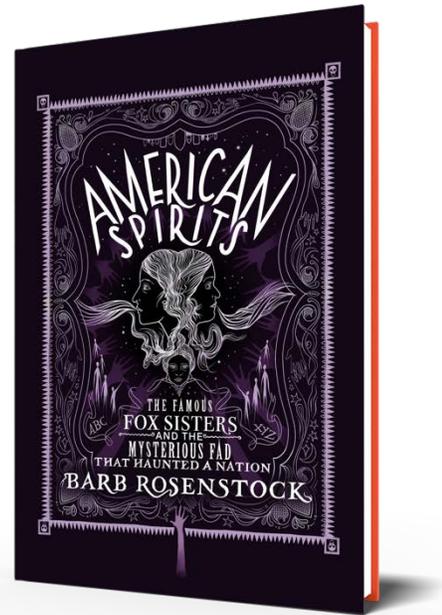
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ABOUT THE BOOK

In *American Spirits*, award-winning author Barb Rosenstock describes how Maggie and Kate Fox, under the watchful eye of their older sister, Leah, performed the first séances and created Spiritualism, a movement at the forefront of public consciousness in the mid-1800s. From their humble beginnings in a rented cottage in upstate New York, the sisters catapulted to fame and appeared on the front pages of newspapers nationwide. As the most popular “influencers” of their time, the Fox sisters communicated with spirits before thousands in sold-out theaters and before select groups at small, exclusive séances hosted by society’s elite. The price of fame, however, was steep.

In this engrossing book, Rosenstock reveals how the sisters managed to achieve considerable success at a time when it was almost impossible for women to have economic power. Using historical images, newspaper articles, and correspondence, the author shares how widespread the sister’s popularity was and how that popularity was affected by outside forces—from the completion of the Erie Canal to cholera epidemics. Readers will be fascinated by the séance tales, by the skeptics who tried to discredit the sisters, and by the similarities between the power and pitfalls of celebrity in the 1850s and today.

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EDUCATOR/DISCUSSION GUIDE

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PRAISE FOR AMERICAN SPIRITS

★ "Rosenstock effectively and objectively presents historical facts alongside primary sources... as she explores whether the Foxes truly experienced supernatural phenomena or whether it was a hoax all along. She also excels at integrating the larger social and historical context in which Spiritualism rose to prominence, drawing clear connections between the facts presented. A suspenseful, well-researched read filled with fascinating and evocative visuals." —*Kirkus Reviews, starred review*

"A detailed and engaging account of the Fox sisters... (p)ages turn quickly with short chapters and Rosenstock's intriguing ghost story-writing style. Extensive documentation is provided, including source notes, bibliography, and index. A great choice for teens who enjoy ghost stories and those interested in con artists or history. Recommended for all libraries."—*School Library Journal*

"Rosenstock, known for her award-winning informational picture books, turns to an older audience as she examines how the Fox sisters drove the Spiritualism movement in the nineteenth century. In meticulous detail... Rosenstock frames their rise and fall with the state of the nation, from deadly diseases to political divisions over slavery. By the end of this intriguing account, which is supported by copious source notes, readers must decide if the Fox sisters were mediums or tricksters, famous or infamous—or a bit of both."—*Booklist*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH

At the beginning of the book, we are introduced to Maggie and Kate Fox. How old are they? What year is it? Where do they live?

What was happening in the bedroom Maggie and Kate's shared with their parents? Why did the Fox family fetch neighbors to come witness what was happening? What details did the neighbors learn?

As word spread about the strange sounds, hundreds of people came to the Fox home to witness the "raps" for themselves. "Groups of curious people searched the Fox cottage and tried to recreate the sounds." (19) Were they successful? What did a group of men attempt to do in the cellar?

How did Maggie and Kate's older sister Leah take charge once she received word about the mysterious rapping?

In May of 1848, Maggie and Mother Fox joined Leah, Kate, and Leah's daughter, Lizzie, in Rochester—but the odd occurrences that happened in Hydesville followed them there. After "Leah confided to a select group of friends about the strange events in her home," (35) people began to ask the sisters for help connecting with lost loved ones. Leah, Maggie, and Kate encouraged these gatherings to connect with the spirit world. What did these gatherings come to be called?

Who were Amy and Isaac Post? What causes did they fight for?

Why did Leah send her daughter to "live in Illinois with the father she barely knew"? (46)

EDUCATOR/DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMERICAN SPIRITS: THE FAMOUS FOX SISTERS AND THE MYSTERIOUS FAD THAT HAUNTED A NATION

Who was Eliab Capron? What role did he play when the Fox sisters appeared at Corinthian Hall in Rochester?

On page 57, the author states, “The Spirits had become American entrepreneurs.” How?

How was the telegraph compared to the Fox sisters’ communications with spirits?

Some people believed the sisters were communicating with spirits, but others were skeptical. What were some of the experiences individuals had at séances that caused them to doubt the sisters’ abilities? What experiences made them believe?

How did the sisters make money from Spiritualism? How did others join the Spiritualism movement and reap financial rewards?

Mr. Capron tried to convince Mother Fox to let Kate and Maggie perform in New York City, but she resisted. Instead, the girls travelled via the Erie Canal to Albany, New York. How did the people of Albany receive the Fox sisters? How much money were they earning? What convinced their mother to let them perform in New York City?

“Before the end of June 1850, the Fox sisters had become New York’s latest must-see sensation.” (88) Describe a typical day for Maggie and Kate once they arrived in New York.

J. Stanley Grimes was a skeptic who challenged the Fox sisters’ abilities in a letter that was printed in the *New-York Tribune* in July of 1850. Why did Grimes suspect the sisters of deceit? What was the response to Grimes’ accusations?

Horace Greeley, editor of the *New-York Tribune*, was an early supporter of Maggie and Kate. Why were Greeley and his wife, Mary, “familiar with spirits?” (96) What was life like in the Greeley house? How did Kate’s life become intertwined with Mary’s?

After attending a Fox sisters’ séance in February of 1851, three physicians at the University of Buffalo wrote a letter to a Buffalo newspaper calling the sisters’ spirit sessions “a waste of time, money, and credulity.” (104) How did the doctors explain the spirits’ “rapping noises?” How did Leah respond to the accusations? What effect did the letter have on the popularity of the Fox sisters?

Who were the Burr brothers? What did they reveal in their lectures and write about in their pamphlets? Who was Ruth Culver and how was she connected with the Fox sisters? How did the public respond to Burr’s accusations?

Elisha Kent Kane “and the Fox sisters had shared side-by-side column space in the newspapers going back at least two years.” (132) Who was Elisha Kent Kane? Why was he famous in the 1850s?

Describe Maggie’s relationship with Elisha Kent Kane. How did he feel about Maggie’s work and her fame? Why was Maggie’s older sister, Leah, opposed to the relationship?

EDUCATOR/DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMERICAN SPIRITS: THE FAMOUS FOX SISTERS AND THE MYSTERIOUS FAD THAT HAUNTED A NATION

When Maggie and Kate traveled to Washington, D.C. with their mother in February of 1853, what officials did they meet? Which First Lady did Maggie have a private séance with?

When Elisha returned home from his Arctic expedition, his brother Tom advised him to court his newspaper friends: “It is they who made us, and not we ourselves.” (170) Why did Tom want Elisha to speak with the press? Why did Elisha’s family reject his relationship with Maggie Fox?

How many copies of Elisha’s Arctic Explorations sold in the first six months? What did the success of his book mean for him? For Maggie?

The author wrote, “This kind of nationwide outpouring of love for a celebrity had never been seen before.” What event was the author describing? (183)

Elisha had promised to leave money for Maggie in his will. Did Maggie receive any money? Why did she hold on to Elisha’s letters?

What did the Boston Courier offer to anyone who could prove spirit communication? Who made up the committee who judged the mediums? How was the Courier’s official report received?

“The story of Maggie’s baptism appeared in hundreds of papers.” (196) What did the newspapers report about Maggie’s conversion to Catholicism? What was the state of Maggie’s mental and financial health after Elisha’s death?

What happened at the séance on October 25, 1860? Who was in attendance?

Describe the unusual talents Kate Fox cultivated in her years of séance work.

“Interest in talking to the dead ticked up once more” in the early 1860s. Why? (210)

In 1866, Maggie finally published a book that included the letters she had received from Elisha Kent Kane. What did she hope to gain by publishing the letters nine years after his death? What was Maggie’s life like at the time the book was released? How was her relationship with her family?

Describe Katie’s relationship with Charles Livermore. How many séances did he attend with her?

What was Katie’s life like after Charles Livermore ended their sessions? Why did she move in with the Taylor family? How long did Kate “stay in touch” with the deceased members of the Taylor family?

In 1871, Kate left for London to work as a medium there. While in England, she met Henry Jencken, an attorney, and later married him. Who “appeared” at their wedding?

After Henry’s death, where did Kate travel with her boys? What royal family did she claim to lead séances for?

EDUCATOR/DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMERICAN SPIRITS: THE FAMOUS FOX SISTERS AND THE MYSTERIOUS FAD THAT HAUNTED A NATION

“After forty years of living with the public’s praise and condemnation, Maggie and Kate knew how best to seek revenge against their oldest sister.” Why were they seeking revenge against Leah? How did they go about exacting revenge? How did Leah respond to their accusations?

Maggie’s appearance at the Academy of Music in New York City was covered by major New York City newspapers. What did she confess? What did she have to say about Spiritualism?

As they aged, Kate and Maggie’s living conditions were often dire, due to their alcohol addiction and frequently desperate financial situation. Despite Maggie’s condemnation of Spiritualism, how did the Spiritualist community help Maggie and Kate at the end of their lives?

On page 248, the author includes part of Maggie Kane’s confession that appeared in the *New York World*. In it, Maggie calls Spiritualism “a fraud and a deception.” (254) How did she and her sisters commit fraud? For example, what did she reveal about Leah’s behavior during séances?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Mr. E. E. Lewis, a lawyer and writer, interviewed twenty-two witnesses and published a pamphlet on the rappings at the end of April 1848. However, he didn’t interview Maggie or Kate. Why didn’t he interview the two main characters in the drama unfolding in Hydesville?

Maggie and Kate’s older sister, Leah, lived in Rochester. At the time, Rochester “was fast becoming one of the largest cities in the United States,” (27). How did Maggie and Kate’s story spread in the mid-1800s? What are some similarities between the information superhighway of their time and the information superhighway of today? What are some differences?

Who was Frederick Douglass? How did his views on the Fox sisters differ from the views of his friends, Amy and Isaac Post? (41)

What is cholera? What role did cholera play in the rise of Spiritualism? (49)

What role did newspapers play in the Fox sisters’ fame and success?

The events of the 1850s were so tumultuous (Compromise of 1850, Fugitive Slave Act, etc.), that “the news-reading public used spirit gossip, spirit cartoons, and spirit love stories as distractions.” What kind of content can you find in reputable newspapers online today that distracts the “news-reading” public from distressing political or economic news? (73)

The Rules of Order for the Fox sisters’ sessions appear on page 80. How did the rules discourage skepticism?

The Rev. Dr. Rufus Griswold invited several famous American men, including James Fenimore Cooper and William Cullen Bryant, to attend a Fox sisters’ gathering in New York City. Griswold was intent on exposing the sisters as frauds, but the gathering inspired more interest in the sisters—despite the

EDUCATOR/DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMERICAN SPIRITS: THE FAMOUS FOX SISTERS AND THE MYSTERIOUS FAD THAT HAUNTED A NATION

skepticism of some of the attendees. In fact, “their interest alone helped turn Maggie, Kate, and Leah into superstars.” (87) What does the author have to say about celebrity? Why were “penny papers” considered the first mass media?

“Leah embraced Modern Spiritualism as her newfound faith.” (95) According to the author, “of the roughly twenty-five million people living in the United States in the early 1850s, more than a million were practicing Spiritualism of some kind.” (126) What were the tenets of Spiritualism? How did news of the Spiritualist movement spread?

One of the University of Buffalo physicians who accused the Fox sisters of deception, Dr. Charles Lee, said, “[I]f they [the Fox sisters] were to publicly acknowledge their imposture...it would not diminish the number of their followers.” (108) Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

“On May 30, 1853, hundreds of spectators shouted three cheers, repeated three times, as Elisha’s ship, the USS Advance, sailed out of New York Harbor.” (153) Where were Elisha and his crew headed? What were the goals of his expedition? Do you think he was prepared for this expedition? How did the newspapers describe Elisha and his crew?

“Kate made the annual salary of \$1,200, about eight times more than a female teacher earned in nineteenth-century New York.” (156) While the Fox sisters at times earned large amounts of money, there were many times Maggie and Kate were nearly destitute. How well did Leah manage her finances? What were some of the reasons why Maggie and Kate often faced financial ruin?

On page 168, there is a reprint from an 1855 newspaper. What is the newspaper clip about? The author suggests on page 74 that “celebrities were fast becoming American royalty.” Do you agree? How does the media still use celebrity news as a sales tool?

On pages 203 and 204, the author shows some of the tricks false mediums played. What were some of the ways these fake mediums duped unsuspecting victims?

Phrenology. Pseudoscience. Apported. Necromancy. Legerdemain. What do these words mean?

Maggie and Kate both “continued to seesaw between drunkenness and sobriety.” (228) What were some of the treatments the sisters tried to treat their alcoholism?

Maggie and Kate were in the news constantly and New-York Tribune articles about them were syndicated around the country. But during the Civil War, Greeley, the Tribune editor, “admitted that an evening spent ‘for two dreary, mortal hours in a darkened room ... waiting for some one’s disembodied grandfather or aunt to tip a table ...’ seemed out of step with the seriousness of the times.” (203) Throughout the book, Spiritualism’s popularity ebbed and flowed. Why?

On page 211, there is a picture of a White House painting from 1865. What is unusual about the painting? How many séances did President Lincoln’s wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, host at the White House? Why was she interested in spirit communication?

EDUCATOR/DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMERICAN SPIRITS: THE FAMOUS FOX SISTERS AND THE MYSTERIOUS FAD THAT HAUNTED A NATION

After they married, Kate and Henry's son, Ferdie, was also receiving publicity: "Ferdie Jencken's miraculous abilities were...covered in...city newspapers in Chicago, Washington, DC, and New York." (231). But Kate and Henry changed their minds about placing baby Ferdie in the public eye. Why? What happened to Kate's career after she made that decision? Think about social media today. Do you think parents should have the right to share images of their children on social media to support the parents' economic interests? Why or why not?

After Maggie's on-stage confession on October 21, 1888, the "New York Herald assured its readers [that Spiritualism could] 'never recover from this crushing blow.'" (243) How was Spiritualism affected by Maggie's public admittance of fraud? Why do you think that was the case?

In the author's note, she lists five psychological techniques often used by mediums and psychics. How do you think the Fox sisters may have used those techniques during their séances?

"By developing their skills, socializing with influencers, and pursuing risks that encouraged sensational press promotion, Leah, Maggie, and Kate claimed power for themselves in a particularly individual, American way." (262) How were the experiences of the Fox sisters unique for women of their time? How did their success inspire other women, including suffragists and abolitionists? Do you think Leah promoted her younger sisters' skills for her own gain? Or do you think she made a necessary decision to help the family stay afloat financially?

EXTRA CREDIT

The book begins with a passage from a poem by Emily Dickinson. How do you think those lines apply to the experiences of Maggie and Kate Fox? Dickinson was a poet who lived around the same time as the Fox sisters. To learn more about Dickinson and her poetry, visit poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson.

"The first Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention would be held in July 1848, about 25 miles (40 km) from the Fox house in Hydesville." (13) What was the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention? Who were the leaders of the women's rights movement at that time? How was Frederick Douglass involved? For more information, visit womenshistory.si.edu/blog/175th-anniversary-seneca-falls-convention and nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/frederick-douglass.htm.

"To pass the time, people told stories and often sang long into the night." (30) Look at page 28 for an illustration of a packet boat on the Erie Canal. When did the Erie Canal open? What impact did it have on transportation, the economy, social movements and more? Visit eriecanalway.org/learn/history-culture to learn more about one of the most significant infrastructure projects in American history. And for more information about how the Erie Canal helped spread new ideas, particularly about women's suffrage, watch youtube.com/watch?v=Y2hh0XXHUGo&t=177s.

Who was P.T. Barnum? What does the word "humbug" mean? (57)

EDUCATOR/DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMERICAN SPIRITS: THE FAMOUS FOX SISTERS AND THE MYSTERIOUS FAD THAT HAUNTED A NATION

“The same Washington, DC, paper that named the Fox sisters’ spirit communication one of the ‘Wonders of the World,’ also ran a serialized story titled Uncle Tom’s Cabin or Life Among the Lowly.” This serialized story was published as a book that was “the greatest publishing sensation of the nineteenth century. For decades, only the Bible sold more copies.”(110) Who wrote Uncle Tom’s Cabin? Learn more about the author and the book’s impact on the United States in the time leading up to the Civil War at womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/harriet-beecher-stowe.

On Elisha Kent Kane’s ill-fated expedition to the Arctic, the crew encountered deprivation and disease, including tetanus and scurvy. What are the symptoms of those two diseases? Why was scurvy often a problem on board ships in the nineteenth century?

Days after Elisha Kent Kane’s death, the Dred Scott decision was announced. What was the Dred Scott ruling? How did that Supreme Court ruling drive the US closer to civil war?

During the Civil War, “about one in four Civil War soldiers never came home; and over 40 percent of the dead remained nameless.” (214) As the author notes, “Americans looked for ways to deal with so much loss.” (215) After the bloody Battle of Gettysburg, President Lincoln dedicated a national cemetery there and gave a memorable speech. Read the Gettysburg Address. How long is it? Why do you think that address still resonates over 150 years later?

Guide written by Jane Becker