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Book Discussion Questions

Helen Keller: Her Life in Pictures
By George Sullivan

Created by Provo City Library

1. In reading about Helen Keller were you surprised to learn that personal appearance was so important to her? Why do you think she felt that way?

2. During an era when most women did not attend college, Helen was determined to graduate. This is just one of the challenges that Helen took on. What impressed you about her character and determination?

3. Would you have responded the same way to life as Helen if you were in her shoes? How can her experience help you with everyday challenges?

4. Because of Anne Sullivan and Polly Thomson, Helen was able to go out into the world. How would you describe their relationship? What did you learn about friendship and the influence of those around you from their experience?

5. How did the photographs affect the telling of the story of Helen’s life? Did it improve it or hinder it? Why?

6. How did the book affect you?

7. Would you recommend this book? Why or why not?

Quotes from the book to discuss:

- “We’re like everybody else. We’re here to be able to live a life as full as a sighted person’s. And it’s O.K. to be ourselves.” page 11

- “To be blind is to see the bright side of life.” page 40

- “Who are the most unhappy people?” Helen was once asked. “People who have nothing to do” she answered. page 47

- “How do you approach old age?” a student asked her. “There’s no age to the spirit,” Helen said. page 59
• Eleanor Roosevelt speaking about her husband President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s polio said to Helen Keller, “Franklin’s illness…gave him strength and courage he had not had before.” page 66

• “Never bend your head. Always hold it high. Look the world straight in the eye.” Quote on the back cover of book

To learn more about Helen Keller, the Provo City Library also has *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller available as a book club set.
At a plain, black well-pump in the small southern town of Tuscumbia, Alabama, one of the world's great miracles took place. It began one bright, spring day in 1887. Puffy white clouds floated overhead on a background of blue, while birds fluttered through oaks and maples and flowers burst forth from the fertile soil in an array of colors—all unheard and unseen by a pretty girl of seven.

Standing at the totally blind and deaf Helen Keller's side was a young woman, Anne Sullivan. Miss Sullivan was steadily pumping cool water into one of the girl's hands while repeatedly tapping out an alphabet code of five letters in the other—first slowly, then rapidly. The scene was repeated again and again as young Helen painstakingly struggled to break her world of silence.

Suddenly the signals crossed Helen's consciousness with a meaning. She knew that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the cool something flowing over her hand. Darkness began to melt from her mind like so much ice left out on the sunny March day. By nightfall, Helen had learned 30 words.

Helen Adams Keller was born a healthy child on June 27, 1880, to Captain Arthur H. and Kate Adams Keller of Tuscumbia. At the tender age of 19 months, she was stricken with a severe illness which left her blind and deaf.

At the age of six, the half-wild, deaf and blind girl was taken by her parents to see Dr. Alexander Graham Bell. Because of her visit, Helen was united with her teacher Anne Mansfield Sullivan on March 3, 1887. After Helen's miraculous break-through at the simple well-pump, she proved so gifted that she soon learned the fingertip alphabet and shortly afterward to write. By the end of August, in six short months, she knew 625 words.

By age 10, Helen had mastered Braille as well as the manual alphabet and even learned to use the typewriter. By the time she was 16, Helen could speak well enough to go to preparatory school and to college. In 1904 she was graduated "cum laude" from Radcliffe College. The
teacher stayed with her through those years, interpreting lectures and class discussions to her.

Helen Keller, the little girl, became one of history’s remarkable women. She dedicated her life to improving the conditions of blind and the deaf-blind around the world, lecturing in more than 25 countries on the five major continents. Wherever she appeared, she brought new courage to millions of blind people.

Her teacher, Anne Sullivan is remembered as “the Miracle Worker” for her lifetime dedication, patience and love to a half-wild southern child trapped in a world of darkness.
Braille Alphabet:

a b c d e f g h i j
k l m n o p q r s t
u v w x y z
!
'
,
-
.
?
Capital
Numbers:
# 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

People often think that braille is a language. Actually there is a braille code for every foreign language you can imagine including French, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, and Hebrew. There are also braille codes for mathematics, music, and computers.

The Braille Cell

The braille characters make up the letters of the alphabet, punctuation marks, numbers, and everything else you can write in print.
The letter "a" is written with only dot 1.

.

The letter "d" has dots 1, 4, and 5.

.. .

The letter "y" has dots 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

... .

When all six dots are used, the character is called a "full cell."

....

And when no dots are used it's an "empty cell!"

The picture below shows you how the dots are arranged in the braille cell for each letter of the alphabet. Do you see a pattern between the lines of the alphabet? Why do you think the "w" is not part of the pattern?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>c</th>
<th>d</th>
<th>e</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>g</th>
<th>h</th>
<th>i</th>
<th>j</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>k</td>
<td>l</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>q</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>v</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>z</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See if you can find the letters in your name and tell the dot numbers for each one.
Capitalizing in Braille

Braille does not have a separate alphabet of capital letters as there is in print. Capital letters are indicated by placing a dot 6 in front of the letter to be capitalized. Two capital signs mean the whole word is capitalized.

One Letter Capitalized  •  Entire Word Capitalized  •  •

Look at these examples:

K  i  m  S  m  i  t  h  N  B  A

Braille Punctuation

A "period" is written with dots 2, 5, and 6. (Do you see how it is the same shape as the letter "d," only lower in the cell?) There are other characters for each mark of punctuation such as dots 2, 3, and 5 for an exclamation point. (Do you see that it is the same shape as the letter "f," only lower in the cell? Like the previous example, which is called a "dropped d," this is called a "dropped f").

Braille Numbers

Braille numbers are made using the first ten letters of the alphabet, "a" through "j", and a special number sign, dots 3, 4, 5, and 6.

#  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  0

Larger numbers only need one number sign. The comma in braille is dot 2, and is used in numbers and with words, too.

3  1  ,  9  8  7

The braille code is used for words and for numbers in sentences or page numbers, but when students take math class they learn a different code called the Nemeth code.
Expanding the Code

Now that you understand how dots are arranged in the braille cell to make the letters of the alphabet and numbers, you're ready to learn more about the code. Braille uses special characters called contractions to make words shorter. We use contractions like "don't" as a short way of writing two words, such as "do" and "not." In braille there are many additional contractions, 189 in all! Using these contractions saves space, which is very important because braille books are much larger and longer than print books.

Some contractions stand for a whole word. For example, when the full cell is used as a contraction, it means "for." Dots 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 make up the word "and" and dots 2, 3, 4, and 6 make up the word "the."

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{for} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 \\
6 & 6 & 6 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{and} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{the} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array}
\end{align*}
\]

Other contractions stand for a group of letters within a word. In the example below, you see the contraction "ing" (dots 3, 4, 6) in the word "sing" and as an ending in the word "playing." Likewise, you see the contraction "ed" (dots 1, 2, 4, 6) in the word "edge" and as an ending in the word "played."

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ing} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{ing} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{p} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{l} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{a} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{y} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{ed} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{ed} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{g} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{e} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{p} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{l} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{a} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{y} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
\text{ed} & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array}
\end{align*}
\]

In addition to contractions, the braille code includes short-form words which are abbreviated spellings of common longer words. For example, "tomorrow" is spelled "tm", "friend" is spelled "fr", and "little" is spelled "ll" in braille. If you text message with your friends, it's a similar idea!

Can you guess what these short-form combinations might mean?

\[
\begin{align*}
c & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
da & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
b & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
v & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
q & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
k & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
s & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array} \\
d & = \begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 3 & 4 & 6 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 6
\end{array}
\end{align*}
\]

If you guessed "could," "above," "quick," and "said," you're right!

You might think that because short-form words are so easy to spell that children who write braille get a break on their spelling tests. Actually, braille readers also learn regular spelling for
typing on a computer.

Let's see what kind of difference contractions make in braille. Look at the same phrase, **you like him**, in uncontracted braille (sometimes called "grade 1 braille") and contracted braille (sometimes called "grade 2 braille"). What do you notice about the length of the two phrases?

**Uncontracted Braille:**

```
   you like him
```

**Contracted Braille:**

```
   y l h m
```

Did you notice that the length of the contracted braille phrase is shorter than the uncontracted braille phrase? If you thought there were three contractions, you're right! The word "you" is written with the letter "y" standing alone. The word "like" is written with the letter "l" standing alone, and the word "him" is one of those short-form words written "hm."

**Other Braille Codes**

The braille code used for writing regular text in books, magazines, school reports, and letters is known as "literary braille." There are other codes, though, that let people who are blind write just about anything, from math problems to music notes to computer notation!

**One More Comment About Braille**

People sometimes ask if it would be easier to use raised print alphabet letters, rather than dots. When you read about Louis Braille, you'll learn that raised print letters were tried in the early 1800s before he invented braille. However, these letters were very difficult to read by touch, and writing them was even more of a problem.

If you ever see an experienced reader's fingers gliding rapidly across a page of braille, you will appreciate the genius of the simple six-dot system. Braille can be read and written with ease by both children and adults. It is truly an invention that is here to stay.