

Creative Writing Activity Using "The Innocent Assassins"



On the left, a digital model of the actual sabertooth skull and bone Eiseley found; on the right, the actual skull. Notice how the teeth are sunk deep into the bone.

GRADE LEVEL

Grades 6-8

SUBJECTS

English, Language Arts

ESTIMATED TIME

Three or more 50-minute sessions

*"We are all atavists and yet
sometimes we seem wrapped in
wild innocence like sabertooths, as
if we still might seek a road
unchosen yet, another dream."*

OVERVIEW

Although Loren Eiseley is best known for his prose, he also wrote several volumes of poetry. Perhaps his best-known [poem](#) is "[The Innocent Assassins](#)", found in a book by the same name. The poem relates to an experience of Eiseley when he was part of the Nebraska State Museum bone hunting team on a dig in the Wildcat Ridge area near Bayard, Nebraska in 1932.

The famous fossil discovered by Eiseley and others on this dig is of the skull of a sabertooth cat, whose fang is locked in the leg of another sabertooth. It is all that remains of a 25 million year old cat fight! Today, the fossil can be seen at the Nebraska State Museum, and a postcard of the fossil is sold at the museum. The postcard is from a photograph from "The Cellars of Time" by *NEBRASKAland Magazine*.

The resources that follow this description can be used for any of the accompanying creative writing exercises after carefully reading the poem "The Innocent Assassins".

MATERIALS AND TECHNOLOGY

- A copy of the poem "The Innocent Assassins" from *The Loren Eiseley Reader* for each student in the class
- A copy of the handout for this lesson plan for each student.

Other materials depend on the selected activity. There are also online visual resources at the Loren Eiseley Society website, www.eiseley.org. Click on 'curriculum.'

PREPARATION

1. Read the poem "The Innocent Assassins" in *The Loren Eiseley Reader*.
2. Make sure every student has a copy of the poem and/or *Reader*.
3. Make copies of all handouts and have all materials available for use.

INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN

STUDENT OBJECTIVES

In this series of lessons, students will

- be introduced to the works of the writer and scholar Loren Eiseley; and
- creatively explore some of the themes Loren Eiseley used in his literary works.

SESSION ONE

1. Ask students to carefully read the poem "The Innocent Assassins."
2. Show students the postcard of the famous sabertooth cat fossil (with fangs embedded in the leg of another sabertooth). This postcard depicts an original 2007 oil painting by artist Jan Vriessen. The painting was commissioned by Dr. Kirk Johnson, Denver Museum of Nature & Science, and is currently on exhibit at the museum. (*Concept for oil painting, posters and postcards by Mr. Ray Boice of the Fossil Freeway, who is a board member of the Loren Eiseley Society.*)
3. Have the students produce a creative narrative in which, in an Eiseley style, they describe the scene and tell a story of this 25 million year old catfight.

ENRICHMENT

1. Bring in interesting fossils, or show pictures of fossils (especially skulls), and have students write their own poems or stories about the animals.
2. Art project: have students draw the scene of the 25 million year old catfight. Describe in 50-75 words the decisions they made when creating the work.



On the left, a digital model of the actual saber tooth skull and bone Eiseley found; on the right, the actual skull. Notice how the teeth are sunk deep into the bone.



"The Innocent Assassins" as depicted in an original 2007 oil painting by artist Jan Vriessen (recommended by Dr. Kirk Johnson, Denver Museum of Nature & Science). Concept for oil painting, posters and postcards by: Ray Boice of the Fossil Freeway (member LES, Gering, Nebraska).



Freewrite

<http://www.nps.gov/bafo/naturescience/sabertooth-cat.htm>