

Big Fish

Responses to Preparing for the Film

1. A son who does not see his father regularly or predictably may feel abandoned or displaced by his father's work and life away from home. He may develop a fanciful notion about where his father has been and what life he might have away from the family. The son might fear that his father has a separate life and family that he favors and hence lives away from him and his mother for periods of time. The son may even fear that he is the cause of punishing separations. The child may fear that he is not important to his father and that the father's life away from home is more important than his life with his family. On the other hand, the son's speculations about his father might involve a triumphant grandeur that the father cannot come close to achieving. If that is the case, the father might be regarded as a kind of returning Santa Claus figure who has the exalted esteem of the family, including the son. The son may be eager to hear about his father's adventures and successes, and his life away from the family. He may want to learn about his father's associates and to meet them. Students will have widely differing notions about how relationships develop between a father and son who face periodic separations. Some family patterns—reading to the son, going on day outings to fish or camp, a habit of story-telling at bedtime—might help young sons and fathers establish a thread for conversation and relationship. Students' own experiences in families with periodically removed fathers will have disparate stories of both successful and failed relationships.
2. When family members hear a relative tell the same stories, they are likely to be disinterested and bored. They may even feel irritated and angry if the stories are fabricated or exaggerated, and yet others seem intrigued or are feigning interest. Tales told by long-winded parents may be especially resented by grown children if the stories are personal, embarrassing, false, or constantly changing.
3. Students will readily identify these challenges for anyone adapting the novel *Big Fish* to a film version:
 - casting both younger and older actors to play the same character, capable of spanning many years
 - finding a charismatic actor who can intrigue and entertain viewers as Edward Bloom must
 - casting William Bloom as one who resents his father but is capable of understanding and empathizing with him as their relationship grows
 - developing smooth, cinematic transitions between the multiple narrators who tell this tale and the various flashbacks while advancing and controlling the plot
 - casting the idiosyncratic individuals who Edward befriends over the years: the Witch, Karl the Giant, circus master Amos Calloway and his crew, the seemingly conjoined singing twins Ping and Jing, and the residents of the magical town of Spectre.
 - creating this fantasy world where the imaginative and real worlds often blend and conflict
 - developing mystery and mystique without frustrating or confusing viewers
 - depicting various visions in the witch's eye

- designing special effects to depict the big fish scenes and the disappearing female in the lake, the struggles in the jungle and at war, and the childbirth narratives
- creating a sense of closure and acceptance at the end

Responses to Reflecting on the Film

1. The story of William's birth is retold by his father over and over. The film records Edward telling the story to William when he was very young, later when William was a Boy Scout and is bored with the story, again to William's date on a prom night, and finally at William's wedding reception, when an irritated William leaves the room to avoid hearing the story yet again.

Even before Edward was born, the biggest fish in the river was a legend known to all, and nobody could catch him. People tried expensive and time-honored lures, but the big fish always eluded capture. One day, Edward has a revelation, to use his wedding ring of gold, the strongest possible lure, to catch the fish. And he did. The beast snapped up the lure, the ring, and swallowed it. Edward followed the fish up river, holding on to the line, where he discovers that the beast is a "her," a female fish, fat with eggs. Edward feels responsible for the fish and does not want to kill her to redeem his ring, so he lets her go. But on the day of William's birth, he catches the fish again, in his arms, as he wades into the river, and he squeezes her, and she expels the ring, which he catches. The lesson of the big fish, as Edward tells it at William's wedding: "The only way to catch an uncatchable woman is to offer her a wedding ring."

William is clearly tired of the story and on his wedding day explains his aversion to his father's telling the story yet again. First, it isn't factual. On the day he was born, as Dr. Bennet will later testify, Edward was not even present. He was in Wichita, Kansas, selling novelties. When William approaches his father after the wedding reception, he objects to his telling the story again, and complains that he is a mere "footnote" to the tale; the punch line has nothing to do with him. For one night, William believes, the world should not revolve around his father, Edward Bloom. Edward believes that "everyone loves that story," but William thinks his father is just embarrassing himself retelling it.

Dr. Bennet will later verify that his father was, indeed, absent for William's birth. He was out of town when Sandra went into labor a week early. Dr. Bennet admits that it's not a very exciting story, but if he had to choose between the real story and the elaborate one about the big fish, Dr. Bennet admits he would choose "the fancy version." However, Will likes the factual reality of Dr. Bennet's version of his birth, but before the story is over, Will helps to fabricate a "fancy version," a "surprise ending" to his father's life story.

2. The Witch has one glass eye that contains mystical powers so that if an individual looks right at it, he will see how he is going to die. Young Edward accepts a dare from his young friends to go up to the witch and discover how he dies. The witch lifts the patch and shows Edward how one friend dies falling off a ladder and another friend dies in a bathroom. Edward gets to see how he dies, but that prediction is kept from viewers. We only hear him say "Oh, that's how I go," and he smiles. Rather than frightening him, this knowledge seems to comfort Edward, especially whenever he is in a dangerous or life-threatening setting because he realizes that a particular peril is not how he dies and he

therefore overcomes that particular adversity. The Witch's prophecy seems to give him courage to take risks and believe in himself. In fact, the narrator reminds viewers that we can never be certain of our destiny because "fate has a way of circling back on a man and taking him by surprise." Certainly, Ed would have never predicted that his adult son, who detested his "tall tales," would create the most delightful "exit" for his dad so that Ed could leave this world as the beloved hero that he truly was.

3. It is axiomatic that "the biggest fish in the river gets that way by never being caught." The longer the fish is alive, evading capture, and eating, the larger it will grow. The wisdom for Edward Bloom might be that growing bigger in his small pond is the way to not be caught—in mediocrity or predictability. From his childhood, he understood that a goldfish will stay small if it lives in a small bowl, but will grow to a larger size if it lives in a more spacious environment. His notion of life is to live in a larger environment that is self-created by aggrandizing his world with the embellishments of narration and relationships, and never getting caught. One of his life's goals is to make people happy, and he does, as the film beautifully shows. William, a writer living abroad—in fact, in Paris—wants factual stories and his "getting caught" might have more to do with not having details, specifics and facts to back his points. He seems to live in a larger world, an international world, than his father's small-town world, but the film does not show that he lives the magnanimous life, filled with relationships, that his father enjoyed.
4. According to the *Microsoft Encarta College Dictionary*, "specter" or "spectre" means "a ghostly presence or apparition" or "a threat or prospect of something unpleasant." When Edward Bloom separates from Karl the Giant and ends up fleeing an attack of bees and another attack of bats, he finds himself at the entrance of "Spectre," a community that appears as a magical oasis and sanctuary. The town of Spectre does indeed seem to be an apparition with its bright green grass and colorful homes and buildings that "feel so strange yet so familiar." The town seems inviting, except for the shoes and boots strung mysteriously across a high rope at the entrance of the town. Edward stresses that Spectre is "the best kept secret in Alabama," and he feels welcome there. But Edward fears that it may be a seductive town that lures people in and traps them as they stagnate and settle for mediocrity. In fact, the town poet Norther Winslow shares a poem that he has been working on for 12 years, but it is only three cliché lines. Edward decides immediately that he needs to leave Spectre that night. Attempting to compel Ed to stay, eight-year-old Jenny slips under the table and removes his shoes and throws them up with the other shoes hanging high over the entrance to town. Edward chases after her and protests that he needs his shoes, but he ends up leaving town barefoot and escapes. Years later, he returns and sees that the town has become barren and lifeless, since residents are now bankrupt and disillusioned. Edward manages to buy and revive the town of Spectre and to inspire the townspeople with his dream, to ensure that the town will never die again.
5. Edward believes that he has shown his son who he really is throughout the boy's childhood and into adulthood—up until the son departs from home with his bride and severs all direct communication with his father. In flashback scenes of the father and young son, we see an engaged and committed Edward enchanting his son with hands that create shadow puppets, and delighting his boy with tall tales and embellished narrations: of being sick in bed for three years, hooked up to a growing machine, high school derring-do on athletic fields, braving a swamp witch with a prophetic glass eye, beguiling

gentle giants, participating in circus escapades and dramatically courting his mother. These tales, Edward knows, should have told his son who he is: a creative man who wanted more from life than a safely predictable future in a small pond, in a town like Spectre, a magnanimous man who wanted to help others, a tenacious man who was not stronger or faster than others but, like the fish who evades capture, “touched by something extra.”

Although William says, “I have no idea who you are because you’ve never told me,” it is clear that Edward has revealed more of himself than the iceberg’s 10%. Will accuses him of telling lies, stories that you might tell a young child, and he feels foolish for having trusted his father who, like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, he feels is “a fake.” His father picks up Will’s word “fake” and protests, “I’ve been exactly who I am since the day I was born, and if you can’t see that, it’s your failing, not mine.”

It is William’s failing if he cannot intuitively grasp who his father is, to interpret what the stories reveal. The director shows that he favors Edward’s truth when he dramatizes Will coming around to his father’s perception of life. Will joins Edward in creating “the surprise ending” to Edward’s life, the story they create together in the hospital, as Edward resists the hospital-bed ending that was not prophesized in the glass eye. He needs his son to help him fabricate the dramatic, fanciful getaway, and William helps to create the tale and to participate fully in it, showing that Will *is* his father's son.

6. Will journeys to music teacher Jennifer Hill's home to determine his father's relationship with her when he discovers her name on a deed among his father's papers. Will learns from her that his father unselfishly revived the town of Spectre and acted nobly and kindly to save others, without any self-interest, except for the joy of helping others and making people happy. Jenny also reveals that although she invited Will's father to stay with her, he gently refuses her advances and always remains true to Will's mother. While Will initially suspects that his father has cheated on his mother with Jennifer Hill and that Jennifer signed over her house because of an illicit affair with his father, Will learns that his dad has integrity and intense loyalty. He also sees that Edward is definitely a hero to others and has earned their respect and admiration.
7. The ending of Edward’s life is in a hospital bed, hooked up to life-sustaining machines. But Edward knows that he was destined for a different ending, the one prophesized by the witch’s glass eye, a prophecy that has come true for the two other boys who saw their death in that eye. Edward believes that he must go to the river to fulfill his destiny, and as he comes out of his stroke-induced coma, he tries to transmit that awareness to his son. Just as he immersed himself in a bathtub when he was still at home, he feels “dry” and he asks William for water. He then mutters, “River.” Will understands the word and what his father must want, and he asks his father to help him create the ending, the death prophesized in the eye. “You never told that story,” Will says to his father, “I need your help; tell me how it starts.”

The final scenes alternate between the reality of the blue-toned light of a hospital at night and the full technicolor of the fabricated story of escape. It is morning in the story that Will is fabricating, and Edward is better. Will says, “I see you’re better,” and then has his father say “Let’s get out of here.” Edward removes his oxygen tubes, has Will get a wheelchair to slide him into, and Will pushes him down halls, past Dr. Bennet, the nurses, and the hospital security. Josephine and Sandra appear and facilitate the escape by pushing a medical cart in the way of the doctors, nurses, and security forces

trying to stop the escaping patient and his son. In the hospital parking lot is Edward's old red car, fixed up and shiny like new, Will tells his father as he creates the story, clearly knowing what his father would want to see and hear. Will lifts him into the car and they drive off as Edward pours a bottle of water over his head. Avoiding the church crowd, that drives too slowly, they tear down streets at reckless speed, hit the highway and keep driving. The giant, Carl, moves cars out of their way as they traverse bridges and travel the road at high speed.

When they reach the river, their destination, they discover, in Will's comforting story, that everyone is already there—the cheerleaders of Edward's life, Carl the Giant, the circus crowd, the folks from Spectre, all of Ashton's people--and that Edward's wife Sandra, the love of his life, is waiting for him in the river. There are no sad faces. As Will says, "Everyone is glad to see you and send you off right." Edward gives Sandra his gold ring, everyone waves goodbye, the big fish appears and Edward disappears. As Will says, "You became what you always were, a very big fish, and that's how it happens."

By the end of the film, it is clear that Will sees the value of his father's stories. They are so valuable that Will helps create a story with his father to comfort him as he makes his final transition. Will helps his father create the final story, the ending that is more special than death in a hospital bed, hooked up to machines. Will shows that he is his father's son, capable of creating a story. Will's participation in fabricating the escape from the hospital confirms not only his acceptance of embellishment of the factual details of an event but, more significantly, the acceptance of his father.

8. Edward Bloom's funeral amazes his son Will, and perhaps viewers too, who may suspect that most of the characters of his tall tales were fictitious. In fact, Ed's funeral parallels the story that he and Will created for his send-off at the river. We see everyone whom Edward has described, exactly as Edward describes them: Karl the Giant, the twins Ping and Jing, the circus master Amos Calloway, poet and Wall St. entrepreneur Norther Winslow, Jennifer Hill, Jennifer's parents, the Spectre townspeople, the Witch with the eye patch, Dr. Bennett who delivered Will, and nearly everyone else from Ed's past. Josephine nudges Will from time to time, as if to prompt him to see the reality of his father's fabulous tales.

Although most guests are dressed in black, Will's mother Sandra is in a bright red coat, a color emblematic of her husband, with his red sports car and his passion for life. Beside Sandra is Jennifer Hill, the other woman who loved his father, and both are talking comfortably. The amazing aspect of the funeral is how predictable in its trappings it appears: flowers, grave-side seating for the family, conversations among the mourners—except that the mourners are all the amazing people from Edward's stories, and they are real, and they are smiling, laughing, and talking animatedly. Will is able to see that his father told compelling stories, but he also lived a rich, full life because of his love for adventure and excitement but also his determination, loyalty, and integrity. Edward's funeral becomes a celebration of his life and of his son's appreciation for his father, a wonderful story teller, just as Will himself is.

9. The use of multiple narrators is a major accomplishment of this film because each narrative perspective helps viewers see and understand Edward Bloom more fully. The film opens with a voiceover as Edward explains, "There are some fish that cannot be caught. It's not that they are faster or stronger than other fish; they're just touched by something extra." As Edward continues, we can imagine that we will be meeting

someone with that "something special." In fact, he notes, "One such fish was the beast. And by the time I was born he was already a legend." Then the camera goes upstairs to focus on a young boy in bed, listening attentively as he is being told this story: "All I knew was I'd been trying to catch that fish since I was a boy, no bigger than you. And on the day you were born, well that was the day I'd finally caught him." The film then skips ahead to a Boy Scout campfire, where a slightly older boy, now bored with this same story, is barely listening as his father is telling all the enraptured boys this tale of the big fish. Next we see the son's prom date hearing the same story while the son is embarrassed; finally, the son leaves his own wedding reception hall while his father is once again telling this same fish tale. Although the father has been the consistent narrator during these retellings, the son's changing reactions to his father's story reveal the son's growing discontent with his father.

When the son Will takes over the narration, we see Edward even more critically. When Ed says pointedly to his son, "I'm sorry to *embarrass* you," Will answers, "You're embarrassing *yourself*, Dad; you just don't see it." Then Will informs viewers, "After that night, I didn't speak to my father for 3 years. . . . We were like strangers who knew each other very well. In telling the story of my father's life, it's impossible to separate fact from fiction, the man from the myth. The best I can do is tell it the way he told me. It doesn't always make sense and most of it never happened, but that's the kind of story this is." Ultimately, the narrative perspective becomes the father's story filtered through the son's skepticism. In fact, when Will and his father are reunited because his father is dying, Edward tell his son, "Your mother thought we wouldn't talk again, but look at us, we're speaking fine. We're both storytellers, both of us. I speak mine out; you write yours down. Same thing." However, Will is seeking the "true version," and hoping that his father can finally help him separate fact from fiction.

When we soon hear Ed's direct narration, it is when he continues telling the story but to Josephine, Will's wife. Ed tells her of his experiences working with the circus, falling in love with Sandra Templeton, meeting Karl the Giant, and going to Spectre. Josephine later tells Will, "You never told me how your parents met. It's romantic." And she urges Will to talk to his father and explain his frustration, which he does. Will confronts his dad, "I believed your stories so much longer than I should have. Then when I realized that everything you said was impossible--*everything*--I felt like a fool to have trusted you." Although Will's father contends that he has been "nothing but myself since the day I was born," Will doesn't believe his father until Will goes to visit the music teacher Jennifer Hill, suspecting that she has had an affair with his father.

When Jennifer narrates how Edward returned to Spectre and decided to buy all the property and save the town from ruin, Will starts to see his father differently. Jennifer explains how much she enjoyed Ed's story-telling while he was fixing up her house, and how she ultimately fell in love with him. However, she also explains how Ed gently refused her affections because he so deeply loved Sandra, Will's mother. Jennifer also verifies that Ed loved Will and his mother deeply: "I wanted to be as important to him as you were and i was never going to be. I was make-believe. In his other life, you were real." Only Jennifer could have shared this perspective, and she helps Will and the viewers see that Ed is more faithful and principled than many might have realized. Jennifer's narration is critical to our realization that Ed is not simply a wonderful story teller, who loves to embellish mundane realities, but he also is a man of integrity who deserves to be the hero of his stories. The shifting perspectives help us see Edward bloom fully and richly with all the complexity and depth that such a legend inevitably embodies.

When Will helps his father create an exciting ending for his life story, Will realizes that he shares his father's ability to help others escape the mundane. Will's ending is a thrilling salute to his father and mother, to their joy and passion, and to the power of imagination and vision to help us transcend limitations. The different narrative perspectives and the interactions between narrators and listeners help viewers better understand the magic and mystery of this Big Fish.

10. The word “fish” appears in many English-language expressions. The bulleted list below includes a few of the commonly- used idioms:

- to drink like a fish
- a fish in troubled waters
- a fish out of water
- neither fish nor fowl
- other fish to fry
- an odd fish
- to fish through one’s pockets
- to fish for compliments
- lots of fish in the sea
- a fish tale
- a big fish in a little pond

William must have felt, during his father’s absences, that his father had “other fish to fry,” matters more important than his son to attend to. Later in his life, he felt “a fish out of water,” a son in a strange, uncomfortable environment where others valued his father more than he did because he believed that his father made up stories that distanced him and his father from each other, story-telling that his friends and family members accepted but he could not. With his magnanimity, and his ebullient nature, Edward was “an odd fish,” with many life experiences that seemed impossible, but only in the eyes of his skeptical son. There are “lots of fish in the sea,” but by the end of the film the audience realizes that Edward is unique, his own man and yet a “Big Fish,” and fortunately his son William finally buries his resentment for his father’s story- telling, or what he sees as stretching and distorting truth to tell a “fish tale,” and William comes to realize and value his father’s unique abilities.