



## *Oceans Apart* Readers Theater

Based on the book by Hallie Darnall & Haley Villont  
&

*Searching for Anne Frank: Letters from Amsterdam to Iowa* by Susan Goldman Rubin

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#penpals

Anne Frank had a pen pal named Juanita Wagner. The two girls wrote back and forth between the Netherlands and Iowa just weeks before Anne and her family went into hiding. Anne wrote in her letter, "I'm looking at a map of Iowa and I see Burlington, are you near there?" Anne was right about the location of her pen pal Juanita, and little did she know that many years later the author and illustrator of the book "Oceans Apart" would be from Burlington, Iowa.

Cast:

**Narrator 1**      **Juanita Wagner 10 years old (Anne's pen pal in Iowa)**

**Narrator 2**      **Miss Birdie Matthews - Juanita's teacher in Danville, Iowa**

**A small class of students (from 5-10 students, Girls & Boys)**

**PROPS & COSTUMES:** Keep costumes simple. Students, including Juanita, could be dressed in the style of 1940's children. Girls could wear simple print dresses, and the boys could have on slacks and plaid shirts. Be aware that boys did not wear jeans to school in the 1940s, even if they wore them around the farm. Miss Birdie could also wear a simple print dress. Props, which are mentioned in the script include: two jars (preferably mason jars each containing small slips of paper), a newspaper, a letter (on light yellow paper, like the original from Anne), and a picture postcard.

**LESSON GOAL:** To arouse curiosity about Anne Frank and the Holocaust by learning how a student in the U.S. became Anne Frank's pen pal.



Hallie Darnall and Haley Villont

**Scene 1**  
6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> Grade Classroom  
Danville Community School (Grades 1-12)  
Danville, Iowa  
Fall, 1939

**Narrator 1:** In 1939, an innovative Iowa educator wanted to widen the world of her small-town students at the Danville Community School, which held grades 1-12 and was located near the larger city of Burlington, Iowa. Miss Birdie, as her students called her, had become somewhat of a local celebrity because of the lengthy letters she sent to the *Danville Enterprise*, a local newspaper, about her many trips overseas. Every year, her travel experiences not only became front-page news, but Miss Birdie also shared what she learned from other people and places with her students. Since most of them lived on farms in rural Iowa, they seldom had the opportunity to travel very far from home. She wanted to open their eyes to the world beyond.

**Miss Birdie Matthews:** **[Addressing her class]** Students, I have some exciting news for you! **[Students turn their full attention to Miss Birdie]** As you recall, I travelled overseas this past summer. I hope each of you enjoyed receiving the picture postcard I sent your way while traveling across the U.S. to New York **[students happily shake their heads yes]**. I even sent some of you a postcard from a particular site I visited in Europe **[students continue smiling and shaking heads yes]**. One of the places I had the opportunity to visit was the beautiful Dutch country called the Netherlands. You may have heard it called Holland. I even got to visit a school in the Netherlands' capital, Amsterdam, where a teacher told me that her students were eager to have pen pals. So, here's the exciting news! I brought back the names and addresses of students your age who want to hear from you. Of course, their lives in a big city are much different from yours here in rural Iowa. That's exactly why I think you could learn so much from them, and of course they could learn from you as well. What do you think? Do you want to have a pen pal? **[Hands begin to wave; Miss Birdie calls on Juanita, who is straining to hold her hand up high]**

**Juanita Wagner:** **[seated near front of class]** Miss Birdie, I would love to have a pen pal in the Netherlands! I don't know much about that country. I do remember where that country is located, and... doesn't it share a border with Germany? **[Miss Birdie shakes head yes]** And, you told us just last week that Germany's leader named Adolph Hitler had started a war against Great Britain, France and Russia. I know those are faraway places, but I still think that's terrible. After we located those countries on a map, you said we could keep informed about what is going on in Europe by reading the newspapers you bring to class. I just read how Hitler and the Nazis have now taken over Austria and Czechoslovakia, and they're even invading Poland. Don't the borders of those countries also touch Germany? **[Miss Birdie shakes her head yes]** If I lived in the Netherlands I think I would be a little worried about what Hitler might do next.

**Miss Birdie Matthews:** Juanita, I'm glad you remember so much about our studies. But, you need to know that despite the troubles in Europe, I didn't find that the teachers and children in Amsterdam were worried about Hitler when I visited. I hope you will focus on more positive things in your letters if you choose a pen pal. In this jar **[shows a jar with slips of paper inside it]** I've placed the names of the girls who are just as eager as you are to have someone here in the U.S. write to them. In this other jar **[shows another jar with slips in it]**, I've placed the names of the boys there who would love to hear from you boys. After you draw out a slip of paper, be sure to pay special attention to how the students in Amsterdam have written their names and addresses. I'm sure they will be quite different from your own. Just write them on your envelopes in the same way they have written them for you. **[All the students stand and form a line, moving toward Miss Birdie to draw slips from the jars.]**

**Juanita Wagner:** **[speaking excitedly to a classmate after drawing a name]** Wow! My slip shows a girl named Anne Frank. That's a simple name. I hope she can read English because I sure don't know any Dutch. I may even need help translating her words if she writes back to me in Dutch. Gosh! I wonder if they wear wooden shoes in Amsterdam! What would that be like? I sure want to hear all about her life there. I'll be sure to tell her about Danville, and about my mother and older sister, and life on the farm. I may even tell her that my father died when I was four years old, and my mother and my older sister Betty and I have lots of chores to do to keep the farm going. I could tell her that we have to take care of the crops and the chickens and the other farm animals. Oh, I can tell her that I have a horse named Prince and that sometimes my sister and I ride him to school. I bet she's never done that! And, I could tell her that my mother even teaches at a one-room country school to make some extra money.

**Miss Birdie Matthews:** **[After students return to their seats]** Boys and girls, let me have your attention again! **[Students quiet down and focus on Miss Birdie]** I know you have lots of questions, but don't worry. I'll continue to address them as you work on your letters. Just remember, when you write to your pen pal, tell about yourself and your family, and what your town is like. You could even put some of your questions in your letters, and you could include drawings or photos. Juanita, I overheard you say that you were worried about getting a letter written in Dutch. You don't need to worry about that, because the teacher at the Montessori school in Amsterdam told me that she wanted her students to practice their English. They haven't studied English very long, so you will need to be patient, because sometimes they might use awkward expressions, just like you would if you were learning a new language. You also wondered if students in Amsterdam wear wooden shoes. Let's find some books that tell us about the Netherlands today and have pictures showing how they dress. I think now you've discovered just why having a pen pal is such a good idea. There's so much to learn about others!

**Scene 2**  
6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> Grade Classroom  
Danville Community School (Grades 1-12)  
Danville, Iowa  
February-April, 1940

**Narrator 2:** That fall, after Miss Birdie’s students had mailed their letters, they eagerly waited for replies. As month after month went by, and Christmas vacation came and went, many became discouraged, wondering if they’d ever receive any letters. Then it happened! In February, students began receiving mail postmarked from Amsterdam. Day after day, letters were brought to school and excitedly shared with the class. One of Juanita’s classmates found an amusing expression in her letter, just like Miss Birdie had told them to expect. Her pen pal explained how she and her classmates felt when they got the letters from Danville. “The tears walked down our cheeks,” she wrote. Miss Birdie’s students chuckled, but they understood just how much the students in Amsterdam enjoyed hearing from them. Maybe they weren’t so different after all!

**Miss Birdie Matthews:** [Addressing the class] Students, I understand how excited you are to finally receive letters from your pen pals – and all of them in English! Of course, it’s possible that they were originally written in Dutch, and parents or teachers who were more fluent in English might have helped them rewrite the message in English. Regardless, I’m glad you are finding out so much about a different country and its citizens! Juanita, I believe you asked me earlier if you could share some things you’ve learned about your pen pal. Maybe you’d like to read a little of your letter to the class.  
**[Juanita walks to the front of the class]**

**Juanita Wagner:** Oh, Miss Birdie, not only did Anne Frank, my new pen pal, write me a letter in English, she also enclosed a letter to my older sister Betty from her older sister Margot. I couldn’t believe it! And, she included photographs of herself and her sister, and a picture postcard. Here’s a little bit of what she wrote:

*April 27, 1940*

*Dear Juanita,  
Margot and myself are the only children in our house. Our grandma is living with us. My Father has an office and mother is busy at home. I have not far from school and I am sitting in the fifth class... I include a post-card from Amsterdam and shall continue to do that collecting picture-cards I have already about 800... In case you and Betty get a photo do send a copy as I am curious to know how you look. My birthday is the 12<sup>th</sup> of June. Kindly let me know yours...*

*Hoping to hear from you I remain  
your Dutch friend  
Annelies Marie Frank*

**Miss Birdie Matthews:** Juanita, thank you for sharing. Wasn't that interesting! And, Margot and Betty can become pen pals, too, since they're the same age. That's such a wonderful coincidence! Also, Anne said that she collects picture postcards, so maybe you can send her one in your next letter to add to her collection. Or, we can collect some as a class project and send them to her. Please show the class the picture on her postcard. But first, why don't you read what Anne has written on the back. I think it will help all of you understand how Anne's city is unlike our own.

**Juanita Wagner:** [Reading the back of the postcard]

*This picture shows one of the many old canals of Amsterdam. But this is only one of the old city. There are also big canals and over all those canals are bridges. There are about 340 bridges with in the city.*

*Anne Frank*

**[Juanita proudly shows the picture on the postcard to the class]**

### Scene 3

6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> Grade Classroom

Danville Community School (Grades 1-12)

Danville, Iowa

April-May, 1940

**Narrator 1:** Unlike Anne's letter, Margot's letter to Betty gave more information about her family and their living conditions: "We live in a five room flat attached to a skyscraper of the city being twelve story high!" she wrote. She also referred to the worsening conditions in Europe. Just a couple of weeks earlier than the date on the letters, the Nazis had invaded two more countries, Denmark and Norway. Margot said that since her country was small, she did not feel safe. Both Juanita and Betty wrote back immediately; they also enclosed photos of themselves. Eagerly they waited for replies.

**Narrator 2:** As the months passed, Juanita and Betty, like the other students, again hoped to get letters from their pen pals before the school year ended. Unfortunately, for some time they didn't know about some disastrous events in Europe. In May, just weeks after Anne and Margot posted their letters to Iowa, the Nazis invaded the Netherlands where they lived. Of course, none of the farm families in Danville had televisions in the 1940s. The Wagner's didn't even have electricity, so they also didn't have a radio. For Juanita and Betty, most of their news about the war in Europe came from their teachers.

**Miss Birdie Matthews:** Students, as you know, this is Current Events Friday. Let's discuss some newspaper articles and radio broadcasts that talk about what's going on in Europe. Here's a newspaper headline that reads, "Holland yields to Hitler." **[Holds up a newspaper]**. I'm sorry to say that this certainly doesn't bode well for the citizens of Amsterdam... including your pen pals. All of Europe seems to be involved in this terrible war. The front page of this newspaper carries an article that says that the United States has promised to stay out of the war.

**Juanita Wagner:** [Juanita holds up her hand; Miss Birdie calls on her] Miss Birdie, I really don't want our country to go to war, but this is terrible! Does this mean that we aren't likely to get any more letters? [Miss Birdie shakes her head yes] Well, I'll miss the letters, but more than that, I can't help but wonder where our pen pals are and how they're getting along under Nazi occupation! Are they still able to go to school? Did they have to defend their homes against the Nazis? Were bombs dropped near them – or worse, ON them? I just don't know what to think! This is an awful situation!

**Narrator 1:** As the school year drew to a close in Danville, at the end of May, 1940, Juanita and Betty, like the other students, became too busy to worry about what was going on in a country so far away. They had to turn their attention to all the summer farm work they had to help with. There were daily chores, crops to tend to, hay to cut and put away, and vegetables to preserve for the winter from their gardens. In Iowa, the war in Europe seemed distant, and would continue to seem so until Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

**Narrator 2:** Once the United States entered World War II, the reality of war came to Iowa. Juanita, Betty and their mother watched schoolmates, friends and relatives leave for armed service. Many young women, including Betty, went to work in factories to aid the war effort. Meanwhile, in Amsterdam Anne, Margot and their parents went into hiding. When Anne was cut off from friends and pen pals, she turned to her diary for companionship. Two years later, after the Franks were discovered and sent to concentration camps, only Anne's father survived. Of course, today we know that *The Diary of Anne Frank* also survived and continues to touch readers everywhere.

**Narrator 1:** Remarkably, Anne's and Margot's letters to their Iowa pen pals have survived as well. The originals are on permanent display at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. But, copies also reside in Danville, Iowa, just down the street from the school where Juanita once attended Miss Birdie's class. Large photocopies are posted on a wall at a museum called the Danville Station, which features a section titled, "The Anne Frank Connection."

**Narrator 2:** Also, to honor Anne Frank and her desire to have a collection of post cards, students at the Danville Community School collect post cards. They hope to eventually have one and one-half million. That's the number of children, like Anne, who perished during the Holocaust. This is their way of keeping their memories alive. What will you do to keep their memories alive?